

THE KEYS

a novel

RAFAEL SILVA



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This book is dedicated to the Greatest Generation. To the men and women from all the nations who contributed to the Allied effort during World War II. To those who—with or without a uniform—sacrificed their lives or loves so that three-quarters of a century later, we have the freedom to write our chosen stories.

...she asked that I not contact her...implored
me to find happiness with another, as we would
surely kiss again, by the river—in another life.

—GUSTAVO MARTEL, *THE KEYS*

PROLOGUE

A loud hiss lingered. The brakes had just released their excess air. With a soft rattle below the passenger compartment, the westbound commuter came to its final stop.

The cabin was only about a quarter full. Passengers had been gradually getting off at the preceding stations. A few of those remaining, some in wrinkled shirts and with undone ties, were already in the line that inevitably formed behind the exit door. This was their last obstacle to freedom after a long, hard day of work. Other passengers sat patiently, or perhaps just less desperately, in their seats. Almost everyone was talking, texting, or staring at their smartphones' colorful screens.

Sam felt the train stop and heard people bustling around him. He opened his eyes and looked pensively out the window. He'd been mostly successful in forcing himself to sleep—not only during the train ride but also during the preceding five-hour flight to Boston. Before his departure, Sam had purchased some magazines and a booklet of crossword puzzles, hoping they would distract him enough.

He'd wanted to avoid thinking about the last few hours and, for that matter, about everything that had transpired in the last year. But once in the air, the more he tried to read an article or apply his wits to the empty grid of rows and columns, the more he was reminded of the people and places he'd come to know in such a short period of time. The friendships he'd forged in the big city and his experience in that remote mountain village

had meant so much to him. The history he'd learned about his own family affected him deeply. Above all, Sam thought of those compelling eyes—beacons of a sophisticated yet down-to-earth presence—that had always thrown him into a blissful trance. If only he'd done things differently that fateful morning.

While contrived, sleeping had helped, albeit temporarily, to tamp down his brooding. Sam knew he'd never forget. But he didn't want to think about it. Not now. Not for a long time. It was disconcerting and painful.

Sam remained seated with the more sensible passengers who waited a little longer to detrain. His railcar was at the end of the commuter, which had come to a halt along the railway platform a good distance from the station. This allowed passengers on his side a splendid view of the dove-white east tower of Worcester's Union Station. The muted sun hitting the tower created a peculiar shimmer. Its setting rays formed a shadowy outline of the stately building. A pristine evening completed the scene.

Under different circumstances, Sam might've appreciated the almost ethereal sight. But he didn't want to feel too much. He was trying to keep his awareness and judgment intact while purposely detaching his heart from his mind. His usual vitality was presently impaired. He was heartbroken.

Sam shook his head and smiled resignedly. He thought, *At least I'm home.*

At first glance, Worcester might've appeared somber and undesirable. Outsiders passing through might've felt inclined to hasten through its stark, industrial façade. But to Sam and most of its nearly two hundred thousand inhabitants, the city was homey and comfortable, even charming in its modesty and simplicity. This was a place with diverse, unpretentious, and sincere people. It had a storied history. Here, in 1926, Robert Goddard launched the first liquid-fuel-propelled rocket and thus ushered in the Space Age. It was the birthplace of the iconic happy face, the smiling yellow symbol Harvey Ball designed in 1963. It was

a modern hub for the healthcare and biotechnology industries. It was where Sam had been born—at the old Saint Vincent Hospital—and where he'd lived, happily, for three decades. His sister and her family also lived in, and loved, the town. Most of his childhood friends, with whom he kept in constant touch, still lived nearby. He'd gone to college in Worcester and currently had a job in the city. It was home to the American Hockey League's Worcester Sharks. It was an easy ride from Worcester to Fenway Park for Red Sox games or to Gillette Stadium for New England Patriots football or Revolution soccer matches. Samuel Gleeson had everything in Worcester. He'd never thought of his life or future existing outside this most agreeable spot in central Massachusetts.

But he would have given it all up—unequivocally and in an instant—for her.



How did I get to this point? Sam wondered. How had he fallen so fervently in love, knowing it was all an improbable fairy tale? How could he have dry eyes but also feel a weeping emptiness in his heart? When did this strange affair first start?

Did it begin with those unexpected letters from the law firm? Was it the pair of keys? Perhaps it was Sam's determination to do the right thing. Or was it simple curiosity when he thought there was nothing to lose?

As he turned and saw the last person in line leave the train, he felt the keys against his chest, hanging from the makeshift necklace around his neck. He grabbed his backpack and headed for the exit. He stepped off the train and into a pleasant evening breeze. It was the last day of summer.

Once on the platform, Sam stopped and sighed. A faint and more logical facet to his musings suddenly entered his thoughts. Sam finally realized the precise moment that had started the

flurry of recent events. With that in mind, he left the train station and walked home.

It didn't begin with those letters, he'd concluded. Instead, this had all originated about seventy-three years ago, on May 20, 1942, when a German U-boat sank the *Faja de Oro*, a Mexican oil tanker, off the Florida coast. This was improbable, incredible, but true. It changed Sam's life forever.