

Chapter 1

May 6, 2015, Bangor, Maine

It was the first spring-like day Klara could remember in what felt like forever, a whopping sixty-two degrees. Feeling the warm sun on her arms and noticing that several purple and yellow crocuses had just sprouted by her front porch in the last twenty-four hours momentarily brightened her mood. She was walking home for some lunch after teaching two classes that morning, when she grabbed her mail from the post box next to the street curb. In quickly leafing through her letters, mostly junk mail, Klara spied a large red, white, and blue FedEx envelope with her mother's name and return address.

She picked up her pace, quickly unlocking the antique oak front door to her small white colonial and throwing down her jean jacket along with the rest of the mail. Tearing open the cardboard envelope, she found a letter from her mother and a more official one from the Polish government. She read her mother's letter first.

Dear Klara,

I have surprising news to tell you, and what good news it is! We are inheriting money in your late father's name. The Polish government has finally gotten around to reimbursing families for property the Nazis and then Communist Poland stole from their Jewish citizens all those years ago.

I know it will be a shock, but I must tell you that your father is dead. When I first found out many years ago, you were so young, and I didn't want to upset you. After that, it just seemed easier not to talk about it.

The truth is, we were fighting all the time, and he decided to leave after he lost his job due to his drinking. He refused to understand that your grandfather was as important to me as he was, and I couldn't just move out, just the three of us, leaving your grandfather alone to fend for himself. What kind of daughter would that make me? He took a train to Philadelphia from New York City to look for work. There was a job a friend had told him about, and, well, the train was in an accident. He was among five passengers who were immediately killed. You were so young, only six years old.

His sister, Rachel, still lived in Warsaw at the time. When I told her about the accident, she somehow had your father's body flown to Warsaw where he was buried. I know I should have told you sooner. I'm forced to bring it up now, as there's a lot of money at hand, \$250,000. We could handle it by mail, but I'm worried that your father's sister, if she's still alive, or her family might try to finagle all the money for themselves, so I think it's best if you travel to Poland.

Call me right away!

-Mom

The letter from Poland's government outlined the details of the reparations—and her mother must show proof that she and her father were married at the time of his death.

Otherwise, the money would go to any living children her father might have. After reading and rereading the letters, Klara paced around her living room, shaking her head.

Unbelievable. All these years, she's denied she knew what had ultimately happened to him, only allowing that he walked out and left us, never turning back. Now that there's money involved, she reveals the truth. That's just so like her.

After running around her home like someone who had lost her way, ignoring her mother's multiple phone messages, Klara called Sheila, her closest friend at Holbrook College. In the seven years since she had first come to teach there, she was the one person who knew Klara's story, or at least much of it.

It was dinnertime, and although she knew Sheila was likely in the middle of her evening family routine, Klara had to speak to her.

"Hi, Klara," Sheila said cheerfully from the other end of the phone line, but with an underlying frenzied tone. "The kids are finishing their homework, Jack has the study door closed, and it's my night to make dinner." She paused for a moment, and then yelled, "Tommy, don't take your brother's pencil away from him! He's using it." Klara heard muffled conversation, and Sheila was back, "Sorry about that. What's up?"

"I don't mean to bother you." Klara's voice dropped, "It's about my mother. I mean it's about my father. He's dead," she said, bursting into tears.

Following a moment's silence, Sheila exclaimed, "Oh, my god, your father's dead . . . but I thought you never found out what happened to him?" she said, trying to follow what Klara had just told her. "How did you find out? Are you okay? You don't sound okay . . . I'm so sorry."

“My mother told me in a letter, and now she wants me to call her. Can I come over to your house? *Please?*”

Sheila immediately replied, “Yes,” and a half hour later at dusk, Klara arrived at her friend’s picket-fenced home. Once inside, she followed Sheila around several piles of student papers and waved from the other room to Jack, as he served their four- and six-year-old kids dinner, mouthing, “Thank you” to him. The women made their way into the over-furnished study for privacy, Sheila first grabbing a bottle of pinot grigio from the fridge. Klara told her more about the letters—her mother’s letter, and the one from the Polish government—as Sheila poured two glasses of wine.

“Here, see for yourself,” Klara said, passing them to her friend.

Sheila scanned the letters, looking up at her. “What are you going to do?”

“I have to go,” Klara insisted. “I have to go, not because she wants me to, which she does, but because I have to try to find any family my father may still have. Maybe his sister’s still alive and living there. From her letter, my mother seems to believe she might still be, or might have children who are,” Klara said, her words bursting out of her mouth, like fireworks. “Also, I need to visit my father’s grave. I want to pay my final respects and have closure. I *have to go.*”

Sheila’s husband knocked on the door, popping his head in. “Should I start their baths?” he asked. Seeing the two women were in deep conversation, he knew the answer was yes before Sheila had a chance to respond. He nodded his head and smiled, closing the door behind him, before Sheila could finish saying, “I’ll pay you back.”

“You know,” Sheila said, crossing her legs and leaning forward, “If you’re really serious about going, the timing couldn’t be better. The semester’s ending in two weeks, and from what you told me, you don’t have any big summer plans that can’t wait.”

“You don’t think I’m crazy for wanting to jump on a plane? Just tell me I’m not crazy,” Klara said, sighing and shaking her head.

“You’re *not* crazy,” Sheila replied. “You should go. You have one more week of classes, and then you just have to finish marking your papers and grading your exams. You can do this. I’ll drive you to Portland to catch the airline transport van to Boston.” She grabbed Klara by the shoulders. “I’m really happy for you. As hard as this is, you’re finally getting answers.”

Klara smiled, exhaling deeply.

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Two weeks passed at tornado speed. The last thing Klara took from her dresser drawer was a white cardboard box previously hidden under some winter sweaters. Inside the box sat a gold oval locket with an engraved floral design, tucked underneath a cotton pad. The last time she’d laid eyes on the locket was when she first arrived at Holbrook College and was unpacking. She held it up to the sunlight while gingerly opening it. Two old, miniature black-and-white photos stared back at her, one of her father’s parents, the other of her father and his sister as young teenagers. Klara could feel them beckoning to her from the dim past.

Sheila kept her word, kindly driving Klara the two hours from Bangor to Portland in her family’s Ford SUV two weeks later. It was cluttered with reusable grocery bags,

children's school projects, and half-eaten granola bars, but Klara took in none of it, given her laser focus on her upcoming trip ahead.

"Keep me posted," Sheila said. "I want to hear all about it, and not just when you get back. Email me as soon as you get there. Good luck!" she added as she reached out to hug her friend goodbye. Klara smiled and hugged her back.

"Thank you for everything," Klara said before waving farewell.

And then she was in the Logan Airport-bound van with six other passengers for the next two-plus hours. Using her faded jean jacket as a makeshift pillow, Klara fell into a half-sleep state, in and out of consciousness, recollecting how she had ended up at Holbrook seven years earlier. A few years before arriving there, she had been working at Harvard University, where she first began as a college student, then moved on to graduate school for five long years. She'd finally landed her dream job as an anthropology professor with a specialty in archeology. However, after happily living in Cambridge's busy college town for twenty-five years, something within her was starting to give out. She was forty-two years old, juggling a full schedule of classes and research, and barely able to get out of bed in the morning. Her engine was running on fumes. Although she had two close grad school friends, Barbara and Diane, who were now her colleagues, they had their own relationships and families. Klara still had no significant other to speak of, so her ties to the area didn't feel very deep-rooted.

Then, one particularly gray morning, her mother called with sad news. She got right down to business, announcing that Klara's grandfather had died and ordering Klara to "return home" immediately. "We're burying him tomorrow," she declared.

Of course, Klara knew she'd need to go right away, as Jewish tradition required the dead to be buried as soon as possible. And then her mother added, "And don't forget to bring a black dress," as though she were a child. Klara drove five hours in her vintage VW Beetle to Queens, New York, for the funeral the next day, sitting shiva with her mother for the remainder of the week. Seeing her, shut down and emotionally detached as usual, in that dark, staid, prewar apartment she'd grown up in, drained every last bit of energy Klara had left. Klara's mother and grandfather, Sigmund—or "Siggy," as he was better known—had shared a claustrophobic, symbiotic relationship that her mother expected Klara to duplicate with her.

Luckily, a colleague had just mentioned an anthropology PhD position at a small, northeastern liberal arts college in Southern Maine. The school was over seven hours from Queens, another two and a half hours farther from where her mother lived. Between Klara's mental exhaustion and her need to slow down the pace of her life, she jumped at the opportunity—a chance to have more time to herself, with the added benefit of putting more distance between her and her mother. Holbrook College was interested in her archaeology background, and she was not deterred by the fact the department was small, offering only a minor in anthropology, with a smattering of archaeology classes. And she wouldn't have to regularly publish!

"How could you go from an urban, high-caliber research university to a small liberal arts college three hours away, even a strong one?" her good friend and colleague Barbara asked. "You've always been so ambitious in the past."

“It’s going to be so lonely for you,” their other friend and coworker Diane chimed in. “We’re going to miss you. You’d better keep in touch. I know you, Klara; you have to promise to come down to Boston for the weekend once a month or so.”

“I’m going to call and check on you. I’ll come up there myself to get you if I need to,” Barbara said in her typical maternal manner.

It was true. Klara had always been so ambitious—first spending hours studying the archaeology and history of Mesoamerica, then participating in Central American digs, even leading some expeditions; and of course, there was the constant pressure to publish her research. She was ready to slow down and have less pressure, having already done the publishing thing. And yes, although she had a great academic position, she had barely anything else to show for herself and was far too tired and worn out for someone in her early forties.

When she first arrived at Holbrook, she did make regular monthly trips to Boston for long weekends to see her friends, but then they became less frequent. These days, her friends had gotten busy with kids and other family members. Although Barbara and Diane would periodically call and email, Klara wasn’t very good about being in touch. She was lucky enough to have met her Holbrook colleague Sheila in her department. Although Sheila’s life was quite hectic between work and family, the two had lunch a few days a week. They mostly talked shop, discussing their course syllabi and areas of expertise. Sheila occasionally invited her over for family dinners.

“Come on, Klara, you can’t spend another Friday and Saturday night by yourself,” Sheila would say.

“How do you know I’m spending it by myself?” Klara would tease.

“Really?” Sheila would reply. “Really?”

Klara wouldn’t say anything at first. Usually she *was* by herself, but she did have some company here and there, although it was more often than not quite short-lived.

Despite knowing Sheila would love to hear any juicy details, she kept those to herself.

“No,” Klara would typically say, “It’s just me.” And sometimes she’d take Sheila up on the invitation and enjoy a lovely, albeit noisy, family dinner with her good friend and her friend’s family. Other weekends when she didn’t have something of her own going on, which was usually the case, she’d self-isolate for the weekend with her archaeological and historical Mayan texts.

As Klara pondered over her mother’s letter, she thought about how this wasn’t the first time in recent history her mother had contacted her with consequential news that had resulted in Klara heading off to another country. This had happened just a year earlier when her mother announced she was getting remarried to a relative of an old family “friend,” at which time Klara responded by barreling off to co-lead a dig with a former colleague/boyfriend in the Yucatán Peninsula. So, truth be told, she wasn’t completely unprepared for more shocking news. But learning that her father was dead and buried in Warsaw, Poland, was beyond anything she could have anticipated.

When Klara finally opened her heavy eyelids, the airport van was somewhere along I-93 south. Knowing it wouldn’t be too much longer before they arrived at Logan, she was trying to reorient herself. She was now paying the price of exhaustion from sleep deprivation, as she had packed too much into too little time. She felt jolted when she

suddenly remembered where she was going and why, and a wave of anger flashed over her as her fists tightened. She was ready to finally get some honest answers.