

ANA WREN

7

ROOK STREET ANNEX / UNROUTED CORRESPONDENCE

NO POSTAGE / NO ADDRESS

POSTHUMOUS CORRESPONDENCE 001

Posthumous Correspondence 001

The original pages were recovered inside an unaddressed annex envelope. Line breaks and signatures are preserved.

Ana,

I have started this letter three times.

The first version sounded too calm. The second sounded like I was trying to frighten you. The third began with an apology, which is how every conversation between us has begun since Mom died, and I could not bear to make this another one.

So I am going to begin with the truth.

Something is wrong at Rook Street.

I know how that sounds. The annex has always been wrong in ordinary ways. The radiators knock after the heat has been switched off. The oldest sorting belts move half an inch when trucks pass outside. We keep mail for people who have been dead longer than either of us has been alive. Anyone could work here for a week and come home with stories.

This is not one of those stories.

I found something I was not supposed to find.

You once told me I noticed things only after they had already hurt someone. I was angry when you said it. I thought you were accusing me of being slow, or selfish, or both. Tonight I keep hearing your exact voice, and I finally understand what you meant.

You meant I wait too long to trust myself.

I am trying not to do that now.

For the past six months I have been reconciling the destruction ledgers. That means I compare what the annex claims was destroyed with what was actually signed out of storage. Most of it is nothing anyone would steal. Water-damaged catalogs. Returned birthday cards. Insurance notices sent to empty apartments. Packages containing clothes that no longer fit the children they were meant for.

But some entries were wrong.

A watch listed as crushed in transit had no damage report.

A registered envelope marked destroyed had been opened cleanly along one edge.

Three small parcels containing jewelry were logged under the same furnace batch, although the furnace had been out of service that week.

At first I assumed it was careless paperwork. You know how I am. I made a list. Then I made a cleaner list because I hated the first list. Then I checked the shelf numbers against the supervisor copies.

That was when I found the private ledger.

It was inside the bottom drawer of Gideon Vey's old metal cabinet, beneath a stack of blank disposal certificates. It was not an official record. No annex heading. No municipal seal. Just dates, parcel numbers, descriptions, initials, and amounts written in his narrow hand.

There were more than sixty entries.

Some of the parcels had been waiting here for years. Some had belonged to people who never knew anything valuable had been sent to them. One contained the deed to a house. Another held a baptism bracelet engraved with a child's name. There were cash amounts beside several registered envelopes.

Every item had been marked destroyed in the official books.

I copied one page.

I should have copied all of it. I should have called someone. I should have photographed the cabinet before I touched anything.

Instead, I heard Gideon in the corridor and put the ledger back.

He came into the records room chewing one of those peppermint lozenges he always carries. I could smell it before he spoke.

He asked why I was still there.

I told him the destruction totals were not balancing.

He smiled and said old buildings never balance.

Then he stood beside my desk without moving. Not looking at me. Looking at my outgoing tray.

He asked whether I had mailed anything.

Not whether I had finished my work. Not whether I had found anything.

Whether I had mailed anything.

I said no.

He looked at my hands.

There was something blue beneath his thumbnail. A dark blue wax, almost black until the lamp caught it. I thought it was carbon paper at first, but it had collected in the half-moon of his nail and along the side of his finger.

He saw me looking.

He put his hand into his pocket.

Then he asked whether I wanted coffee.

I said no.

He left, but the peppermint smell stayed in the room.

I know this is not proof. I know you will read that sentence and think, Celia, please stop making a case out of a smell and a dirty fingernail.

I would think that too, if this were happening to anyone else.

There are other things.

The electrical cabinet outside the restricted sorting room has been silent all evening. Usually it hums loud enough to feel through the wall. Tonight there is nothing. No fan. No relay clicking. No heat behind the metal door.

Calder Rook warned us about that cabinet months ago. Gideon complained about the cost of replacing it. Everyone here knows it is old.

But tonight it is not failing. It has gone deliberately quiet.

A sharp chemical smell has started leaking from the restricted room. A few minutes ago, I heard something heavy scrape across the floor behind the door.

I have not gone in there.

I am not going to.

The copied ledger page is safe. I did not keep it in my desk, and I did not put it in the chute.

It is behind the warning no one reads.

You will understand that when you see the room.

I hope you never see the room.

I know those two sentences do not agree.

Neither do I.

Ana, I am sorry I stopped calling.

That is not related to the annex, except that everything becomes related when you think you may not have another chance to say it.

After Mom died, you wanted to empty her apartment immediately. I wanted to leave everything where it was. Her mug beside the sink. Her slippers beneath the bed. The grocery list on the refrigerator with oranges misspelled because she wrote it without her glasses.

You said keeping the apartment untouched would not keep her alive.

I said getting rid of her things would not make you less relieved she was gone.

I have replayed that sentence for four years.

I knew it was cruel before I finished saying it. I said it anyway because you were doing what I could not do, and I wanted to make your strength look like coldness.

You were not relieved that she died.

You were exhausted because you had been taking care of her while I kept volunteering for late shifts and pretending work was the reason I could not come over.

I am sorry.

I should have said that before tonight.

I should have said it without needing a locked building, a stolen ledger, and a man outside the records room to make me brave.

There. I wrote it.

He is back.

He did not knock.

He stood in the doorway just now and asked why the office typewriter was running.

It is not running. I am writing this by hand.

I told him the belt motor sometimes rattles through the wall.

He said the belt motor has been disconnected for eleven years.

Then he looked toward Return Chute 7.

You remember me mentioning the chute, don't you? I may have told you about it when I first started here. The iron one behind the old sorting cages. It has a brass plate that says: NO ACTIVE ROUTE

There is nowhere for it to go.

Maintenance opened the wall behind it last winter. The chute ends after less than three feet. Brick, dust, dead insects. Nothing else.

Letters still disappear inside it.

I have seen it twice.

The first was a postcard addressed to a house demolished in 1968. I placed it in the chute because I was tired and thought it was the ordinary return slot. When I opened the maintenance panel, the postcard was gone.

The second was an envelope with no address, only the words FOR MY SON written across the front.

Gideon found me holding it.

He took it from me and said some mail was better left without a route.

The next morning the envelope was gone from his locked office.

He blamed me.

I had not touched it.

Tonight, when he asked whether I had mailed anything, he was not looking at the outgoing tray anymore.

He was looking at Chute 7.

I think he believes I put the copied page inside it.

I did not.

The page is behind the warning no one reads.

I am writing that again because I am afraid the first time will not be enough.

I have folded this letter twice already. It is too thick for a normal envelope now. I found one of the old unclaimed envelopes from the supply cabinet. There is no postage on it. I wrote your name, but I did not write your address.

I am going to place it in Chute 7.

That is an absurd plan.

I know.

But Gideon has the outgoing door key tonight, and the front entrance is chained from the inside during inventory shifts. The office phone gives a dial tone but will not connect. My cell phone has no signal, though the signal bar rises whenever I stand near the chute.

I tried your number anyway.
For one second I heard breathing.
Then I heard my own voice say your name.
Not through the phone.
From inside the chute.
Ana.
Just like that.
Not angry. Not frightened.
Almost relieved.
The chemical smell is stronger now.
Something has begun leaking beneath the restricted-room door. It shines when the light catches it.
Gideon has stopped pretending he is not here.
I can hear the peppermint wrapper opening in the hall.
I used to tease you for carrying peppermints in your purse because Mom did. I would give anything for that smell to belong to you right now.
I am putting the letter in the chute.
If it reaches you, do not bring it back here alone.
Take it somewhere public. Show someone the envelope. Ask them to check the processing mark, if there is one.
Find the warning placard above Chute 7.
Do not reach inside the chute.
The copy is not inside it.
I want to say something less frightened before I fold this.
I want you to know that the last good day with Mom was the Thursday you brought soup and she complained it had too much pepper. You went into the kitchen to fix it, and she squeezed my wrist and whispered that you were the only person she trusted to tell her the truth.
I was jealous.
I thought love was something she had measured and found more of in you.
Now I think she trusted you because you stayed when truth was unpleasant.
I ran whenever it became heavy.
I am trying to stay now.
I love you.
I have always loved you.
Even when I made silence do the speaking for me.

If this letter arrives and I do not, believe what I have written.

Believe the small details.

The peppermint.

The blue wax.

The cabinet gone quiet.

The chemical smell.

The warning no one reads.

Please do not let anyone tell you I was careless.

Please do not let them say I started a fire.

Please do not let the report call me confused because that version is easier.

He is at the door.

I am putting this in now.

I love you.

Celia

CONTINUATION APPEARS AFTER ORIGINAL SIGNATURE

Ana,

I thought the letter was finished.

I remember folding it.

I remember lifting the iron mouth of the chute.

I remember the paper leaving my fingers.

The next part should not be here.

I can still hear the pen moving, but my hand is not holding it.

There is smoke beneath the sorting-room door now. It crawls low across the floor and divides around my shoes.

Someone has carried my coat past the records window.

It hangs from one arm as if there is a person inside it, but there is not. The sleeve drags against the cabinets.

The glass is dark enough to reflect the room.

I can see the desk.

I can see the chair tipped backward.

I can see someone lying between the chair and the filing cabinet.

Her face is turned toward the wall.

Her hair is mine.

There is a dark line around her throat.

Ana, I do not understand how I can see her from here.

I do not understand where here is.

The chute is closed, but I can hear paper sliding through it.

From inside the chute, paper shifts once, then twice, then once again. It is the old rhythm Mom used when she knocked on our bedroom door.

Then your name returns.

Ana.

Come back.

The smoke has reached the letter, but the page is not burning.

I can smell peppermint.

There is blue wax on the iron latch.

Someone is searching inside the chute.

He has misunderstood what I wrote.

Let him.

The warning is above him.

He has never read it.

I can see myself on the floor.

I can see this page somewhere in the dark.

Those things cannot both be true.

Still, the words are appearing.

So I will use what remains.

I am not asking you to forgive me because I am dead.

I am asking you to believe me because I finally told you the truth while I was alive.

The rest came afterward.

Celia