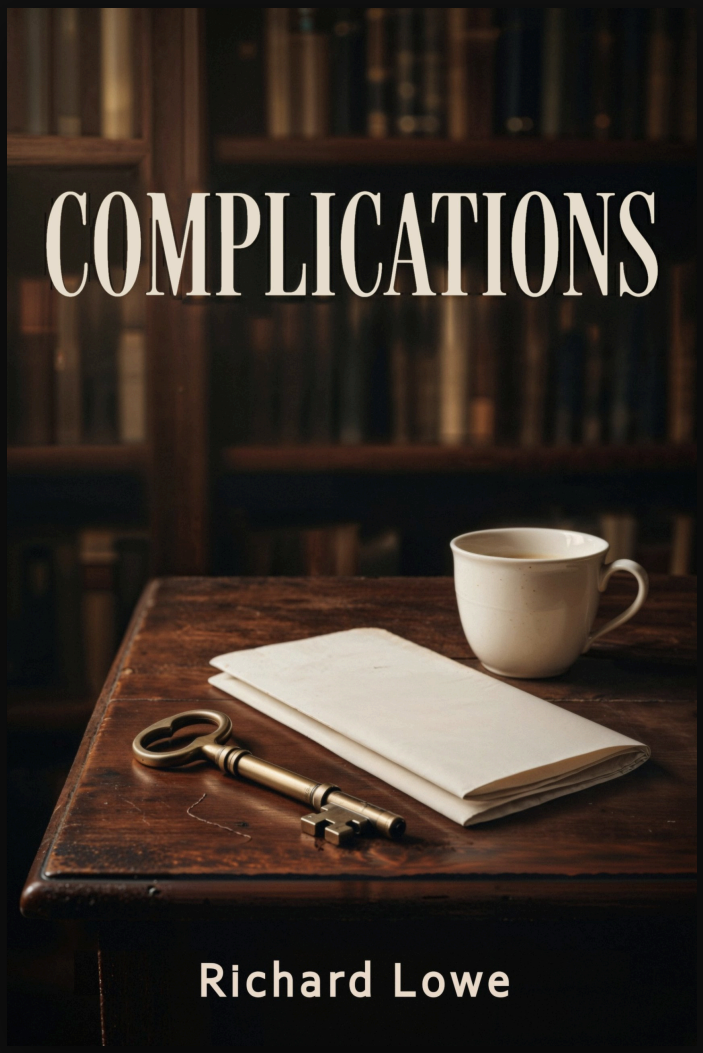
A FREE COMPANION TO COMPLICATIONS

The Plumber Recovered

A burst pipe, a rude plumber, and the three days Reid Callahan's dog spent with the widow next door.



RICHARD LOWE

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The man next door ran like he owed the street money.

Ruth Ellenbogen watched him from her kitchen window at half past five on a Monday in February, with her tea going cold in her hands and the radiator ticking behind her. He came down the sidewalk under the streetlights in a black jacket and a gray hat, breath going out of him in short white bursts. The dog ran loose beside him, a young gray pitbull with a head like a cinder block, and the dog was having a much better morning.

For years Reid Callahan had not run at all. He had left at seven in a dark car and come home after dark in the same car, and the only exercise she had ever seen him take was carrying groceries. Since the fall he ran every morning, with his head down and his shoulders up around his ears, too fast for the ice, as if the point was to get to the end of the four miles before something caught him.

"He's going to fall," she said.

Gerald did not answer. Gerald was asleep on the chair by the window, which was his chair, a ladder-back with a flat blue cushion that had once belonged to the dining set. He was eleven pounds of orange cat with one torn ear and the general disposition of a retired customs officer.

The man and the dog turned the corner at the end of the street. Ruth drank her tea, which was cold, and did not pour it out, because she had paid for it.

She knew about the divorce the way you knew about weather on your own block. Nobody had told her anything. The wife's car had stopped coming home some time in the spring, and in the summer there had been men in suits who stood on the lawn and talked into their phones, and in September a moving van had taken away a white sofa, two white chairs and a mirror the size of a garage door.

The house had looked smaller after that. Ruth had thought it looked better.

The wife had been beautiful, the kind of beautiful people turned around for. She had come to Ruth's garden party every June for four years, in a dress that cost more than the garden.

She had said lovely things about the roses and the peonies and the iced tea. She had said them while looking over Ruth's shoulder at the gate, as if a better party might come through it at any minute.

She had picked out the dog. Ruth knew that too, because she had been on her own front step the day the puppy came home in a cardboard box with a red bow on it. The wife had carried the box up the walk and set it down in the hallway and taken a picture of it with her phone.

Ruth had never once seen her walk him.

* * *

He knocked on her door that evening at seven, which he had never done.

She opened it with her reading glasses on her head and a pencil in her hand, because she had been doing the crossword and losing. He stood on the step in his work clothes with his tie gone and the dog sitting at his feet. The dog was looking at her with great interest, as if she were made of something good to eat.

"Mrs. Ellenbogen," he said. "I'm sorry to bother you."

"You're not bothering me. I'm stuck on a seven-letter word for regret."

He thought about it. He did not pretend not to. "Remorse," he said.

She looked at the crossword, which was still in her other hand. Remorse fit. She wrote it in, and he waited while she did, and she liked him a little better for not saying anything while she wrote.

"I have a favor to ask," he said. "You can say no."

“I usually do,” she said. “Come in. You're letting the heat out.”

He came into the front hall and stopped there, the way men stop in a house where they don't know the rules. The dog did not stop. The dog went past her at hip height and leaned on her leg with his whole body, an enormous warm pressure, and looked up at her with amber eyes the color of the honey she kept for her throat.

Ruth put her hand on his head. It was a wide flat head, warm as a loaf.

“He'll do that until you acknowledge him,” Reid said.

“I've acknowledged him.”

“He'll do it a while longer anyway.” He took a folded sheet of paper out of his jacket. “I have to be in Pittsburgh for three days. A deposition.”

“Pittsburgh,” Ruth said, as if it were a diagnosis.

“I'm back Thursday night. The kennel called this afternoon with a cough going through the dogs.” He held out the paper. “I don't know anyone else on the street well enough to ask. I don't know you well enough either.”

Ruth took the paper.

It was typed, a full page, single-spaced, with headings for FEEDING and WALKING and SLEEPING. There was a heading that said LEANING, and under it: He will lean on you. This is not aggression.

It is a request for acknowledgment, the sheet went on, and can be ignored, though he will not believe you mean it.

Near the bottom, under a heading that said FOOD, there was a sentence in bold. Do not give him chicken.

“Why not chicken?” she said.

“He loses his mind.”

“Loses it how?”

He looked down at the dog, who was still leaning on her and had closed his eyes. “He'll follow you from room to room for the rest of his life,” he said. “He'll expect it.”

“That doesn't sound like losing his mind,” Ruth said. “That sounds like having one.”

He did not laugh. His mouth moved at one corner, which she decided to count.

Up close he looked worse than he did from her window. Under his eyes the skin had gone thin and bluish, and there was a nick on his jaw where he had shaved too fast.

His collar stood a quarter inch off his neck. He had lost weight since he bought the shirt.

She knew that look. She had worn it herself for most of a year.

“What's his name?” she said.

“Pika.”

“What kind of name is that?”

“The kind somebody else picks,” he said.

She folded the paper in half. “Bring him over at six,” she said. “Bring whatever else is on this list. I'm always up.”

“I know,” he said. “Your kitchen light is on when I go out.” He reached for his wallet. “I'd like to pay you for…”

“No.”

“Mrs. Ellenbogen.”

“I said no. Put that away before I'm insulted.” She opened the front door for him, and the cold came in around her ankles. “If he eats anything of mine you can pay for that.”

He put the wallet away. On the step he turned back, and the dog stayed where he was, leaning on her leg. Reid said the dog's name once, quietly, and Pika sighed with his whole body and went.

* * *

Pika arrived at six in the morning with a bag of kibble, a stainless steel bowl, a bed the size of a loveseat and a blue rubber ball that had been chewed into the shape of a kidney. Reid carried all of it in two trips and set it down where she pointed. He stood in her kitchen for a minute in his overcoat with his car keys in his hand.

He looked at the herbs on the windowsills, the rosemary and the thyme and the basil she had been keeping alive under a lamp since October. He looked at the roosters. Ruth had forty-one ceramic roosters, on the shelves and on the top of the refrigerator and in a row along the back of the stove, and she did not explain them to anybody.

He did not ask. She liked him better again.

“The hotel number is on the sheet,” he said. “My cell will be off during the deposition. Leave a message and I'll call back at the break.”

“Go,” she said. “You'll miss your plane.”

He crouched down in her kitchen in his good coat and the dog put both front paws on his shoulders. They stayed like that for a moment, the man and the dog, the dog's chin on his collar. Reid said a few words into the dog's ear that she did not hear and was not supposed to.

Then he stood up and brushed off his coat and left, and Pika stood at the front door and watched it for eleven minutes. Ruth knew it was eleven because she timed it on the stove clock.

At the twelfth minute he came into the kitchen and looked at Gerald.

Gerald was on his chair by the window. Gerald opened one eye. It was the eye on the side of the torn ear, the one that had seen a raccoon off the back porch in the fall, and he aimed it at the dog and held it there.

Pika sat down.

He sat up straight, like a dog in a painting, and looked at the chair. Then he looked at Ruth. Then he looked at the chair again with a long hopeful expression, as if somebody might come along any minute and explain that the chair had been his all along.

“No,” Ruth said. “That's his.”

Pika lay down under the kitchen table with a groan like an old man getting into a bath. He put his chin on her slipper. He stayed there while she made toast and while she ate it and while she did the dishes, moving when she moved and settling again on whichever foot was nearest, and by the time she sat down with the newspaper both of her feet were warm for the first time since November.

She read the paper. Gerald slept. Pika breathed on her slippers.

At noon she looked at the typed sheet again and boiled a chicken breast.

It was for her own lunch. She ate half of it with mustard on a slice of rye. The other half she cut into pieces the size of her thumbnail and stood in the middle of the kitchen with the plate, and Pika came out from under the table and sat in front of her with a stillness so complete she could hear the refrigerator hum.

She gave him a piece.

His eyes closed. His tail went across the linoleum once, slowly, like somebody sweeping up after a wedding. He opened his eyes and looked at her with an expression she had last seen on Gerald, the human one, on the night in 1971 when she told him she was pregnant.

"Don't tell your father," she said.

He did not tell anybody. He followed her for the rest of the afternoon from the kitchen to the living room to the bathroom door and back, a gray shadow at her hip, and when she sat down he lay down, and when she got up he got up. In the late afternoon she went upstairs for a sweater and came back to find the begonia gone.

It had been on the sill of the back window, a red rex begonia in a clay pot. Gerald had given it to her on their fortieth anniversary and it had outlived him by nine years.

The pot was still there with a ring of dirt around it. The begonia was not.

Pika was under the table. He had a red leaf stuck to his lip.

Ruth stood in the doorway for some time.

She was not a woman who cried over plants. She had buried a husband and both of her parents and a sister in Albany and a son-in-law she had liked better than her daughter's second husband, and she had not cried in front of any of them. She looked at the empty pot and the ring of dirt, and her throat closed up, and she was furious with herself for it.

"You," she said.

Pika thumped his tail against the table leg.

She swept up the dirt. She did not throw away the pot. She put it on the counter by the sink, where she would see it, and she made a note on the pad by the phone that said BEGONIA in capital letters, and under that, $, because a deal was a deal.

* * *

The cold came down that night like a lid on a pot.

The radio said nine below by morning, and the wind came off the river and leaned on the north side of the house, which was the kitchen side. She had lived in the house for fifty years. She knew what nine below did to the north wall, and before she went to bed she opened the cabinet under the sink and left it open so the warm air could get at the pipe.

Gerald had taught her that. He had been an engineer for the county, roads and culverts, and he believed a person who lived in a house ought to know how it worked.

In their first winter here he had walked her down to the basement with a flashlight and shown her the main shutoff, a red wheel on a copper pipe behind the furnace. Turn it right, he had said. Righty tighty, and don't let anybody tell you different.

She had not been down there since the summer. She went to bed with the cabinet open and the radiator banging, and Pika on his loveseat bed at the foot of hers, snoring like a lawnmower in another yard.

She woke at four to a sound she knew.

It was a long hiss and then a spatter, like rain on the side of a tent. She lay there in the dark and listened, and her heart went hard and fast, and Pika lifted his head off his bed and looked at the door.

"I know," she said. "I hear it."

She put on her robe and her slippers. She went down the stairs with one hand on the rail and the dog close at her hip, taking each stair when she took it and not before. The kitchen light showed her a

spray of water coming out from under the sink in a fan, and an inch of it already across the floor, shining, with the bath mat floating in it like a raft.

The water was so cold it hurt her ankles. She went through it to the basement door.

The red wheel was where it had always been. It had not been turned in thirty years and it did not want to turn now. She put both hands on it and leaned and nothing happened, and she stood in her robe in the basement at four in the morning with the furnace roaring beside her and thought, with great clarity, that she was seventy-seven years old and this was how women her age ended up on the evening news.

She took the rubber mallet off Gerald's pegboard. She hit the wheel twice, sharp, the way he used to, and leaned on it again, and it gave.

Righty tighty. The hiss upstairs stopped.

She sat down on the bottom step and breathed for a while. Pika came down and sat beside her on the cold concrete, pressed against her hip, and leaned. She let him.

* * *

The magnet on her refrigerator said BRISCO PLUMBING AND HEATING, SINCE 1961, with a phone number and a cartoon wrench with a mustache. Walt Brisco had put in the downstairs bathroom in 1979, and afterward he had sat at her kitchen table and drunk her coffee and talked to Gerald about the Mets.

Walt had retired. The magnet had not.

She called at seven. A girl answered and said they had an emergency rate before eight and a regular rate after and a truck could be there by nine.

The truck was there at a quarter to ten. The young man who got out of it was big and red-faced and about thirty, in a canvas jacket with BRISCO on the back, and he came up her walk without looking where he was going and tracked slush across her hall runner from the door to the kitchen.

“Morning, young lady,” he said. “We got a little leak?”

Ruth had not been a young lady since Eisenhower. “The cold-water supply under the sink split at the elbow,” she said. “It's done it twice before. I've shut off the main.”

He looked at her as if a lamp had spoken. Then he smiled wide and said, “Okay. Let's have a look,” louder and slower than before, the way people talk to foreigners and the deaf.

His name was Kyle. It was stitched on his chest. He got down on his back on her wet floor and put his head in her cabinet and his flashlight beam went back and forth, and he made a long whistling sound through his teeth that she recognized from car mechanics and the man who had sold her late sister a burial plot.

Pika had come out from under the table. He sat by the stove and watched.

“Big dog,” Kyle said, from inside the cabinet.

“He's not mine.”

“He friendly?”

“He's particular,” Ruth said.

Kyle came out from under the sink and sat up. He wiped his hands on his jeans and looked around the kitchen, at the roosters and the herbs and the old linoleum and the cabinet doors that Gerald had refinished himself in 1985. He looked at all of it the way a man looks at a used car he is about to tell you is worthless.

“So, bad news,” he said. “This is all galvanized back here, the whole wall. It's shot.”

Ruth waited.

"What you need is a full repipe," he said, and shook his head at the cabinet. "We're looking at eleven, twelve thousand, ballpark."

"It's copper," Ruth said.

"Ma'am?"

"Walt Brisco replaced the galvanized in this house in 1979. The only bad spot is that elbow, because the outside of the north wall never gets any sun." She folded her arms. "Walt said he'd move it next time he was here. He never came back to move it."

Kyle looked at her. His face went slowly through several opinions.

"Walt's my grandfather," he said.

"Then you can ask him."

He did not want to ask him. She could see that. He stood up, and he was much bigger standing, and he looked down at her with the patient smile of a man who has been told by his father that the customer is always right and has never once believed it.

"Is there somebody else I can talk to about the estimate?" he said. "Your husband, maybe?"

"My husband's dead," Ruth said. "My son lives in Phoenix. You can talk to me."

"Okay," he said, in a voice like a pat on the head. "Okay, sweetheart. Why don't you let me show you what I'm looking at."

He took her by the arm.

He took her above the elbow, his big hand closing all the way around it, and he steered her toward the sink the way you steer a shopping cart with a bad wheel. It did not hurt, exactly. She was seventy-seven and her arm was thin and his hand went right around it, and it was the first time a man had put a hand on her without asking since a doctor in 1966, and she felt it all the way up into her teeth.

Pika moved.

She did not see him get up. One second he was by the stove and the next he was between her and Kyle, low and gray and silent.

Kyle let go of her arm and said a word she had not heard in her kitchen in fifty years and went back two steps into the refrigerator. The roosters on top of it rattled. Pika had him by the calf, below the knee, through the jeans.

"Pika," Ruth said. "Leave it."

She said it in the voice she had used on her children when they were small and on Gerald when he was not small, and the dog let go. He backed up until he was against her leg again, and he did not growl, then or later.

He leaned on her with all of his weight and looked at Kyle with his ears flat and his amber eyes steady, a dog who had made a decision and would make it again.

Kyle had both hands around his leg. "That dog bit me," he said.

"You grabbed me."

"I didn't grab you, I was showing you…"

"You grabbed me," Ruth said. "In my own kitchen. He saw it."

Kyle let go of his leg and looked at his palm. There was a little blood on it, not much. He swore again, more quietly, and limped two steps sideways and swung his canvas tool bag off his shoulder, and he dropped it, hard, onto the nearest chair.

It was the chair by the window.

Gerald was on it.

What happened next took about a second, and Ruth would describe it for the rest of her life to anybody who would hold still. The bag came down. An orange shape came out from under it like a jack from a box, all claws and torn ear and sound, and attached itself to the back of Kyle's right hand by the teeth.

Then Gerald let go and dropped to the floor and walked away under the table with his tail straight up. He did not hurry. He was a customs officer who had stamped a passport.

Kyle stood in the middle of her wet kitchen holding his right hand in his left.

"The cat," he said. "The cat bit me."

"That's his chair," Ruth said.

Pika had not moved from her leg. Under the table Gerald began to wash his face.

Kyle looked at the dog. He looked at the chair, where his tool bag sat on the flat blue cushion. He looked at Ruth, and his face had gone the color of a brick. Whatever happened next, he was not going to be the one who remembered it kindly.

"I'm calling the county about that dog," he said. "That's a pit bull, lady. They'll take it." He picked up his bag and held it in front of him like a shield. "And I'm getting a lawyer."

"Get two," Ruth said. "The dog's owner is one. You can have a conversation."

She had not known she was going to say it. She heard it come out of her own mouth and did not like it, because it was not hers to say. Kyle went white around the mouth and then red again.

He left. He left without fixing anything and without closing the front door, and she heard his truck start and grind and pull away. The cold came in down the hall and across the kitchen floor and found the water.

* * *

She closed the front door. She got the mop.

She mopped the kitchen floor in long strokes the way her mother had taught her, toward the drain in the basement door, and wrung the mop into the bucket and mopped again. She did it twice more than it needed. Pika lay under the table with his chin on his paws and watched her with his eyebrows moving.

There was no water in the house now. There would be none until somebody fixed the pipe, and nobody named Brisco was going to fix it after this.

She did not care about the water. She had a case of seltzer in the basement and fifty years of practice going without.

What she cared about was under the table.

They'll take it. She had heard men like Kyle say things like that her whole life, and most of the time it was weather, and she did not know whether it was weather this time.

She did not know the law about dogs, or what the county did, or whether a man in a canvas jacket could point at a gray dog with a head like a cinder block and have him taken away in a truck. She knew that it was not her dog.

She knew that the man who owned him had stood in her kitchen the morning before looking at the roosters with his collar standing off his neck. She had watched the moving van take the white sofa away. Whatever the wife had wanted out of that house, she had taken it, and the dog was what was left.

Ruth had been trusted with him for one day.

She sat down at the table across from the empty chair by the window. Gerald came out from underneath and jumped up onto it and turned around twice on the blue cushion and lay down, as though nothing had ever been dropped on him in his life.

The typed sheet was on the counter where she had left it. She looked at the phone number at the bottom. Leave a message and I'll call back at the break.

She did not pick up the phone.

He was in Pittsburgh in a room full of lawyers, doing the thing he did, and if she called him he would come out of the room to take it. She had seen him run. She knew what one more thing would do to a man running like that, and she was not going to be the one thing.

She got up and went to the refrigerator and looked at the magnet with the mustache on the wrench.

Then she went to the drawer under the phone, where she kept the address book Gerald had kept before her, and turned to the Bs.

* * *

Walt Brisco answered on the sixth ring.

He was eighty-six. He said so himself, before she asked. He lived with his daughter in Ossining now and he did not get out much and he could not drive anymore since the cataracts, but he remembered her, and he remembered Gerald, and he remembered the ball game on the radio while he sweated copper in her kitchen in 1979.

“That north wall,” he said. “I told Gerald I'd come back and move that elbow.”

“You did tell him.”

“I never came back.”

“No,” Ruth said. “You didn't.”

There was a silence on the line. She heard a television in the background, a game show, somebody winning a car. Then she told him the rest of it, plainly, the arm and the dog and the cat and the chair, and what his grandson had said on his way out the door.

Walt was quiet for a long time.

“He took you by the arm,” he said.

“He did.”

“In Gerald's kitchen.”

“It's my kitchen,” Ruth said. “It always was. Gerald just fixed the cabinets.”

Walt laughed once, a dry sound like a match. Then he said a number of things about his grandson, slowly, in the voice of a man who has been disappointed by the same person for thirty years and has finally been handed the paperwork.

She let him say all of them. It was his phone bill.

“Kyle's a good plumber,” he said finally. “He's a bad man in a kitchen. I'll talk to him, and nobody's calling the county about anybody's dog.”

“And the pipe.”

“Tomorrow morning. I'm going to sit in your kitchen and watch him move that elbow where I should have moved it in 1979.” He stopped. “The cat going to be there?”

“He lives here,” Ruth said. “Tell Kyle to bring his own chair.”

“Good,” said Walt Brisco. “Good. That's good.”

* * *

She heard Reid's car at nine that night.

It was Wednesday, not Thursday. She looked out the front window and saw the car turn into his drive with its headlights going yellow through the falling snow, and the porch light came on next door, and then went off, and then her own doorbell rang.

He stood on her step with snow on his shoulders. He had his overcoat on and his bag still over his shoulder and he had not been home long enough to put either down. Pika was through her legs and out the door before she could say anything, and he hit Reid at the knees and nearly took him off the step.

Reid caught himself on the rail. He put his free hand on the dog's head and held it there.

"They settled at four," he said. "I got the last flight." He looked past her into the dark hall. "Your house is cold."

"The pipe burst," Ruth said. "Come in. I have to tell you something, and I'd rather tell you sitting down."

She told him at the kitchen table, with the overhead light on and the snow coming down past the black window and Gerald asleep on his chair. She told him all of it, the burst pipe and the red wheel and the mallet, and Kyle on her wet floor saying eleven, twelve thousand.

She told him about her arm. She told him exactly what Pika had done and how long he had held on and where, and that he had let go the first time she told him to.

She told him about the county. She told him she had said the dog's owner was a lawyer, and that she should not have said it.

He listened. He sat still at her table with his coat still on and his hands folded in front of him, and he did not interrupt her once. When she said the part about her arm his hands came apart on the table and then folded again, slowly, and that was all.

When she finished he did not say anything for a while.

Then he said, "Did he break the skin?"

"Pika? Through the jeans. A little."

"Did the cat?"

"The cat drew blood," Ruth said. "The cat meant it."

He looked across at Gerald, who was asleep on his chair with one paw over his face. "Did the plumber need stitches?"

"He drove away. I didn't ask."

"So as far as you know," Reid said, "the plumber recovered."

She looked at him. His face had not changed. It was the same tired face with the thin skin under the eyes, but the corner of his mouth had moved. He was making a joke. He had not made one in a long while, and he was out of practice.

She laughed.

It came out of her like the water out of the pipe. She laughed until she had to take her glasses off, and he sat across from her at her table in his overcoat with snow melting on the shoulders and let her, and Pika came out from under the table and put his chin on her knee to see what was going on.

"I'm sorry," she said, when she could. "It's not funny."

"Some of it is." He looked down at the dog. "Not your arm."

"No."

"I'd like to call the company in the morning," he said. "I'd like to call the grandson. I'd like to explain to him, calmly, in some detail, what the word battery means in this state, and what happens to a

contractor's license when…"

"No," Ruth said.

He stopped.

"I've already called Walt," she said. "He's coming in the morning with the grandson, and nobody is calling the county about your dog." She put her glasses back on. "It's my kitchen. I'll handle my kitchen."

He looked at her for a long time.

She thought he would argue. She had been married to an engineer for forty-one years and she knew what men looked like when they had a better system and were working out how to tell you. She waited for it.

"Okay," he said.

That was all. He did not say it like a man giving up. He said it like a man putting a document down on a table because the other party had signed it, and she felt her shoulders come down from somewhere around her ears, where they had been since four in the morning.

He looked at the counter by the sink, at the empty clay pot with the ring of dirt.

"What was in that?" he said.

"A begonia."

He looked at the dog.

"My husband gave it to me," Ruth said. "For our fortieth. It lived nine years longer than he did." She folded her hands. "It's only a plant."

He did not say he was sorry. He did not say he would buy her another one, or that he knew what it meant. He looked at the pot for a while, and then he looked at the pad by the phone where she had written BEGONIA and the dollar sign under it, and he took out his wallet and put two twenties under the rooster nearest the phone.

She opened her mouth.

"You said," he said. "If he ate anything of yours."

She closed her mouth. A deal was a deal.

He stood up. He went out to his car in the snow and came back with two plastic jugs of water from his own kitchen, and then went back and came with two more, and set them on her counter in a row beside the roosters. He brought a fifth one up to her bathroom and set it beside the toilet without a word about what it was for, and she was grateful to him in a way she would not have known how to say.

At the front door he crouched down and put on Pika's leash. The dog did not want to go. The dog lay down in her front hall with his chin on her slipper and made himself as heavy as a sack of wet cement, and Reid looked up at her from the floor with an expression she had not seen on him before.

"He's never done that," he said.

"I gave him chicken," Ruth said.

Reid closed his eyes.

"Every day," she said. "Twice on Tuesday."

"It's on the sheet."

"I read the sheet." She looked down at the dog, who looked back up at her with his eyebrows. "He bit a plumber, but the plumber was being rude."

Reid opened his eyes. He looked at her for a moment from the floor of her front hall, with the leash in his hand, and his mouth did the thing at the corner again, more of it this time.

"I'll put that in his file," he said.

* * *

She woke at five to a sound she knew.

This time it was a scrape and then a pause and then a scrape again, steady, in a rhythm, like somebody turning the pages of a heavy book. She lay in the dark and listened to it and knew it the way you know a song from the first three notes.

Gerald had shoveled the walk for forty-one winters. After he died her son had done it for two, and then he had moved to Phoenix, and after that she had paid a boy from the high school until the boy went to college. The last three winters she had done it herself, a little at a time, with a kitchen chair at the bottom of the steps to sit on.

She got up and went to the front window in her robe.

Reid Callahan was shoveling her walk. He was in his running clothes, the black jacket and the gray hat, working from her front steps toward the street in the blue dark before the streetlights went off.

He was doing it properly, a clean line on both sides, the snow thrown left onto the lawn and away from the roses. Pika was in the middle of her front yard with snow up to his chest, eating it.

She had her hand on the window latch. She was going to open it and tell him to stop.

She had been telling people to stop for nine years. Her daughter, her son, the neighbors with casseroles, the boy from the church with a leaf blower, the woman from the county who wanted to talk about whether she was safe on the stairs. She had sent them all away with a no and a cup of coffee, and she had been proud of herself, and she had sat on a kitchen chair at the bottom of her own steps in the snow and waited to get her breath back.

She took her hand off the latch.

He did the walk and the steps and the path to the side door where she kept the trash cans. Then he leaned the shovel against her porch rail and called the dog, and Pika came out of the yard covered in snow and shook it all off on him.

The two of them ran off down the street toward the river path. He ran with his head up. She watched him all the way to the corner.

Her newspaper had not come. It never came in snow. At six there was a newspaper on her front step anyway, in its blue plastic sleeve, with his address on the label.

* * *

Walt Brisco came at nine in his daughter's car, in a hat with earflaps and a cane, and his grandson came behind him in the truck. Kyle had a white bandage on the back of his right hand and walked with a slight hitch on the left side. He stood in her front hall with his hat in his good hand and looked at the floor.

"Ma'am," he said. "I want to apologize for yesterday."

Ruth looked at him. She looked at Walt, who was behind him on the step, and who looked back at her with an expression of complete innocence, a man who had nothing whatsoever to do with this and had certainly not rehearsed it in the truck.

"For what part?" she said.

Kyle's face went red. "All of it," he said.

"All right," Ruth said. "Wipe your feet."

He wiped his feet. He lay on her clean floor and moved the elbow on the north wall eighteen inches to the left, while Walt sat at her kitchen table with a cup of her coffee and told him everything he was doing wrong.

It took him two hours. He did it well.

Gerald watched the whole thing from his chair by the window. Kyle did not set anything down on it. Kyle did not set anything down within four feet of it.

When he was finished he turned the water back on and stood up and ran the tap, and it ran clear, and it did not hiss. He wrote her a bill for the parts. It said two hundred and forty dollars, and Walt looked at it over his glasses and crossed out the two and wrote a one.

"The leg all right?" Ruth said, when he handed it to her.

Kyle looked at her for a while. He was a big red young man in a canvas jacket, and she could see Walt in him somewhere, under the rest of it, around the eyes.

"It's fine," he said. "They gave me a shot at the urgent care." He looked down at the bandage on his hand. "The cat was worse."

"The cat usually is," Ruth said.

Walt laughed until he coughed. His daughter had to come in from the car and pound him on the back.

* * *

On Thursday evening Reid knocked on her door with a begonia.

It was a red rex in a plastic pot from the garden center on the parkway, with the price sticker still on the bottom. It was not the same as the old one. The leaves were smaller and the red was brighter, too bright, the red of a thing grown fast in a greenhouse and hurried to market.

She took it. She did not say anything about the twenties under the rooster. He did not say anything either.

He had something else in his other hand. He held it out to her on his flat palm, the way you hold out a sugar cube to a horse. It was a key, a single house key on a plain steel ring, old-fashioned, cut for a real lock.

"My spare," he said. "In case of pipes, or in case he gets out." He looked at the begonia instead of at her. "I'd rather you had it than the lockbox."

Ruth looked at the key.

It was a small thing, and she knew what it was. In fifty years she had given a key to this house to exactly three people, and one was dead and one was in Phoenix and one had lost it in 1988 and never told her.

She took it off his palm and put it in the pocket of her cardigan.

"He can come here," she said. "When you travel. You don't have to call the kennel."

"He'll eat your plants."

"Then you'll buy me new ones," Ruth said. "This is practically a relationship at this point."

That made him laugh. It was short and surprised and it changed his face completely, and he looked down at his shoes as if he had dropped it there.

She thought it might have been the first one since the fall. She did not ask.

Behind her in the kitchen there was a scrape of chair legs on linoleum.

They both turned. Pika had come in behind Reid while they were talking and gone straight through her hall to the kitchen, and he was standing beside the chair by the window with his front paws on the

blue cushion.

Gerald was on the cushion. Gerald had both ears flat back and was looking at the dog with an expression that went back to the Old Testament.

The dog looked at the cat. The cat looked at the dog.

Pika took his paws off the cushion and backed up and sat down. He sat up straight, like a dog in a painting, and looked up at Gerald, and then at Ruth, and then at Gerald again.

“He wants the chair,” Reid said.

“He can't have the chair,” Ruth said. “It's Gerald's chair.”

“Every day?”

Ruth looked at the dog. She looked at the cat, who had begun, with great dignity, to wash the back of one paw. She thought about it with the seriousness it deserved.

“Gerald gets it on Tuesdays,” she said. “The rest of the week they can work it out.”

She went to the refrigerator and took out a chicken.

The World of Complications

Who's Who

The people of the novel as you first meet them. Nothing here gives away how anything ends.

NAME	WHO THEY ARE
Vivienne Holloway	Twenty-six, out of Fordham Law, and one of four interns at Hargrove, Vance and Associates competing for a single associate position over twelve weeks. She reads every room she walks into, reads every file twice, and has kept a mental drawer for things she will not look at since she was eight.
Reid Callahan	Senior partner in corporate and employment law, fourteen years with the firm, thirty-nine. He wakes at five-fifteen all at once, runs four miles before anyone else is up, and lives alone in Westchester in a house he furnished himself after the divorce.
Pika	Reid's gray pitbull, about eighty pounds, with amber eyes the color of old honey. He leans on people he approves of at hip height and does not do that with everyone. He bit a plumber. The plumber recovered.
Christine Holloway	Vivienne's mother and Reid's former wife. Beautiful, warm on purpose, and expert at rooms, she tells a version of every story and always arrives at exactly the right moment.
Cassidy Holloway	Vivienne's sister, four years older, a graphic designer in Tribeca. She calls without texting first, buys honey bears at the farmers market and calls her prosthetic her fancy leg. She was the one who took the bus to Vivienne's recital.
Daniel Cho	An intern from Northwestern who times the good coffee to the minute and notices everything. He told Vivienne on the first day that he wants the job but will not become a person he doesn't like to get it.
Priya Anand	An intern from Georgetown, the best in the cohort by Vivienne's reckoning, with connections inside the firm and very good armor.
Tyler Marsh	An intern from Columbia Law with a firm handshake and a professor connected to two senior partners.
Simone Osei	A first-year associate, corporate, third floor. Eight-fourteen on Wednesdays in the firm kitchen, a bright orange phone case and opinions about oat milk.
Lester Vance	The managing partner. Every sentence he says is one he decided to say.
Marcus	A senior associate who eats lunch at his desk every day but Friday, when he disappears for two hours and comes back quieter.
Garrett	HR. He has run intern orientation seventeen times and still means it.
Arthur Opaline	The Garfield client, sixty-seven, forty years in the staffing business, with a binder.

Mrs. Ellenbogen	Reid's next-door neighbor, eighty-one when the novel opens. Herbs on every windowsill, a collection of ceramic roosters and a cat named Gerald.
Eleanor and Frank Callahan	Reid's parents in Connecticut. Eleanor spent thirty years at the town library and sends her son books with notes. Frank collects historical maps.

In this story only:

NAME	WHO THEY ARE
Ruth	Mrs. Ellenbogen's first name, which nobody in the novel uses.
Gerald	Two of them. The first was Ruth's husband, a county engineer who shoveled her walk for forty-one winters. The second is an orange cat with a torn ear.
Walt Brisco	Retired plumber, eighty-six, who put copper in Ruth's kitchen in 1979 and never came back to move the elbow.
Kyle Brisco	Walt's grandson. A good plumber and a bad man in a kitchen.

Timeline

The years behind the first day, as the novel tells them.

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENS
Vivienne is four	Her father, Thomas, leaves. She remembers a morning when he was there and an afternoon when he wasn't.
Vivienne is eight	Christine misses the recital. Cassidy, twelve, takes the bus and sits in the third row. The drawer begins.
Vivienne is sixteen	Christine marries Reid, twelve years her junior, after eight months of dating. Vivienne, mostly away at boarding school and then college, meets him twice: a Christmas, and a dinner she arrives late to and leaves early.
Vivienne is twenty	She finds Thomas online, in Portland, Oregon, with a wife and two children. She looks for twenty minutes and closes the browser.
About five years before the novel	Christine picks out a gray puppy. Pika comes home at eight weeks old.
Vivienne is twenty-one	The marriage ends after five years. Reid keeps the house he paid for and fights for the dog.
The next February	This story. A pipe bursts on the north wall next door, and Pika bites a plumber.

Vivienne is twenty-three	Her first year at Fordham Law. In October Cassidy calls to ask whether Vivienne is still herself, and Vivienne stands outside the library in the cold and takes stock. In December the motorcycle accident.
Eight months after the accident	Cassidy moves to an apartment in Tribeca and decides to live her actual life.
The novel opens	A September morning on the fourteenth floor of Hargrove, Vance and Associates. Four interns, twelve weeks, one job, and a brushed-steel plaque that reads R. Callahan.

Places

PLACE	WHAT IT IS
Hargrove, Vance and Associates	The fourteenth floor. Charcoal carpet thick enough to swallow sound, a birthday card curling on a window ledge, and partner offices down the corridor on the right.
The second conference room	Where the good coffee is, left over from the eight o'clock partner meeting. Get there by eight-ten or it's gone.
The hotel ballroom uptown	Site of the donor fundraiser in September, with marble floors, tall white centerpieces and a quartet whose cellist is flat.
Reid's house	In an older part of Westchester with big trees and wide lots. The walls are a gray the paint store called Fog, the bookshelves are actually read, and a spare key hangs on a hook by the kitchen door.
The river path	Half of Reid's four-mile morning route, through the park and back along the river, with Pika running loose.
Mrs. Ellenbogen's house	Next door to Reid's. A kitchen fifty years in the making, with a chair by the window that belongs to Gerald.
Cassidy's apartment	Tribeca. A bookshelf with the big dictionary from college on the first shelf.
The place on Bleecker	Where the good soup is.
Connecticut	The small town where Reid grew up, with a library, a hardware store and three churches.
Brisco Plumbing and Heating	Since 1961. The magnet is still on Ruth's refrigerator. In this story only.

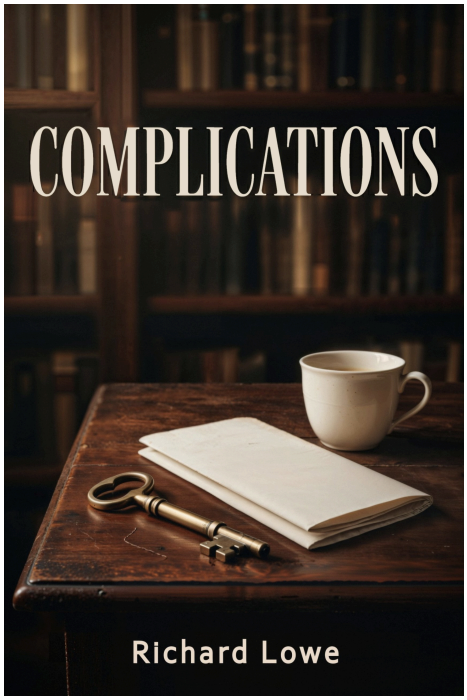
Glossary

TERM	MEANING
The drawer	Vivienne's system since she was eight. Identify the thing, name it, put it somewhere, move on.

The cohort	The four summer interns: Vivienne, Priya, Daniel and Tyler. Only one of them gets the job.
Reading rooms	What Vivienne does in every room she enters, fast and systematic, without deciding to. She can't turn it off. Neither can Reid.
The face	Daniel's word for whatever Vivienne's expression is doing while she pretends it isn't doing anything. She has several.
Forty-three minutes	The length of a conversation by a flat cellist at a September fundraiser, between two people who did not exchange last names.
The Garfield matter	The corporate employment dispute Vivienne is assigned to in week six, under a supervising partner she did not choose.
The binder	Arthur Opaline's thirty years of documentation on a man named Morrow.
The plaque	R. Callahan, on the second partner door, mounted a fraction of an inch lower than the others.
The spare key	On a ring by itself, on the hook by Reid's kitchen door.
Leaning	What Pika does at hip height to people he has decided about. He is asking to be acknowledged.
Chicken	Not on the sheet.

Read the Novel

Mrs. Ellenbogen still has the key, Gerald still gets the chair on Tuesdays, and Pika still leans on the people he has decided about. In Complications, an intern named Vivienne Holloway walks onto the fourteenth floor of Hargrove, Vance and Associates to win the only job on offer, and discovers that the partner who will supervise her is the man her mother divorced.



Complications

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