



THE MEASURE

A Novel

NIKKI ERLICK



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The logo for William Morrow, featuring a stylized, cursive 'wm' in a dark grey color.

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Dedication

*For my grandparents,
with love and gratitude*

Epigraph

Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

—Mary Oliver, “The Summer Day”

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Prologue

It was difficult to imagine a time before them, a world in which they hadn't come.

But when they first appeared, in March, nobody had any idea what to do with them, these strange little boxes that came with the spring.

Every other box, at every stage in people's lives, had a clear meaning, a set course of action. The shoebox holding a shiny new pair to be worn on the first day of school. The holiday present crowned with a looped red ribbon, skillfully curled on a scissor's edge. The tiny box with the long-dreamt-of diamond inside, and the large cardboard packages, sealed with tape and labeled by hand, loaded into the back of the moving truck. Even that final box, resting under the earth, whose lid, once shut, would never be opened.

Every other box felt familiar, understandable, expected even. Every other box had a purpose and a place, fitting comfortably within the course of a typical life.

But *these* boxes were different.

They came at the start of the month, on an otherwise ordinary day, under an otherwise ordinary moon, too early to blame the March equinox.

And when the boxes came, they came for everyone, all at once.

Small wooden chests—at least, they *looked* wooden—that emerged overnight, millions and millions of them, in every town and every state and every country.

The boxes appeared on finely mowed lawns in the suburbs, nestled between hedges and the first blooms of the hyacinth. They sat atop well-

trampled doormats in the cities, where decades of tenants had passed through the threshold. They sank into the warm sands outside tents in the desert and waited near lonely lakeside cabins, gathering dew in the breeze off the water. In San Francisco and São Paulo, in Johannesburg and Jaipur, in the Andes and the Amazon, there wasn't anywhere, or anyone, that the boxes couldn't find.

There was something both comforting and unsettling about the fact that every adult on earth suddenly seemed to be sharing the same surreal experience, the ubiquity of the boxes both a terror and a relief.

Because, in many ways, it *was* the same experience. In nearly every manner, these boxes were identical. All were dark brown in color, with reddish tints, cool and smooth to the touch. And inscribed on every box was a simple, yet cryptic message, written in the native tongue of its recipient: *The measure of your life lies within.*

Within each box was a single string, initially hidden by a silvery white piece of delicate fabric, so even those who lifted the lid would think twice before looking at what lay underneath. As if the box itself were warning you, trying to protect you from your own childish impulse to immediately tear away the wrapping. As if the box were asking you to pause, to truly contemplate your next move. Because that one could never be undone.

Indeed, the boxes varied on only two accounts.

Each small chest bore the name of its individual recipient, and each string inside measured a different length.

But when the boxes first arrived that March, amid the fear and the confusion, nobody quite understood what the measure truly meant.

At least, not yet.

Spring

Nina

When the box inscribed with Nina's name appeared outside her door, Nina was still asleep in bed, her eyelids twitching slightly as her dormant mind wrestled with a difficult dream. (She was back in high school, the teacher demanding to see an essay that Nina had never been assigned.) It was a familiar nightmare for someone prone to stress, but it was nothing compared to the one awaiting her in the waking world.

Nina woke up first that morning, as she usually did, and slid off the mattress, leaving Maura undisturbed in her slumber. She slipped into the kitchen, still wearing her plaid pajama set, and switched on the burner under the plump orange teakettle that Maura had found at a flea market last summer.

The apartment was always deliciously quiet at that early hour, the silence only interrupted by the occasional hiss of a droplet escaping from the lid of the teapot and landing with a sizzle among the low flames of the stovetop. Later, Nina wondered why she hadn't heard any commotion that morning. There were no screams or sirens or televisions blaring, nothing to alert her to the chaos already unfolding outside her home. If Nina hadn't turned on her phone, then perhaps she could have stayed in the stillness for just a while longer, savoring the time before.

But instead she sat on the couch and looked at her phone, the way she started every morning, expecting to read a handful of emails and scroll through various newsletters until Maura's alarm went off and they debated eggs or oatmeal. It was part of Nina's job as an editor to keep herself informed, but the sheer number of apps and outlets had grown with every

year in the role, and it sometimes overwhelmed Nina to think that she could spend an entire lifetime reading and never keep up.

That morning, she didn't even have a chance to start. As soon as she unlocked the home screen, Nina knew something was wrong. She had three missed calls from friends, and the texts had been piling up for hours, mostly from her fellow editors in their group message.

WTF IS HAPPENING?!

Did everyone get one???

They're EVERYWHERE. Like the whole world. Holy FUCK.

Is the inscription for real?

Do NOT open until we know more.

But inside is just a string, right???

Nina felt her chest constrict, her head tingling with dizziness, as she tried to piece together the full story. She clicked over to Twitter, then to Facebook, and it was all the same, filled with question marks and all-caps panic. But this time, there were photos. Hundreds of users posting pictures of small brown boxes outside their doors. And not just in New York, where she lived. Everywhere.

Nina could make out the inscription in a few of the photos. *The measure of your life lies within.* What the hell did that mean?

Her heart was beating alarmingly fast, keeping pace with the questions in her head. Most of the people online, faced with the same obscure message on the box, had quickly rallied around a single, terrifying conclusion: Whatever was waiting inside that box claimed to know just how long your life would last. The time you'd been allotted, by whatever powers may be.

Nina was about to scream and wake up Maura, when she realized that *they* must have received them, too.

She dropped her phone on the couch, fingers trembling, and stood up. She walked to the front door of the apartment, a little woozy on her feet, then took a deep breath and peered through the peephole, but she couldn't see down to the floor. So she slowly unhooked the double lock and timidly opened the door, as if a stranger were waiting on the other side, asking to be let in.

The boxes were there.

Sitting on the doormat with the Bob Dylan quote that Maura insisted upon bringing with her when she moved into Nina's place. "Be groovy or leave, man." Nina probably would have preferred something simpler, a neutral lattice mat, but that quote always made Maura smile, and after weeks of trudging home to it, Nina had grown to love it, too.

Covering most of the cursive blue lettering on the mat sat a pair of wooden-looking chests. One for each of them, apparently.

Nina looked down the hall and saw an identical box waiting for their neighbor in 3B, an elderly widower who only came out once a day to toss his trash. She wondered if she should alert him. But what would she possibly say?

Nina was still staring at the boxes at her feet, too nervous to touch them, yet too shocked to leave, when the whistle of the kettle roused her from her trance and reminded her that Maura still didn't know.

Ben

Ben, too, was asleep when the boxes arrived, only he wasn't at home.

He wriggled in his narrow economy seat, eyes squeezed shut against the glow of his neighbor's laptop, while millions of boxes swept across the country like a fog, thirty-six thousand feet beneath him.

Ben's three-day architectural conference in San Francisco had concluded in the early evening, and he had boarded the red-eye to New York before any sign of the boxes had reached the Bay. His plane departed just before midnight in the West and landed just after sunrise in the East, none of the passengers, nor the crew, aware of what had transpired during those dark hours in between.

But when the seat belt sign clicked off, and the cell phones of every traveler turned on all at once, they were instantly made aware.

Inside the airport, crowds formed around the base of the giant televisions, each network offering a different spin.

MYSTERY BOXES APPEAR ALL OVER GLOBE.

WHERE DID THEY COME FROM?

BOXES PURPORT TO PREDICT THE FUTURE.

WHAT DOES YOUR STRING REALLY MEAN?

All upcoming flights were delayed.

A father standing near Ben was trying to calm his three children while arguing on the phone. "We just got here!" he said. "What should we do? Come back?"

A businesswoman staring at her iPad had taken to informing fellow passengers of the latest news online. “Apparently they only came for adults,” she announced aloud, to nobody in particular. “No kids have gotten them so far.”

But most people were screaming the same question into their phones: “Did *I* get one, too?”

Ben was still squinting at the neon screens above, his eyes dry and sore from an uneasy sleep. Flying, to Ben, always felt like sidestepping time, the hours on an airplane existing outside the normal continuum of life below. But never before had he so clearly exited one world and returned to another.

As he started walking quickly toward the AirTrain to reach the subway, Ben dialed his girlfriend, Claire, but she didn’t pick up. Then he called his parents at home.

“We’re okay, we’re fine,” his mother assured him. “Don’t worry about us, just get back safely.”

“But . . . you did *get* them?” Ben asked.

“Yes,” his mother whispered, as if someone might be listening. “Your father put them in the hall closet for now.” She paused. “We haven’t opened them yet.”

The subway into the city was distinctly empty, especially for the morning rush hour. Ben was one of only five in the car, his carry-on luggage tucked between his legs. Wasn’t anyone going in to work that day?

It must be a safety precaution, he realized. Whenever something cataclysmic might be striking the city, nervous New Yorkers avoided the underground. Few places seemed worse to potentially be trapped in than a small, airless train car below the earth.

The other commuters were quiet, on edge, sitting far apart from each other and consumed by their phones.

“They’re just little boxes,” said a man slumped in a corner. He looked, to Ben, like he was high on something. “People don’t need to be freaking out!”

The person nearest to the man shifted away.

Then the man started singing deliriously, conducting an invisible orchestra with his hands.

“Little boxes, little boxes, little boxes made of ticky tacky . . .”

It was only then, listening to the man's raspy voice, the eerie tune, that Ben truly started to worry.

Suddenly distressed, he rushed off at the next stop, Grand Central Station, and raced up the steps, grateful to be back on street level among the comfort of the crowds. The terminal was much more populated than the subway, with dozens of people boarding trains to the suburbs. Where were they all going? Ben wondered. Did they really believe that the answer to these mysterious boxes resided outside the city?

Perhaps they were simply running toward family.

Ben paused by an entrance to a vacant track, trying to orient his thoughts. About a quarter of the people around him were carrying brown boxes under their arms, and he realized that even more might be hiding in backpacks and purses. Ben felt surprisingly relieved that he hadn't been home when it arrived, snoring obliviously in bed, separated from the invading box by only a shamefully thin wall. It felt like a lesser violation, somehow, when he was gone.

On a typical day at the station there would be plenty of tourists milling about, listening to audio guides, staring upward at the famous celestial ceiling. But today nobody stopped, and no one looked up.

Ben's mother had pointed them out to him once when he was a child, the faded gold constellations above, explaining each zodiac in turn. Was she also the one who had told him that the stars were painted backward on purpose? That it was meant to be seen from the perspective of the divine, rather than humanity. Ben always figured it was just an excuse concocted afterward, a pretty story covering someone's mistake.

"The measure of your life lies within," a man was enunciating into his headset, visibly frustrated. "Nobody knows what it means! How the hell should I?"

The measure of your life lies within. Ben had picked up enough information by now, from the strangers at the airport and his phone on the subway, to recognize that was the inscription on the boxes. The mystery was only a few hours old, but some people were already interpreting the message to mean that the string inside your box foretold the ultimate length of your life.

But how could that *possibly* be true? Ben thought. That would mean the world had flipped around, like the ceiling above him, the humans now seeing from God's perspective.

Ben leaned against the cool wall behind him, faintly light-headed. That's when he remembered the bout of turbulence in the middle of his flight that had jostled him awake, the plane shuddering up and down, nearly spilling his seatmate's drink. Like something had briefly rocked the atmosphere.

Ben would realize, later, that the boxes hadn't appeared all at once, that they came during the night, whenever night happened to fall in a particular place. But there, standing in Grand Central, when the details of the prior evening still remained hazy, Ben couldn't help but wonder if that shift in the air marked the moment the boxes had arrived down below.