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KATIE WINTERS

Winter Sun

THE COLEMAN SERIES

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The Coleman Series

Katie Winters

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Chapter One

It was the hazy week between Christmas and New Year's—a time that demanded movie marathons, Christmas leftovers, warming up by the fireplace, and not a whole lot else. Heaps of glittering snow covered Nantucket Island, and the ferry service had been shut down for three days. This meant islanders couldn't go back to the mainland, and only those with boats of their own and enough bravery in their hearts could travel across the sloshing Sound at all. The majority of Nantucketers remained safe at home, watching the gusts of snow-filled air rush up against their cozy houses, feeling grateful for another year gone by.

Blissful from multiple Christmas celebrations, Katrina often hummed or smiled while gazing at Grant, her husband of forty-five years. She was in awe of him. How had she gotten so lucky? When it was just the two of them in their big house alone, they held hands over the scratchy blanket on the couch, recounting old Christmas memories or playing Scrabble till their eyes hurt. She wished for a thousand more Christmases by his side.

Grant and Katrina were both sixty-five years old. These days, Grant's hair was a mix of salt and pepper, his beard thick and rugged, and his twinkling eyes sported soft bags beneath them. Katrina had begun dyeing her hair a luscious maple brown many years ago when the first flecks of gray had filled her with dread. She wished she could tell her thirty-something self not to fear the passage of time. She wished she could tell her that aging was a blessing, especially when you could do it alongside someone you loved.

The house phone rang at nine o'clock on the evening of December 28th. Katrina was in the kitchen, arranging their plates and cutlery in the

dishwasher as Grant flicked through the sports channels on the television in the family room. Dinner had been pork chops and mashed potatoes, with leftover Christmas cookies for dessert. Everything had the air of indulgence. Katrina dreaded January 2nd when she planned to incorporate a few more greens into her diet. It was such fun to eat whatever she pleased. She felt like a kid again.

Katrina dried her hands on a kitchen towel and answered the phone, imagining it was her sister-in-law, Estelle, or perhaps her oldest daughter, Ida. Her younger daughter, Sophie, hardly ever called.

“Good evening. Coleman residence.”

“Hello, Mrs. Coleman.” The voice was warm yet tentative. “It’s Connie. Your mother’s nurse?”

A chill raced down Katrina’s spine. “Of course. Connie. How are you?”

“I don’t want to beat around the bush, so I’ll just come out with it.” Connie went on. “Your mother fell this evening at home. I called the ambulance immediately, and we’re on our way to the hospital.”

Katrina’s vision narrowed to a single black dot in front of her. Her knees turned to Jell-O. “She fell?” Her voice was hardly a rasp.

She wanted to say, *didn’t I hire you just to avoid this kind of emergency?* But she kept that to herself.

Connie continued. “I was upstairs. I’d asked your mother to call me with the device we gave her if she needed anything. But you know how stubborn she can be. She decided to walk to the kitchen by herself. She took a tumble on that small staircase between the living room and the kitchen. I heard the fall from upstairs and ran down as quickly as I could.”

Katrina could hardly imagine her eighty-five-year-old mother bent and twisted on the hardwood floor. It went beyond her understanding of the old, formidable woman who’d been too proud to go to a nursing home. Katrina had had to tell a half lie when she’d hired Connie, insinuating to her mother that Connie really needed the job. That her mother was doing a good deed in allowing her to “sit around” and help out occasionally.

In the car on the way to the hospital, Katrina shook so violently that her knees rattled together. Grant held her hand between the seats, his thumb stroking her gently. Enormous snowbanks on either side of the island streets towered over their Prius. The streetlamps cast them in a neon glow.

“I can’t help but feel like she did this to spite me,” Katrina whispered. “She figured out Connie was a real nurse. And she wanted to prove she could

fall, anyway. Even with all the help in the world.”

Katrina’s heart seized with sorrow and guilt the minute she said it. She snapped her hand over her mouth. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that. I don’t know why I said it.”

Grant’s hand tightened over hers. “I’ve known your mother since we were teenagers,” he said. “She’s never been the easiest woman in the world.”

Grant didn’t agree or disagree with Katrina. He was simply reminding her of the truth of her life. Although she loved her mother with every ounce of her soul, she did so, knowing that at every turn, her mother could answer a compliment with an insult. She could bite when you least expected it.

Katrina’s mother, Agatha Whittaker, was born on Nantucket Island eighty-five years ago. She’d been one of five siblings, the only girl, and the only one who’d ultimately stayed on Nantucket to raise her own family. The fact that she’d only had two children, Katrina and her older brother, Norm, had been a devastating loss to Katrina’s grandparents. They’d expected heaps of grandchildren running around Nantucket, so many that they forgot their names.

When Katrina’s father, Calvin, died many years ago, Katrina had half expected her mother’s inner rage to fade. She’d imagined her finding new hobbies, new interests. She’d imagined her writing a book about the history of Nantucket Island or painting a self-portrait or teaching her grandchildren to bake. Instead, she’d hardened her heart even more to the outside world. Whenever Katrina brought up the idea of leaving that enormous house where Katrina had been raised, Agatha had practically spat with rage. “This is the home your father bought for me. You’ll have to carry me out of here.”

It was true. Agatha wasn’t the easiest woman in the world. But Katrina had no idea what to expect when they reached the hospital. Watching a great and manipulative leader fall would terrify anyone who’d once called them powerful. As Grant pulled into the parking lot, her mind’s eye flashed with images of her mother throughout Katrina’s childhood—five foot nine with perfect posture, wearing an apron she never got dirty, her hair gorgeously permed, her waist always size two. “*Norm? Katrina? Turn off the television! You’re going to burn your eyes out!*” And then their father, upstairs, howling, “*Can’t I get any quiet in this house?*”

Katrina and Grant approached the long white desk at the front of the hospital, holding hands. When they explained why they were there, the young woman said that Agatha’s doctor would be with them shortly. “Have a seat in

the waiting room,” she instructed. “There’s free coffee in the corner.”

Katrina checked her phone. It was nine thirty. The only messages she’d received since she’d gotten the call from Connie were from Ida, who’d sent photographs of Nellie and Frankie, her granddaughters. They were home on Nantucket, visiting from college. Katrina had taken approximately two hundred photographs of them over Christmas—baking cookies, walking along the shore, and gossiping together. Sometimes, it was hard for her to remember that beautiful, loving Frankie and Nellie were genetically linked to Agatha and Calvin Whittaker.

Then again, it wasn’t that the Coleman name didn’t have their share of skeletons in the closet. The story of Chuck’s second family had certainly reared its ugly head in 2023.

Connie appeared a few minutes later. In her mid-fifties, she was short and muscular with tight curls that raced down her shoulders. Her face was blotchy, as though she’d been crying.

Katrina’s heart melted when she saw her. This woman had to field a great deal of Agatha Whittaker’s vitriol and insults over the past few years. She’d done it with grace.

Before Katrina could say anything, the doctor appeared and led Grant and Katrina to his office. Like everyone in Nantucket, Katrina knew bits and pieces about the doctor’s life. She knew his wife volunteered at the soup kitchen and his children were outstanding gymnasts. She also knew that as a high schooler, he’d had to repeat grade ten due to reckless partying.

But the man before her looked solemn and thoughtful, with bags under his eyes that proved the weight of his profession. She decided to shove her assumptions about him to the side.

“Your mother had a nasty fall,” he said. “When she first got here, we contemplated immediate surgery.”

“Oh no.” Katrina squeezed Grant’s hand with all her strength.

“Fortunately, we were able to avoid surgery,” he went on. “We have put her in a medically induced coma, which should last approximately seventy-two hours. This will give her body time to reduce the swelling and rest. Best of all, she’s not in any pain.”

He said it as though Agatha had been in a great deal of pain when she’d arrived. Katrina could practically hear her mother’s howling echoing through the halls.

Katrina and Grant asked the doctor a series of questions. Katrina felt as

though she were outside of her body, floating up by the ceiling and watching this all take place. When her father had passed away, it had been sudden and immediate, and Katrina hadn't had time to dwell. Now, for better or for worse, she was forced to reckon with the specifics of her mother's decline. Her heart felt bruised.

After the doctor left to tend to other patients, Katrina and Grant were led to Agatha's room. Katrina's heart pounded in her throat as the door opened to reveal the very slight old woman hooked up to wires and tubes. Machines beeped on either side of the hospital bed, illustrating the dimming light of her mother's life. A ball of sorrow filled Katrina's chest, pressing hard against her heart. As the nurse closed the door behind them, Katrina burrowed her face in Grant's chest and tried to breathe.

"She'll wake up in a few days," Grant told her, rolling his hand over her back. "The doctor knows what he's doing."

Katrina sat on one side of the bed, and Grant sat on the opposite side. Her mother's wrinkled hand was splayed across the bed, the fingernails glinting with perfection. Agatha had never let more than two weeks go by without doing her nails. This wasn't something she'd been able to pass along to Katrina. "*Just look at the state of your nails, Katrina. Really. Aren't you embarrassed?*"

Agatha's bruises had begun to appear. They were purple and blue, rising up from beneath her skin. Her wrist and leg were both broken. It was impossible to imagine just how tender eighty-five-year-old bones were. Katrina imagined them like the set of China in her mother's hutch. Once, she'd accidentally dropped a teacup and watched the shards scatter to all corners of the dining room. Her father had exploded with rage.

As Katrina watched her mother lay there in the hospital bed, she half imagined Agatha would open her eyes, twist her head on the pillow, and bellow, "*What happened to you, Katrina? You've let yourself get so old.*"

But instead, Agatha's eyes remained closed. And Katrina began to reckon with the real truth of her mother's fall.

Maybe Katrina would never be able to talk to her mother about the trauma from their shared past. Maybe it was already too late for Katrina to heal.

Chapter Two

The Narcotics Anonymous (NA) meeting on December 30th was held in the Presbyterian church community room. It was located in the basement, its carpet musty and in dire need of an update. Old newspaper clippings featuring Nantucket teenagers and children doing “good deeds” around the community hung on the bulletin board. The room was connected to the church kitchen, which made it a viable option for NA, especially around the holidays.

“These are often the most difficult weeks for people in the program,” Jeff had told them a few weeks ago. “Which means we’ll take any opportunity to celebrate together and be there for one another. We have to stay strong through this season and beyond.”

Tonight, Sophie reached NA a few minutes before six. She stomped her boots on the welcome mat and unbuttoned her coat, inhaling the warm smell of broccoli cheddar soup, fresh bread, and something else. Chicken? With each step down the staircase, more of the NA crew came into view, their cheeks red from the cold yet their smiles and laughter vibrant. They hugged one another and gripped Styrofoam cups of coffee, recounting their Christmas stories. Sophie knew she was lucky compared to most of these people. Most of her family had continued to love her through her addiction and recovery. (Her mother, of course, was another story.) But many people’s parents, children, or partners abandoned them when times got tough.

“And it’s not like we can blame them for that,” Jeff had said at another meeting. “We were not ourselves. As addicts, we gave them no love and no respect. We thought only about ourselves and our next fix.”

Jeff was the leader of the Nantucket NA chapter, a guy in his sixties with gray hair to his shoulders and a round silver belt buckle that he brought back from a trip out west. He'd been sober since he was thirty, which was more than half his life. Sophie couldn't imagine having that much sobriety on her. He wore his sobriety proudly, like a warrior through battle. In many ways, he was exactly that.

Addicts understood that about one another, Sophie knew. It was nothing she could describe to her mother. It was, perhaps, why she'd fallen so deeply in love with Patrick. He understood her down to the core.

"There she is!" Jeff greeted Sophie first, striding forward as she shimmied from her coat. They hugged. "Merry Christmas," Jeff said. "I hope things went well with your family?"

"As well as can be expected," Sophie said. "How was yours?"

"Cozy," Jeff said. "Just Mandy and me at the house with the dogs. I ate my weight in her Christmas cookies, I'll tell you." He patted his stomach, which looked exactly the same as it always did.

Jeff smiled and adjusted his glasses on the bridge of his nose. His wedding band glinted on his left hand—a new addition from last summer. His wife, Mandy, was in AA, not NA, but the same rules applied. And they'd fallen head over heels for one another when Mandy had come to the island two summers ago for a solo vacation. When Sophie had learned the story, she'd welled up with tears. Love had no timeline. It had no rules.

"Where's Patrick?" Jeff asked.

"He's working today, unfortunately," Sophie explained. "He and his brothers have to finish a project before the end of the year."

Patrick was Sophie's boyfriend. The title was a relatively new development for reasons that were difficult to say aloud. Katrina Coleman certainly didn't like to speak about them—not even to Sophie, who sometimes ached to hear what her mother thought.

The gist was that Sophie had always been an addict. Even when she hadn't been using, she'd been an addict. That was the way these things went—genetically, physically, and emotionally. Years ago, as she'd snuck around as a high-functioning addict trying to get a fix, she'd met Patrick, another addict. "It was love at first sight," Sophie told the NA group sometimes when it was her time to share. "It was like we'd always known each other. Like we were just waiting for the other to appear."

Sophie had been married to Jared when they'd met. An addict with a

million secrets up her sleeves anyway, she'd added yet another secret: her love for Patrick. They'd spent nearly two years sneaking around, getting high, and sleeping together. Sometimes, they'd fought about it, wondering what to do when they could take the necessary steps to actually be together. The arguments always ended the same way—they just got high again.

Sophie had been too terrified to leave Jared. For one thing, they'd been together since high school—tied together more or less for forever. Sophie marrying her high school sweetheart was something Katrina was proud of. After all, that was what people did in Sophie's family on both the Whittaker and Coleman sides. They decided on who they were and who they loved by the time they were eighteen. Somehow.

Beyond that, Jared had been emotionally abusive. Counterintuitively, this made Sophie cling tighter to Jared and think of him as a lifeline. He'd belittled her so much that she believed she couldn't live without him in some respect. She thought of herself as ugly and less than. Her self-esteem was gone.

But last spring, as Sophie's addiction had gotten more and more challenging to hide, everything changed. Her cousin, Samantha Coleman, inherited their great-aunt Jessabelle's old house—colloquially called The Jessabelle House. She then hired three contractor brothers, Derek, Brent, and Patrick, to refurbish the house. Patrick hadn't mentioned the job to Sophie. Perhaps he hadn't even realized they were cousins. Sam had still carried her ex-husband's last name at the time.

One thing led to another, and Patrick's addiction worsened. He'd never been as good as Sophie at hiding his problems. (This was something she disliked about herself—her ability to box herself in.) Samantha, a social worker who specialized in people with addiction, stepped in to help and invited Patrick to stay at The Jessabelle House to detox. Sophie was distraught when she stopped hearing from Patrick, so she used heavier than ever.

Samantha invited everyone to The Jessabelle House for the Solstice Party. Sophie hardly remembered going. She hardly remembered anything in the fog of that time at all. It was clear that Jared had clued in on her affair with Patrick at one point or another. Perhaps they'd fought about it. Perhaps Jared had threatened her.

When Patrick came out of his room on the night of the Solstice Party, Jared smashed his fist into his face. And Sophie had no longer seen a reason

to live that way. She'd taken immediate steps to leave Jared, get clean, and unite with Patrick.

* * *

The NA group feasted on soup, chicken, several different casseroles, and fresh bread. As a few church ladies gathered their plates and scrubbed the table, Jeff announced it was time to gather in a circle. Sophie grabbed a chair and slid between Monica and Peter, two addicts who were visiting family on Nantucket and were using this meeting as a bridge between their meetings back home in Boston. With the ferries closed, they couldn't get back.

Jeff set to work on his typical pre-meeting speech, outlining the rules of NA. Respect was paramount. When it was time to share, Monica raised her hand first and talked at length about a horrible encounter she'd had with her mother-in-law here on the island.

"She learned I'm an addict just this year," Monica explained. "And now, she doesn't think I'm good enough to be the stepmother to my stepchildren. But what does she know about our home life? Nothing. My husband and I are very open about what happened to me. I've been clean for twelve years." She chewed her lip. "I don't know how long I have to pay for these sins, you know? I don't know how to outrun them."

Everyone in NA nodded. They felt echoes of what she said in their own narratives.

After three more people shared their holiday stories, Sophie raised her hand. Jeff nodded, his eyes warm.

"Hello. I'm Sophie. And I'm an addict," Sophie began. "As Jeff always tells us, the holidays are difficult, to say the least. My mother hosted my boyfriend and me for Christmas. She sent daggers in my direction all day long. She has this way of making me feel so small, you know?" Sophie swallowed.

"I was fifteen or sixteen when I first got serious about using," Sophie went on. "And I thought I was being so secretive. But nothing got past my mother, Katrina. No, Katrina had her finger on the pulse, as most mothers do, I suppose. But she had no idea what to do with me. She screamed at me, but she never wanted to say the word 'drugs' aloud. She probably thought the neighbors would hear. Anyway, when I was seventeen, I came home out of

my mind. I'm actually surprised that I can still remember this story. But I found my mother crumpled on the ground, sobbing. She finally told me my grandfather had died."

Sophie blinked back tears and tried to keep her voice bright. She didn't want to sound too "woe is me."

"My mother looked up at me from the floor and said, *'You know why he died? He died because he was a drunk. He was an addict. And you'll end up just the same way if you don't quit it!'*" Sophie punched her thigh and tried to laugh. "It was the only time she really commented on my using like that. I just stormed off, unable to face her.

"But two days ago, my grandmother fell. It's not looking good. I saw my mother at the hospital yesterday, and the look in her eyes reminded me so much of that day. She still looks at me like an addict. Like I'm out of control. And sometimes, it makes me think I am still out of control. It certainly makes me think about using much more than usual, which is crazy. In many ways, I'm happier than I've ever been. I live alone. My divorce from a very cruel man just finalized. I have a wonderful boyfriend who is also in recovery."

Sophie raised her shoulders.

"These feelings will always come back up," Jeff said, his shoulders dropping. "As we've talked about before, your mother is unwilling to look at the part she played in your addiction. And these patterns will repeat, over and over again."

"What's the solution? Do I stop seeing her?"

"That's up to you," Jeff said. "Many people find those relationships too difficult to carry. The fact that you're trying is a testament to your strength. But don't let it drag you out of recovery. You need to put that first."

After NA finished that evening, Sophie hugged a few friends and bid goodbye to Jeff, who gave her a fatherly look of concern.

"I'm sorry to hear about your grandmother," he said. "How is she?"

"She's still in an induced coma," Sophie admitted. "We'll know more when they take her out of it."

Jeff shook his head. "I'm sorry to hear. That grandmother of yours is a fighter. Agatha Whittaker always terrified me. Nobody could take her."

Sophie grimaced into a smile. She'd heard stories about her terrifying grandmother and her obstinate personality, but she'd always been tremendously kind and loving to Sophie and her sister, Ida. That was always the story, she supposed. Parents always lent most of their emotional abuse

(known or unknown) to their children and covered their grandchildren with nothing but kisses.

Sophie walked through the blistering cold and jumped into the front seat of her car, where she turned on the engine and the heat and sat for a moment. She always felt relieved after NA, as though she'd unburdened her soul. Today was no different, save for one thing.

As was her custom, she'd kept a secret.

Sophie's heart pounded as the memory surfaced. Before she could stop herself, she tugged open her glove box and removed the plastic baggie within. She wasn't sure why she was driving around with it like this, as though she was carrying it around town, waiting for it to tell her something.

But it had already told her everything she needed to know.

For the second time in her life, she was pregnant.

The pregnancy test on the other side of the plastic still showed off those two pink stripes, clear as day. Sophie dropped her head back. This went against everything NA told her to do. The rule stated not to make any big changes in your life before you have one year of full sobriety. She hadn't let Patrick move in for that reason.

But a baby was the biggest change of all.

What was she going to do?

Sophie had taken the test on December 28th, many hours before she'd received the call from Ida about Grandma Agatha. She hadn't even told Patrick yet. Even now, terror pumped through her chest, and she threw the pregnancy test back in the glove box and snapped it closed.

"One thing at a time, Sophie," she breathed as she started the engine.

But she knew she couldn't ignore this forever. Babies had a way of growing bigger and bigger until they made themselves known.

Chapter Three

Katrina was antsy as soon as she woke up. Her heart fluttered in her chest as though it were a thousand butterflies, and for what felt like nearly an hour, she sat on the edge of her bed and gazed out at the rolling hills of snow outside her home, trying to calm herself. It was December 31st, the final day of the year, and she'd hardly spent an hour of daylight away from the hospital since her mother's accident. But tomorrow, her mother would be removed from her medically induced coma. And that meant today, Katrina had to get started on something she was terrified of. She had to go over to her childhood home and begin the long, harrowing process of cleaning it out. There was no way her mother was well enough to return. And Katrina had every intention to hollow it, sell everything at auction, and get rid of the massive old place, once and for all.

Katrina showered, dried her hair, did her makeup, and donned a pair of Levi's jeans and a big red sweater. Downstairs, she found Grant and Roland at the kitchen table, newspapers spread between them. Like the inseparable brothers they were, they spatted amicably about something sports-related.

When Roland saw Katrina, his face fell. "I'm so sorry to hear about your mother, Katrina."

Katrina poured herself a mug of coffee. Roland, Grant, and Katrina had all grown up on Nantucket, and they all knew very well the intricacies of Agatha Whittaker's personality.

"Thanks, Ro," Katrina said. "It's been hard. But your brother here has been a lifesaver. As usual." She smiled at her husband.

"Is that so? Grant, I had no idea you had a heart in that chest of yours,"

Roland joked.

“You know I can’t show you my tender side,” Grant said. “You’d take advantage in no time flat.”

Roland laughed uproariously and flashed through the newspaper. Katrina retreated to the living room to sit by the fire and make a list of what she needed to do. The worst of it would come after her mother awoke, she knew. That was when she had to tell Agatha she could never go home again.

The drive out to Siasconset took fifteen minutes. Katrina gripped the steering wheel with white fingers and barely tapped the gas, frightened the wheels would cut across the ice too quickly. When she spotted the old Whittaker House, a historical Victorian with gorgeous triangular eaves, a large porch around the front and a veranda in the back, and rolling hills that crept across the soft white beach, her heart stopped. Although she hadn’t officially called it “home” in many years, it wasn’t hard to imagine she was seventeen again or that she’d just gotten out of school. That she would enter the front door and find her mother in the kitchen and her father in his study, where he’d once written all of his articles as a journalist for the *Nantucket Gazette*.

It was funny how you could trick your mind.

Katrina parked in the driveway, walked up the porch steps, and used her key to enter. According to the schedule she’d arranged for her mother years ago, two maids came in every Friday to tidy up the place, which meant there wasn’t a lick of dust on anything—not on the framed paintings in the foyer, the plants, or the stone Greek statues that lined the entrance to the living room. Her father had actually picked them up on a trip to Athens many years ago. He’d called them a “blessing from the Greek gods.” Her mother hadn’t liked that. “We can’t even pretend to acknowledge any other gods,” she’d scolded. “It’s sacrilegious!” It was only after her father died that Agatha had put the Grecian statues back out.

Katrina felt like a ghost haunting her childhood home. She floated through the living room, past the kitchen, through the dining room, then the library, and up the stairs to the second floor, where most of the bedrooms were located. Her father’s study was up here, too. Katrina hovered outside the door, imagining she could hear him typing on the old typewriter, then went in, daring herself to face her fears.

Although Katrina had come to the Whittaker House more than once per week since her father had died, she hadn’t had reason to enter his study.

Come to think of it, she hadn't even been upstairs. Now, she found herself at age sixty-five, around the same age her father had been when he'd died, standing in a perfectly preserved space. It felt as though he could come in any time, adjusting his glasses and rubbing at the collar of his sweater. "Move aside, Kat. I need to get this down," he might have said, dropping into his creaking chair to clack away at the keys of his typewriter.

The typewriter was here, too. Katrina closed the door and tiptoed over to it, then placed her fingers across the keys and exhaled all the air from her lungs. Her father's book collection lined the shelves, too precious to be in the rest of the library, and she spotted several he'd written himself—mostly about the state of journalism during the sixties and seventies.

Sometimes, when Calvin had been particularly drunk, he'd said, "I never should have had you kids. I could have been somebody. I could have been a famous journalist in the city. Look at me, wasted at the *Nantucket Gazette*! It's pathetic."

Katrina hadn't known what to say. But she'd been captivated by his stories and sat rapt, waiting for the next. It hadn't mattered to her if some of the stories were made up.

Her brother, Norm, had felt the same. In fact, he'd taken their father's teachings to heart so much that he'd decided to go to New York City himself.

Katrina still remembered the day Norm shared this news with the family. They were at the dining room table, eating spare ribs and potatoes. Norm put his fork and knife down, cleared his throat, and said, "A kid from high school has a room for me in the city. I'm going to go after graduation."

All the blood drained from Agatha's face. "The city?" She was scandalized.

"What for?" Calvin demanded.

Norm realized he was in over his head. He picked his fork back up and traced lines through the mashed potatoes. "For the past few years, I've had the lead in the school play." Norm continued. "I talked to some of my teachers, and they really think I have a shot."

"At what?" Calvin asked.

"Acting," Norm said. "On Broadway."

Calvin burst into laughter. His fork and knife clattered to the plate, and his fork eventually fell to the floor below. Norm was stricken. Katrina imagined he'd practiced this announcement in his bedroom mirror, deciding

to keep it simple. “Be strong, Norm,” he might have told his reflection. “Dad loves the city. He’ll support you.”

“Acting?” Calvin repeated. “My son? Acting?”

Agatha shook her head and placed her napkin over her mouth.

“I’m good, Dad,” Norm said. “Just talk to my teachers. Ask anyone.”

Norm hadn’t invited their parents to any of his theater productions. Without being asked, Katrina had known to keep Norm’s involvement a secret. It was the seventies. If a boy wasn’t keen on sports, he was often perceived as gay. And having a gay son was Calvin Whittaker’s worst nightmare.

Of course, everyone knew Norm had a steady girlfriend. But that still didn’t make his interest in theater “right” in the mind of their father.

That night, Calvin went on a bender in his study. He drank through an entire bottle of whiskey and started on the scotch. Presumably, that gave him enough courage to stumble down the hallway, blast his fist against Norm’s door, and ask him, “You think you’re better than us? Huh? Is that why you’re going to New York City?”

Norm kept his door locked. He told Katrina later that he was in a ball on the floor, sobbing with fear. He had no idea what would happen if their father was able to break down the door. When Calvin got drunk enough, he was no longer himself. He was a monster.

Now, so many years after that horrible night, Katrina poked through her father’s old desk, trying to understand his psyche. She found long-dried-out pens, sticky notes with scribbled to-do lists, old cigars, and other odds and ends. When she opened the third drawer on the left, she found three half-empty bottles of scotch—his leftovers from decades ago. It wasn’t hard to imagine that the entire house was lined with bottles like this. Addicts like Calvin planted them everywhere. They didn’t like to be too far away from their next fix.

Overwhelmed, Katrina backed out of the study, closed the door, and took several deep breaths in the hallway. Her father’s yells echoed in her head. Before she’d thought it through, she pulled her phone from her pocket and dialed Ida. She needed backup.

Ida pulled into the driveway forty minutes later. Katrina watched her from the foyer, her heart brimming with pride. Ida was forty-three, a wife, a mother, a respected businesswoman, and a pillar of their community. She was precisely the sort of woman Katrina had wanted her daughters to become.

A 50 percent success rate wasn't bad, she supposed.

Ida had brought Nellie and Frankie along to help out. This pleased Katrina to no end. She swallowed them in hugs and ordered them to make themselves cozy in the living room. She'd just started a fire in the fireplace, and the CD player still worked if the girls wanted to go through Great-Grandma's CDs. When Nellie and Frankie dropped to their knees in front of the CD collection, they studied them as though they were relics from a forgotten time.

Ida followed Katrina into the kitchen to make tea. Katrina put the kettle on the stovetop and studied the calendar that hung on the wall, upon which her mother had written doctors' appointments and lunches with friends. Many of her eighty-something friends were still living. They'd come by the hospital to say hello, talking about a version of Agatha that Katrina had never been allowed to know.

"Tomorrow's the day?" Ida crossed her arms.

"I hope everything works out okay," Katrina said.

"Gosh, I hope she doesn't feel all that pain at once," Ida said. "She's black and blue."

"They have her on some pretty good drugs," Katrina offered. "Good thing addiction runs on Dad's side, not Mom's." She bit her lip, swimming in regret. Why had she brought up addiction?

Ida's face fell. Katrina and Ida had never spoken to one another about Sophie's drug use. Katrina liked to think of their relationship as a safe space from that darkness. She was the daughter who hadn't received Calvin's genes. She was her angel.

"Are the girls hanging around home for New Year's Eve tonight?" Katrina asked.

"Um. I think they'll be at a friend's place. Maybe somebody's basement. Who knows?"

Katrina remembered how truthful she'd been of her own children. How sure she'd been that they wouldn't do anything wrong. How foolish.

"Nellie and Frankie have good heads on their shoulders," Katrina said. "I'm sure they'll be fine."

"They're twenty-two and twenty," Ida said. "I'm sure they know how to handle a few beers by now."

"And let's hope they stop there," Katrina said.

Ida sucked in her cheeks and stared at the kettle. Katrina's heart flipped

over.

“Mom,” Ida began, “there’s quite a lot of work to be done with this old place. Isn’t there?”

“You’re telling me,” Katrina said. “I imagine this will be the next few months of our lives. And I’m dreading telling your grandmother. How do you tell Agatha Whittaker that you know best?”

Ida nodded and rubbed her chest. “Why don’t we ask Sophie for help, too?”

The kettle roared and sounded. Katrina hurried to remove it from the stovetop and pour the water into four mugs. “How does ginger tea sound?”

“It’s fine, Mom.” Ida sounded frustrated. “I just think...”

“What do you think?” Katrina’s voice had a hard edge to it. She turned to look at Ida, her perfect daughter. The one who’d never given her any trouble.

“I just think you need to give Sophie more credit, is all,” Ida said. “She’s worked hard to be sober this time. She told me she hasn’t missed a single NA meeting.”

“Is that so?” Katrina couldn’t care less. She plopped tea bags into the mugs and passed two to Ida.

“Mom,” Ida groaned. “Just promise me you’ll think about it.”

“I have a million things on my mind, Ida,” Katrina said, walking swiftly past her with two steaming mugs. “I can’t get into it with your sister. Not now. Not again.”

Chapter Four

Sophie drove up the long, winding driveway toward The Jessabelle House, watching the sun dim to soft pinks and purples over the bluffs. It was the last light of the year—a year that had been especially invigorating for her—and she wanted to soak up every last bit of it.

Sophie parked next to Sam’s SUV just as Sam trounced across the veranda in her snow boots and a thick winter coat, waving. “Hello, gorgeous!”

Sophie threw back her head, cackling, and hurried toward the veranda steps. Many years ago, as children at their great-aunt Jessabelle’s, she and Sam had run amok, screaming out across the bluffs, feeling like the most powerful people in the world. When they’d gotten a little bit older, Great-Aunt Jessabelle had gotten more reserved and only invited Sam over rather than the rest of her great-nephews and great-nieces. Sophie had felt it like an emotional bruise.

“Where were you?” Sophie asked, assessing Sam’s thick winter garb.

“I just went for a walk along the shore,” Sam explained, opening the door from the veranda and guiding her into the warm indoors. “The sea looks incredible in this cold. It’s like the waves want to freeze, but they just can’t, and they’re shimmering against the air.”

“You’re a poet, Sam,” Sophie said as she removed her coat.

“I’m just in love with everything right now,” Sam said. “I can’t help it.”

Sam took Sophie’s winter clothing and hung everything over the radiators, then led her downstairs to the kitchen. She served her hot cider and Christmas cookies, gabbing away about some drama at Rachele’s restaurant

in the Historic District.

“That chef is the most arrogant man alive,” Sam said, her face cherry red. “The things he’s said to Rachelle have made me want to storm down there and give him a piece of my mind.” She raised her hands. “But I won’t. Because I respect that Rachelle is now a young woman in the world, and she has to handle all this herself.” She said it slowly, as though it were her mantra.

Sophie giggled and touched her stomach under the table. Would she one day feel the same about her child’s boss? Would she feel so passionate? So domineering?

Sam snapped her fingers. “I can’t believe it. I haven’t even asked you how your grandmother is doing. I’m so sorry.” She placed her hands on either side of her face. “I feel so rude.”

“No. Don’t worry about it.” Sophie gave her a soft smile. “I went to see her this morning. Miraculously, my mother wasn’t there, so I was able to sit by Grandma Agatha in peace.”

Sam furrowed her brow. “Can she hear when you talk to her?”

“I’m not sure,” Sophie admitted. “But I talk to her, anyway. I probably sound silly speaking to a mostly empty room like that. But it’s kind of soothing. I tell her about Patrick. About how much I want to move in with him next year. And about sobriety.” Sophie laughed. “I tell her a lot of stuff I would never say if she was awake. If she wakes up tomorrow and starts screaming at me, I guess I know why.”

Sam shook her head, seemingly at a loss.

Sophie hurried to ease the tension. “I’m just chatty about everything these days. NA has made me vocal about my feelings and my backstory. It’s healthy, you know? But not everyone wants to hear it all the time. Least of all, my mother.”

Sam broke a Christmas cookie in half and gazed out the window. Huge, wet chunks of snow spit down, and pink-tinged clouds hung low, thick as a milkshake. Once upon a time, when Sophie had been using, the low-hanging clouds had made her feel suffocated. She’d thought she suffered from claustrophobia. In actuality, addiction had led to anxiety, which had pushed her to use even more. An endless, nasty cycle.

“How are things with Aunt Katrina?” Sam asked quietly, her eyes knowing.

Sophie’s cheeks burned. This was a topic she and Sam had never touched

on before.

“I’m sorry to ask like that,” Sam said, stretching her hand across the table to touch Sophie’s. “You’ve been hinting lately that things aren’t great between you two. And it’s surprised me. That’s all.”

Sophie sipped her hot cider and rolled her shoulders back. “My mother and I have never had the best relationship. Everyone knows that, I guess, even from a distance. Ida’s the golden daughter, and I’m the black sheep. But our secret is that Mom has known about my addiction since I was a teenager. And had it ever gotten out, the embarrassment would have killed her.”

Sam’s lips parted with surprise. Sophie felt the ache in her heart slowly bleed away.

“I always wondered if someone else knew,” Sam breathed.

“I was a secretive teenager,” Sophie went on. “I fooled just about everyone except my mother. No rumors were circulating at the high school. Even Ida didn’t know.”

Sam’s face was ashen. “And Aunt Katrina didn’t try to help you?”

“Reaching out for help meant admitting there was a problem,” Sophie explained. “I think she assumed the problem would go away on its own. And it did. For a little while.”

Sophie remembered those exhilarating few years when she’d gotten sober on her own. She’d gotten engaged and married Jared. They’d bought the very house in which she now lived. She’d assumed she’d buried her demons once and for all.

But in reality, it was as though she’d walked a tightrope. And you can’t walk a tightrope for the rest of your life. At one time or another, you’ll fall.

“I’m so sorry I wasn’t there for you,” Sam murmured.

“You were when I needed you the most,” Sophie assured her. “The past year has changed everything. Patrick and I talk about it all the time. How messy it all was. How amazed we are that it all fell into place.”

Sam’s smile brightened. “Have you heard from Jared lately?”

“Nothing,” Sophie said. Her heart jumped. “It’s strange, isn’t it? I spent twenty-five years of my life with that man. But now that he’s gone, I hardly think of him at all. My therapist thinks that my addiction was tied up in my love and codependency for Jared.”

“And what do you think?” Sam asked.

“I’m certainly not as smart as my therapist,” Sophie quipped. “All I know is, I can’t remember feeling as loved or as protected as when I’m with

Patrick. And even though I think about using every once in a while, it's more of an abstract thought. I can't imagine ever going through with it."

Sam squeezed Sophie's hand. "Remember to call me. Anytime. I'll be there as quickly as I can."

The front door burst open down the hall, bringing a sharp draft of chill. "Hello?" Derek called. "Is anyone home?"

"We're in the kitchen!" Sam popped up, and Sophie followed her down the hall and into the foyer, where two snow-covered men removed their hats, gloves, boots, and coats. Sophie burrowed her face into Patrick's chest, her heart fluttering. Patrick hadn't slept over at her place last night, and the interval between seeing one another had felt impossibly long. She felt like a high schooler who called her boyfriend as soon as she got home from school. Her love was her life force.

"Happy New Year's Eve," Patrick said quietly. He kissed her gently and then lifted her into him.

"We brought plenty of alcohol-free champagne for tonight," Derek announced, gesturing at the paper grocery bags lining the foyer.

"And five types of cheeses, dates, blueberries," Patrick went on.

"And three types of chips?" Derek asked.

"Four," Patrick corrected. His dimples deepened.

"Food coma time," Sam said, collecting two grocery bags in her arms and heading back to the kitchen. Derek followed her with the rest.

With just Patrick in the foyer, Sophie rose on her tiptoes and kissed him again with her eyes closed. A wave of heat filled her chest. "Did you finish the job?"

"We did." Patrick laced his fingers through hers. "Just in the nick of time."

"And you don't have another one till February?" It was beyond Sophie's wildest dreams, imagining more empty afternoons with Patrick: time for blissful, two-hour lunches, movies, walks through the snow, and naps in winter sunbeams.

"February 9th," Patrick said.

It was nearly five thirty, and an inky darkness bled across the bluffs. Far above were the first dappling of stars. Derek put a Carole King record on the record player, and Sam poured everyone what they wanted to drink—wine for Sam, beer for Derek, and sparkling water with lemon for Sophie and Patrick. According to Sam, Rachelle and Darcy would join them with dates

soon. Rachelle had an entire menu planned for the eight of them.

As Derek and Sam prepped vegetables in the kitchen, calling themselves “sous chefs” for Rachelle, Patrick and Sophie cozied up on the couch by the big bay window and gazed at the violent sea as it roiled beneath the ominous sky.

“It looks like 2023 is fighting to stay alive,” Patrick joked.

Sophie dropped her head on Patrick’s shoulder. With a jolt, she remembered the final day of 2022—one year ago. She’d woken up before Jared and popped several pills while standing on the back porch. The cold air had bitten her cheeks until the drugs had made it so she couldn’t feel anything anymore.

Over breakfast, when Jared had asked if she was “daydreaming again,” Sophie had laughed and pretended to be happy. Sometimes, when she took enough drugs, she’d half believed her own happiness until the drugs had faded, and she’d again noticed the hatred that echoed from Jared’s eyes.

It wasn’t clear to Sophie why Jared hadn’t left her years ago. She’d never given him a child. They’d never had anything but a marriage certificate and property keeping them together. That wasn’t much these days.

And Sophie had been too out of it to find her way out.

“Where did you go?” Patrick called her back to the present. He smiled down at her lovingly, and Sophie raised her chin and kissed him.

She loved sobriety. She loved being here, with Patrick, without the desire to flee her own consciousness. She loved the cozy air in The Jessabelle House and the sound of the crackling record player. She loved hearing Derek and Sam squabble and giggle in the kitchen.

“Patrick?” Sophie whispered. “I have something to tell you.”

Patrick furrowed his brow. Like her, he was accustomed to hearing only bad news.

“It’s not bad. I mean, I don’t think it’s bad,” Sophie assured.

Patrick’s shoulders loosened. His eyes stirred with questions.

Sophie tucked her hair behind her ears. *Spit it out*, she told herself. You’ve kept it in for three long days. He deserves to know.

“I’m pregnant,” she whispered.

Patrick’s jaw dropped. He gaped at her for a long, beautiful moment, his face registering several different emotions at once. And then, he dropped forward and wrapped her in his arms. Sophie felt his heartbeat through her torso.

“Sophie. Sophie. Sophie.” Patrick couldn’t stop repeating her name. “Sophie, I’m so happy. I don’t know what to say.”

Sophie’s eyes filled with tears. She closed them tightly and slid onto Patrick’s lap. He placed his hand across her lower stomach and held it there. Their baby was a collection of cells—hardly visible. Yet she somehow felt that their baby could feel Patrick’s warmth and love.

“I never thought I would be well enough to do this,” Patrick said, his voice breaking.

“Neither did I,” Sophie said. Her throat was thick with tears.

The front door cracked open, and Rachelle’s voice echoed. “Happy New Year’s Eve!”

Sophie slid off Patrick’s lap, wiped the tears from her face, and pressed a single finger over her lips, suggesting they keep the news to themselves. It wasn’t time. Patrick bowed his head. He looked on the brink of calling out across the bluffs. Screaming out that he would be a father. That it would be up to him to raise the tiniest of babies into a young woman or a man.

“What’s up, guys?” Sam interrupted them from the doorway. “Can I get you anything?” Her gaze cut from Sophie to Patrick and back again.

“We have everything we need,” Patrick said, his eyes still on Sophie. Sophie’s heart swelled.

Chapter Five

Rachelle cooked a feast that evening. Asian-style roasted quail with dumplings, spring rolls, various types of Asian noodles, and three types of Chinese soups. Darcy ambled in and out of the kitchen to help her sister, bringing appetizers on ornate platters. Their dates, Greg and Dean, were amiable islanders, both twentysomethings and handsome. To Sophie, neither of them seemed good enough for Darcy and Rachelle.

Patrick and Derek were kind to Greg and Dean. Derek made them Manhattans and asked them about their careers and New Year's resolutions. Greg said he wanted to travel more, and Dean said he wanted to settle down. The glance he cast to the kitchen made Sophie's heart crack. She had a sense that if he asked Darcy to settle down with him, she would say no. She hated that heartache awaited both of them. But that was life, she supposed.

"Do you have any New Year's resolutions?" Derek asked Sophie.

Sophie laughed and raised her glass of non-alcoholic champagne. "Stay sober, of course."

That, and have a healthy baby. But she couldn't share that part.

"You, Patrick?" Derek said.

"I'd like to echo what my beautiful girlfriend said," Patrick said. "But on top of that, I'd like to eat healthier. I guess."

"I'll believe that when I see it," Derek joked, eyeing Sophie. "You should see my brother when we're on the job. It's just burgers and fries."

Sophie laughed. "It hasn't caught up to him yet."

Patrick was still slender and muscular due to his vigorous work as a contractor. That, and frequent runs along the boardwalk. Sophie sometimes

joined him, amazed at his long strides and his ability to run without music or podcasts.

“What do you think about for all that time?” she’d asked him.

Patrick had said, “I make up stories in my head.” When she’d begged him to tell her one, he’d shrugged and said, “I dream up what kind of man I’ll be in five years. That’s all.”

Now, Sophie wondered if the man he hoped to be was a husband and father.

When dinner was served, the eight of them sat at the immaculate dining room table. Out the window, the snow escalated, becoming a thick sheet of white between the glass and the stark black night. Rachelle instructed them on which flavor pairings to make, how to eat the quail, and which spicy sauce went with which dumpling.

“How did you learn all this?” Sophie asked.

“Culinary school,” Rachelle said with a shrug. “They drilled the science of food into us. I’ll never forget it.”

“She’s offended when she sees some of the stuff I make back home,” Darcy said. Darcy and Rachelle shared an apartment in the Historic District, not far from Rachelle’s restaurant.

Sophie laughed and spooned another dumpling onto her plate. This one was filled with tofu and red-hot chili.

“Did you and your sister ever live together?” Darcy asked.

Despite her best efforts not to, Sophie winced, clicking her chopsticks together. “No. Ida would have never lived with me.”

“You didn’t get along?” Rachelle asked, tilting her head.

“It wasn’t that,” Sophie said. *What was it, then?* How did she translate the events of the past in a way that didn’t dramatically alter the mood of the evening? It was a holiday, for crying out loud.

Rachelle and Darcy looked at her curiously, hoping she would fill in the gaps.

The truth, Sophie supposed, was that back then, she’d only wanted to be around people who used. Ida wasn’t an addict, which had made her “boring” in Sophie’s mind. Once Sophie had gotten sober on her own at nineteen, she’d been head over heels in love with Jared. Her codependency had disallowed her to live anywhere but with him. He’d been another addiction.

“I regret it,” Sophie went on, surprising herself. “Ida and I were never as close as you two are. It must be incredible.”

Darcy and Rachelle smiled at one another. Between them, the air sizzled with adrenaline and secrets. Greg and Dean were clearly out of their depths.

“We’re lucky,” Rachelle admitted.

“Can’t imagine life without you, Sis,” Darcy said, clamping her chopsticks around a spring roll.

“What’s Ida doing tonight?” Sam asked.

“Good question.” Sophie raised her shoulders. “I imagine she’s just spending the evening with her husband, Nellie, and Frankie. They’re one of those rare families who never seem to fight about anything and actually enjoy one another’s company.”

Sophie didn’t add her suspicion—that her mother and father were with Ida’s family, too. That they’d planned an entire evening without Sophie. She was perpetually the black sheep—always the reminder of the trauma of the past. It upset her mother to have her around too often. They simply left her out.

* * *

An hour before midnight, Sophie and Patrick hugged everyone goodbye and drove their separate vehicles back to Sophie’s place. As Sophie entered through the garage, she flicked on the lights in the kitchen and adjoining living room, inhaling the familiar smells of home—the pine from the Christmas tree and the cinnamon of the candle she’d burned that morning. When Sam begged them to stay till midnight, Patrick and Sophie looked at one another doubtfully and admitted they had to return home. The “baby” topic was too powerful. They needed to be alone. They needed to celebrate together.

Patrick wore a spectacular smile. He stomped his boots of snow in the garage and called out, “Keeping that secret was torture, babe!”

Sophie laughed and whipped back toward the door to hug him again. “I know. You deserve a medal for keeping it to yourself.”

“How much longer?” Patrick asked, removing his winter hat and ruffling his hair.

“I want to wait till the three-month appointment,” Sophie said.

“And when’s that? How far along are you?” Patrick looked frantic, on the verge of heading out right away to buy baby supplies.

Sophie took his elbow and guided him into the living room. “I just found out three days ago,” she explained. “I’m probably about a month in. Maybe a little more or less.”

“A month.” Patrick shook his head and collapsed on the couch. “You’ve been pregnant for a whole month! It feels like I should have sensed something.”

Sophie kissed his cheek and bent before the fireplace to turn it on. Jared had had someone install a “fake” fireplace a long time ago, which lent about 50 percent of the ambiance and even less of the warmth of a traditional fireplace. Still, it was all they had, and Sophie was grateful not to deal with matches and kindling.

Sophie made hot chocolate and returned to the couch. Fireworks crackled and popped outside as they blew on the steam over their mugs. Sophie checked her phone.

“Just ten more minutes of the year,” she announced.

Patrick puffed out his cheeks and caught her eye. He looked deadly serious.

“Patrick.” Sophie put down her mug and touched his shoulder. “It’s going to be okay.”

Patrick bowed his head. “I know that,” he stuttered. “I do.”

Outside somewhere, another round of fireworks exploded. Sophie imagined whoever had set them off, shivering in the dark while their family waited inside, watching the spectacle.

“It’s just that I want to ask you something,” Patrick said. “And I’ve never asked it of anyone. And I’m petrified.”

All the hairs stood straight up on Sophie’s head. As she gazed at Patrick, she tried to remember the first version of Patrick she’d ever met—the addict, the man who’d been after the same high she was.

Now, they chased something else.

Patrick scooted to the end of the couch and dropped on one knee. He held both of Sophie’s hands with his much larger, capable hands. It was clear he spent his days building, sawing, and putting things into place. His hands were calloused and jagged against her smooth ones.

“Sophie, when we met, we were very different people,” Patrick said quietly. “But I knew, even then, that you were special. The fact that we’ve ended up here on the eve of 2024 together is beyond me. But I want to spend every other New Year’s Eve with you. I want to raise this baby with you.

And I want to marry you. If you'll have me."

Sophie's throat nearly closed. Tears spilled from her eyes.

"I'll marry you," Sophie whispered. "Yes."

Patrick leaned forward and captured her in a hug. Outside, the sounds of fireworks escalated. From the corner of her eye, Sophie could make out pinks, purples, and greens ripping through the night sky.

"We should toast this," Patrick said, sniffing as he rushed to the kitchen to pour them a non-alcoholic glass of champagne. Sophie stood and cleaned her face and pulled her hair back into a ponytail. Everything seemed to be moving quickly. Even the minutes on her phone were faster than normal. By the time Patrick returned to the couch with their glasses, the clock struck midnight, and the fireworks outside were triumphant, popping and exploding as though this was the dawn of a new age rather than just another new year.

In recovery, they told you not to do too much during your first year of sobriety. They told you not to rush into new relationships, not to move, and not to dramatically change your life.

Sophie's stomach banged with guilt and fear. On the one hand, she'd forbid Patrick from moving in with her as a way of "obeying" these rules. On the other hand, now that she was pregnant, they barreled ahead toward a far different future that would require buckets of change.

She prayed their sobriety was strong enough to withstand the storm. She prayed they could hold one another accountable for the love of one another—and the love of their baby.

Chapter Six

On the first morning of the brand-new year, Katrina awoke at five thirty, headed downstairs, and cooked her contribution to the New Year's Day feast—cheesy potatoes with plenty of red onions. As she worked, she listened to a radio show that discussed all things New Year's Day, including the name of the first baby born on the East Coast and news of a celebrity couple married at midnight who'd decided the marriage was no more by morning. Katrina shook her head at that. It was clearly a promotional stunt.

Grant crept into the kitchen at eight thirty, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. He wrapped his arms around Katrina from behind and kissed her neck. "Good morning, darling."

Katrina turned around to hug him properly. "How was your first sleep of the year?"

"Not long enough," Grant admitted. "Nellie and Frankie kept me up later than I was ready for. That Frankie is an epic Scrabble player. And Nellie makes a mean Negroni. My head can feel it!"

Katrina laughed and poured Grant a mug of coffee. Not long after midnight, she'd abandoned Grant, Nellie, Frankie, Ida, and Ida's husband, Rick, at the dining room table, declaring herself unfit for "wild nights." Unfortunately, she'd spent nearly two hours lying awake, staring through the darkness, listening to the rhythm of their voices downstairs. She'd felt heavy with fear for her mother, who was set to wake up tomorrow. Plus, Ida had bothered her about Sophie again. "Why didn't you invite her, Mom? Don't you think she wants to spend the holiday with her nieces?" The guilt pressed upon her chest.

“The doctor said Mom should wake up around ten,” Katrina said.

“Wonderful news,” Grant said, pretending as though this was the first time Katrina had made this announcement. It was probably the tenth.

“I’ll head out in a few minutes. Gosh, it’ll be a long day, won’t it?” Katrina took a deep breath. “But the ferry’s back up, thank goodness. Meet at the docks around five?”

“If you still want to come,” Grant said. “Oriana said she has our room ready for us.”

“I told Oriana I would be there,” Katrina said. “Visiting hours are shorter today, anyway.”

Even as she said it, she felt another pang of guilt. Would a better daughter have begged the nurses to let her stay longer? Would her mother assume Katrina didn’t love her enough to stay?

Oriana Coleman held a New Year’s Day party every year, inviting friends, family, and clients from Martha’s Vineyard, Nantucket, New York City, and beyond. This was the first year Grant and Katrina had been invited—because it was the first year they were officially in one another’s lives at all.

Oriana was a sought-after art dealer, handling multimillion-dollar deals and rubbing shoulders with the elite. Oriana and her sister, Meghan, were quite impressive individuals—no different from their older half brothers, Roland and Grant.

It had taken Grant and Roland ages to come around to the idea of meeting Meghan and Oriana in person. For decades, they’d blamed them for their father’s abandonment of their mother and their mother’s subsequent death of a broken heart. But when Roland and Grant finally came around, they’d fallen in love with their little sisters. They took every opportunity to visit them on Martha’s Vineyard or invite them to Nantucket.

“The cheesy potatoes are for the party,” Katrina said as she donned her coat and hat. “So don’t even think about digging into them before we leave!”

Grant gave her a mischievous smile and kissed her again. “Give my love to your mother. She’s a fighter.”

Katrina drove up to the hospital with a massive lump in her throat, parked in the lot, and hurried inside. She visualized Agatha opening her eyes and tried to imagine what words she might say first after seventy-two hours of darkness. All she could hear were Agatha’s world-famous insults hurled at whoever was around.

As Katrina walked down her mother's hallway, laughter rang out, echoing. She stalled in recognition, listening. One of the nurses who'd helped her mother a few days ago walked out of another hospital room, smiled, and said, "Your mother woke up a little earlier than planned! Luckily, your daughter was here to greet her."

All Katrina managed to say was, "Oh. Isn't that nice?" But she hardly recognized her own voice.

Katrina continued down the hallway and leaned against the doorway of her mother's room. Sophie sat on the edge of a plastic chair with both hands around one of her grandmother's. Her eyes glinted, and she spoke a mile a minute, telling Agatha a story Katrina didn't have context for.

"And you should have seen him, Grandma," Sophie was saying. "He had the biggest fish either of us had ever seen on this hook, and he was terrified. It was flopping around like crazy. I jumped over to grab it, but as soon as I touched its fin, it managed to whip itself off the hook and leap back into the waves. I swear, I could hear it screaming, 'I'm free!' as it jumped!"

Agatha smiled sleepily and nestled her head deeper into her pillow. It was bizarre to see her with her eyes half-open, her chest rising and falling more than it had since the coma. The bruises were softer, the purples fading to yellows and greens.

"That's silly, Sophie," Agatha rasped. "You were raised an islander. You know how to handle a fish better than that."

Sophie giggled. Katrina was amazed. Hadn't Agatha just criticized Sophie? Why was Sophie taking it to heart—the way she would have had Katrina said the same? But then again, the smile that played out across Agatha's lips was far different from any look Agatha had ever given Katrina. She was playing with her.

"I know, Grandma," Sophie said. "It's embarrassing. I told you that."

"Good morning." Katrina surprised herself, shivering with fear at the sound of her own voice. It sounded formidable and strained in this cozy environment.

Sophie turned, and her smile melted slightly. "Happy New Year, Mom."

"Happy New Year." Katrina strode toward the opposite side of the bed and took her mother's other hand. "How are you feeling, Mom?"

Agatha's eyes were glassy. "A bit tired. A bit thirsty. They say I won't feel so groggy in a few days."

"I'm sorry I wasn't here when you woke up," Katrina stuttered. "They

told me it wouldn't happen till ten."

"It's all right. Soph was here." Agatha smiled back at her granddaughter.

"You're up early, Sophie," Katrina said. She hated how accusatory she sounded.

Sophie waved her free hand. "I wanted to be here for Grandma's big day."

Was it Katrina's imagination, or was Sophie speaking slightly faster than normal? She narrowed her eyes, assessing Sophie's expression, the tint in her gaze. Against her will, she'd been trained in the art of studying Sophie, looking for clues, signs that she was using again. She still remembered Christmas dinner twenty-four years ago, when Sophie had talked so quickly and told stories so sporadically, only to fall asleep with her face down on her plate. These were memories Katrina didn't like to keep. They felt like curses.

If Sophie really was using again, what would Katrina do? The thought rattled through her. Would she corner Sophie and demand answers? Would she call Sam? Would she call the police? It all seemed hopeless. Maybe it was a lost cause, just as her father had been.

Katrina blinked out of her reverie and realized that Sophie and Agatha were talking about her brother, Norm. Sophie had watched a film he'd produced called *The Storm Above Us* and gushed about it, saying, "He has such an incredible eye for what will work artistically. He's not the richest producer in the world, but he's brought tremendous beauty to the film industry."

Agatha looked dreamy. "My son is a very talented artist," she said of Norm. "I wish you could have seen him on Broadway, Sophie. He was incredible. The minute he walked out on that stage, it lit up."

"I've seen a few photographs," Sophie said, lacing her fingers together. "How many productions was he in?"

"At least ten," Agatha said, frowning her brow.

"Eighteen, actually," Katrina chimed in, flaring her nostrils. It took all her will not to glare at her ill mother. Agatha had conveniently forgotten her role in Norm's Broadway career—in that, she and their father had done everything in their power to keep him from going. The minute he'd become a success, of course, Agatha had changed her tune.

"I was just devastated when he said he wanted to move out to Los Angeles," Agatha said. "I couldn't understand why he wouldn't want to devote his entire life to being on stage."

“Uncle Norm told me he wanted a hand in building culture rather than being a part of it,” Sophie said.

“But so far away from his family!” Agatha said. “That’s one thing about you, Sophie. You never went far away.”

Sophie gave her grandmother a sad smile. There was a hard, judgmental edge to what Agatha said, an admission of worry for Sophie’s wayward years. Of course, Katrina had done everything in her power to ensure Agatha never knew Sophie was using. Sophie had told her herself just last year. When Agatha brought it up with Katrina, Katrina stormed out of her mother’s house and drove home to sob into her pillow. These were memories she didn’t like, either.

“Your grandfather was so proud of our Norm,” Agatha said. “We taped every newspaper clipping we could on the refrigerator.”

Katrina snorted just loud enough to draw Sophie’s attention. In a rare moment of connection, Katrina shook her head ever so slightly in Sophie’s direction. Sophie understood. Her grandpa Calvin had only ever shown hatred toward Norm’s acting career. However, whatever fiction Agatha told about Calvin’s so-called fatherly pride had to be upheld for the good of Agatha’s health. They had to start the new year off right.

A strange discomfort passed over Katrina’s chest. Again, she had to fight the urge to drag Sophie out of the hospital room and demand to know if she was using again.

Before she could, the doctor arrived. Agatha greeted him like a blushing bride, as though she had a crush on him. Katrina backed away from the hospital bed and leaned against the wall as Sophie excused herself to get a cup of coffee. Katrina’s hands formed fists. She watched Sophie duck into the hallway, probably off somewhere to put something in her nose. Tears sprung to her eyes.

When Sophie had been a toddler, she’d been extremely sensitive, more so than Ida had been. Katrina had fallen asleep in her bed hundreds of nights, cooing at her to fall asleep. Nightmares had destroyed Sophie’s sleep until the age of thirteen or fourteen, probably not long before she’d begun using. Had the drugs helped her evade the night terrors? Had the drinking helped to calm her mind?

After the doctor checked Agatha thoroughly, he asked Katrina to come to his office. As they headed there, they breezed past Sophie, who looked bright and happy, the skin on her face like peaches and cream.

The doctor explained that the induced coma had been a success. Agatha's body was healing far nicer than her eighty-five years should have allowed. And it was more than likely that she could move into a nursing home by February or March.

"Let's celebrate the new year and all it will bring," the doctor said as they stepped out of his office. "Agatha has a whole lot more living to do. And she'll probably be a whole lot happier at the nursing home. Most of our patients are."

Chapter Seven

Sophie sat beside her grandmother, her stomach settled gently against the mattress, her hands animated, circling about her as she told another story. This one was about her and Patrick's recent hike along Martha's Vineyard's Aquinnah Cliffside on a gorgeous autumn day. "I thought the wind was going to whip us off the cliff and into the ocean," she said, her eyes widening. "It's hard to believe people ever used to get on those massive ships and go whaling for years and years. The ocean looked terrifying. Like it wanted to gobble us up."

Grandma Agatha had begun to lose her voice. It was scratchy and tired from more than an hour of conversing lightly with Sophie. "Oh, honey," she whispered. "Your grandfather and I used to hike that path together before we had children. I remember we'd sail from Nantucket, and he'd tie up the boat to a tree along the shore, then we'd clamber up together. He was so careful about making sure I didn't fall."

"Was that when you were teenagers, Grandma?"

Grandma Agatha nodded and coughed. Her eyes were hardly open. They were merely slits reflecting pockets of light from the fluorescent bulbs. Something out of the corner of Sophie's eye caught her attention, and she turned to find Katrina peering at them through the window, her expression surly. Katrina had been coarse since she'd arrived, looking at Sophie as though she were a bomb about to explode. Sophie was accustomed to her mother's accusatory glances, but that didn't mean they didn't still break her heart.

"Do you want to sleep, Grandma?"

“I just want to close my eyes for a minute,” Agatha said.

“Of course. I’ll be right here.”

Sophie walked into the hall, met her mother’s gaze, and raised her chin. “What did the doctor say?”

“It looks like the coma was a success,” Katrina offered.

“Wonderful news.” Sophie adjusted her purse on her shoulder. Inside was the small velvet box Patrick had retrieved from his apartment that morning. Apparently, he’d been planning to propose for several weeks but hadn’t found the right time. The news about the baby had opened the door.

Sophie’s heart pumped loudly in her ears. The silence in the hallway was eerie. Only a few nurses scampered from room to room, their shoes squeaking on the linoleum.

Sophie tried to imagine herself telling her mother about the engagement right here, right now. She imagined removing the diamond ring from the velvet box, sliding it over her finger, and displaying her hand the way people did in commercials for engagement rings, fingers dangling forward. She imagined her mother gasping about how beautiful the ring was, telling her that Patrick had “done a great job.” That he was a “keeper.”

But just as soon as she imagined the scene, it dissolved in her mind’s eye. Her mother wouldn’t act the way she wanted her to. She wouldn’t give her a blissful smile and tell her how happy she was. Instead, she would find a way to poke holes in Sophie’s happiness. She would ask her if she was really healthy enough. If Patrick was really the kind of guy she wanted to spend the “rest of her life with.” “Not that marriage means anything to you,” she might say. “Now that you’ve divorced.”

It was best to keep this news to herself, at least until the party.

“You’re still going to Oriana’s later?” Katrina crossed her arms over her chest.

“We’re going to take the five fifteen ferry.”

“That’s our plan, too.” Katrina looked stiff. “Did you make anything?”

“Just a batch of cookies,” Sophie said. “As though we need any more of those after Christmas.”

The joke landed flat. Katrina sniffed and returned her gaze to the window, where Agatha was displayed beautifully, her thin skin glowing with the light that shimmered in through the wide window. Sophie swallowed the lump in her throat. Just two floors up was the labor and delivery ward. Perhaps in nine months’ time, she and Patrick would take a room there. Perhaps Patrick

would hold her hand as she screamed and writhed through labor. Perhaps they would leave the hospital with their own bundle of joy.

“Sophie?” Katrina was saying her name, calling her back from her reverie. “Goodness, girl. Where is your head today?”

Katrina said it accusatorially. Sophie was reminded of coming home high as a teenager and trying to manipulate her mother into believing she was sober.

“Sorry,” Sophie said. “I’m just excited about the new year.” She wrapped her hair into a ponytail and smiled. “I’m going to grab some water. You want anything?”

Katrina shook her head ever so slightly, her honey-brown hair shaking over her ears. “I’ll sit with her while you’re gone.”

As Sophie walked down the hallway, she sensed her mother’s eyes upon her, watching her every move. It wasn’t until she rounded the corner and was out of sight that she breathed easier, her shoulders loosening.

* * *

Fifteen minutes before the ferry was set to disembark, Sophie and Katrina ambled wordlessly out of the hospital, got into their separate vehicles, and drove to the Nantucket ferry docks. The plan was to take just one car to Martha’s Vineyard—

Grant’s—which he’d already parked on the ferry. Grant and Patrick waited for them near the ticket booth, dressed in so many layers that they resembled onions. Grant was eating what looked to be a sandwich filled with leftover Christmas ham.

“There they are!” Grant welcomed Sophie and Katrina as they approached, hugging Katrina first, then wrapping Sophie in one. “Happy New Year, darling.”

“Happy New Year back,” Sophie said, sliding from her father to Patrick. Patrick looked jittery, shifting his weight from foot to foot. She imagined he was nervous, carrying the secrets of their engagement and pregnancy in front of her father.

“And how is she?” Grant asked, turning to lead them to the ferry ramp.

“Just as stubborn as ever,” Sophie said.

“I can’t imagine that will ever change,” Grant said, flashing her a smile.

“Birds will fly, fish will swim, and Agatha Whittaker will be stubborn. Forevermore.”

Sophie chuckled, throwing her head back. Grant looked pleased. When Sophie and Ida were growing up, Grant had always been the playful, loving father, while Katrina had to be the responsible one.

Sophie, Patrick, Grant, and Katrina found seats in the ferry café, where Grant bought everyone hot chocolates and chatted happily about the sports he'd watched on television that day. Having watched them as well, Patrick joined in, his upper lip stained with hot chocolate. This left Katrina and Sophie out of the loop, staring out the ferry window at the sloshing, angry waves.

When there was a lull in the conversation, Sophie cleared her throat. “Sam said something about Margorie Tomlinson coming to the party today?”

“Who's that again?” Grant asked.

“She accused Estelle of copying her book,” Katrina said in a low rasp.

“That's right!” Grant snapped his fingers. “What a racket that was! Why would she be at the party?”

“She's dating Meghan's best friend,” Sophie answered with a laugh. “Daniel? He owns that bookstore on Martha's Vineyard.”

“Should I throw him out?” Grant asked.

“Estelle and Margorie made up,” Katrina reminded him. “Don't you remember the story Estelle told on Christmas? She found out that Margorie and Roland briefly went to college together. That Margorie had a big crush on him before Roland dropped out and returned home.”

Grant rubbed the back of his neck. “Jealousy is a powerful thing.”

“It nearly destroyed Estelle's career,” Katrina said. “I wouldn't have forgiven Margorie half as quickly as Estelle did.”

“I think it's beautiful,” Sophie offered, crossing her ankles. “Margorie explained where she was coming from. She's fully aware of her flaws. I don't know why Estelle would continue to punish her for them.”

Even as Sophie said it, she recognized that she wasn't fully talking about Margorie anymore. In many ways, this conversation was suddenly about Sophie. About her addiction. About all the work she'd done to “clear her name” to earn her mother's love.

Maybe it would never be enough for Katrina. Maybe she would never forgive her.

As the ferry eased toward the Oak Bluffs ferry, Grant, Katrina, Sophie,

and Patrick finished their hot chocolates and went downstairs to find Grant's car. Very few vehicles were parked in the parking zone, and Grant was able to glide down the ramps without much fuss, dropping down from the ramp and onto the concrete dock.

"Welcome to Martha's Vineyard!" Grant announced, tapping his palm on the steering wheel. "Who's ready for another evening of feasting?"

Oriana Coleman and her husband, Reese, owned a very large home that stretched along the northwestern coast of Martha's Vineyard. The rolling hills split into soft, sandy beaches, and seagulls circled overhead, cawing as froth from the Vineyard Sound crept along jagged rocks. On one side of Oriana's house was a large lawn, which aligned her with her neighbor, Alan, and a Nantucket transplant, Nora, both of whom Sophie spotted as she stepped from her father's car. Nora carried what looked like a cake tray, nodding hello with a smile. Many, many years ago, Charlie Coleman had been best friends with Nora's son. They'd been involved in a horrific car accident, and Nora's son hadn't made it. Sophie still remembered that horrible time, like a bruise on her heart. Charlie had never and probably would never get over it. But these days, Nora's great-nephew and Charlie's daughter, Marcy, were dating and even living together in Boston. Charlie and Nora had been forced to face the demons from their past.

"Happy New Year!" Nora said as she breezed past. "When I arrived at the party a few minutes ago, I realized I'd forgotten my carrot cake! I slaved away all morning on it."

"I can't wait to have a slice!" Sophie said.

Nora led the four Colemans toward the front door of Oriana's place. The house buzzed with what sounded like fifty different conversations. Children squealed, and their footsteps bounced as they raced from one end of the house to the other. As Patrick reached out to open the door, it sprang open, and Oriana smiled out, beckoning them to enter.

"Hello! Happy New Year!"

Sophie fell into the immaculate house, jumping from Oriana to Reese, to their daughter, Alexa, to Sam, to Derek. Hugs were given, and backs were clapped. Someone went to the kitchen to fetch her and Patrick glasses of sparkling water with lemon, and her father cracked a beer. Light shimmered through the floor-to-ceiling windows, which illustrated a gorgeous view of the ocean just beyond, and a massive Christmas tree towered over them, nearly scraping the top of the ceiling in the cathedral-like room. Sophie had

been raised in a wealthy Nantucket family, but this was something else. This was Manhattan money.

“Aunt Sophie! Aunt Sophie!”

Sophie turned toward the sound of her name and watched as Nellie and Frankie burst from the hallway. They could have been twins, with their slender and long arms and legs and their large, animated eyes. Sophie collected them both into a single, enormous hug, remembering the first time she’d ever held them as babies. Katrina had watched her like a hawk, terrified she’d drop them.

“Hey, Patrick!” Nellie said, raising a hand to give him a high five. “What’s up?”

“How’s your first Coleman Family New Year’s?” Frankie asked jokingly.

Patrick smiled nervously and placed his hand on Sophie’s lower back. “So far so good. Should I be worried about anything coming my way later?”

Nellie and Frankie gave one another mischievous smiles.

“Uh-oh,” Patrick joked.

Just then, Derek appeared through the crowd, carrying a light beer. After greeting Sophie warmly, he clapped Patrick on the shoulder and said, “Come with me, sir. Sports. Three televisions’ worth. You won’t believe the resolution on these screens.”

Patrick laughed. “I’ll catch you later, Soph?”

In his eyes, Sophie recognized the question at hand. When would they announce the engagement? And how? There had to be at least one hundred and fifty people here.

Sophie raised her shoulders, and Patrick’s smile widened. They’d figure it out. Eventually.

Just as soon as the crowd swallowed Patrick and Derek, Sophie asked her nieces, “Where’s your mother?”

Nellie and Frankie led Sophie past the Christmas tree, through a side room in which a record player echoed John Denver songs, and through another hallway that shot them into the kitchen. There, Ida leaned against the kitchen counter, holding a glass of wine and nodding along to a story told by Meghan, Oriana’s sister. Beside Meghan was Margorie Tomlinson, the novelist, who tugged her hair nervously. It was as though she worried everyone hated her because of what she’d tried to do to Estelle.

“Oh!” Ida spotted Sophie and interrupted Meghan. “I’m sorry, Meg. I just

have to hug my sister really quickly.” Ida draped her arms over Sophie, bringing with her a wave of Santal 33, the very expensive perfume Ida swore by. “I heard you were at the hospital today. How was it?”

Sophie wrinkled her nose and returned her gaze to Meghan. “What were you saying, Meghan?”

But Meghan waved her hand. “I was just telling your sister about our upcoming trip to Mexico. Hugo surprised me with it on Christmas morning!”

“Goodness,” Sophie said. “When do you go?”

“Tomorrow,” Meghan said.

“Wow! Spontaneous!” Sophie said.

“It’s been a long time since Hugo and I could call ourselves spontaneous,” Meghan offered. “But now that we’re empty nesters who work for ourselves, I see no reason we can’t be. Tomorrow, Mexico. This spring, Paris? It’s a new era!”

Meghan turned to refill a glass of wine for herself, breezily asking Margorie a question about her recent writing process. Nellie and Frankie sped off to join their second cousins elsewhere, leaving Ida and Sophie alone with one another—a rare thing, especially around the holidays, when the Colemans swarmed.

“I thought we used to be busy around the holidays,” Sophie joked now.

“Right? Now that we have another whole side of the family, things are getting out of hand,” Ida joked.

Sophie sipped her sparkling water and smiled, studying Ida’s face. At forty-three, she had very few lines, and her hair had only a few wisps of gray throughout, adding a touch of wisdom to her glowing beauty. Sophie had always felt inferior compared to Ida. Ida was brilliant. She’d been a star student, the captain of multiple academic and sporting teams, and a state finalist in track and field. As far as Sophie knew, Ida hadn’t so much as smoked a cigarette in her life. She hadn’t touched drugs. She normally stopped after two glasses of wine. She was a foreign creature to Sophie. But Sophie wasn’t sure she loved anyone in the world more.

Under her breath, Sophie admitted, “Mom’s acting weird.”

Ida’s eyes darkened. “I had no idea you would be at the hospital together all day long. I would have come up, but Nellie, Frankie, and I had plans.”

“It’s okay. I guess.” Sophie sighed. “I woke up this morning feeling over the moon, you know? I wanted to be there when Grandma Agatha woke up. I wanted to celebrate this brand-new year. But Mom took one look at me, and

it was like I was seventeen years old again.”

“Mom is terrifying when she gets like that,” Ida agreed, although Sophie couldn’t imagine a time when Katrina had looked at Ida the same way. Her golden daughter.

“I just thought, you know, that Mom would finally see how much better I’ve been,” Sophie murmured. “I thought she’d finally see my recovery for what it is.”

“I talked to her about that.” Ida shook her head.

“When?”

“We were at Grandma’s the other day,” Ida said. “Boxing things up. Cleaning.”

Sophie’s heart sank into her stomach. She gaped at Ida, who knitted her brows together.

“I know. I felt like you should have been there, too,” Ida offered. “And I told her that.”

“I have so many memories there,” Sophie rasped. Her heart fluttered, imagining her mother tearing things apart, boxing things up, sanitizing that gorgeous home.

Ida made a face and sipped her wine. Across the kitchen, Oriana laughed outrageously at something someone told her—an artsy type who looked like he’d come in from Manhattan.

“You should go over there yourself,” Ida suggested. “Make sure Mom doesn’t get rid of something you might want.”

“What’s her plan?” Sophie asked. “Has she even told Grandma she’s doing this?”

“You know how weird Mom is about that house.” Ida shrugged. “She looks so determined not to cry while she’s there. Like she uses all of her brain power not to fall apart.”

Sophie sighed and leaned against the counter beside her sister, suddenly overwhelmed with sorrow.

“I need to tell you something,” Sophie whispered. She felt the secret bubbling up from her stomach. She wanted to tell her sister before everyone else.

Slowly, Sophie unzipped her purse and lifted the black velvet box up toward the light. It was concealed from everyone else but Ida, tucked beneath the folds of the leather bag. The minute Sophie popped it open, Ida’s jaw dropped, and her eyes glinted with tears.

“Is that?” she stuttered. “Is that really...?”

Sophie returned the box to the bottom of her bag and threw her arms around Ida. She shook, overwhelmed with emotions—grief, surprise, and hope. They all pummeled against her heart, threatening to shatter it. How much could one person feel before falling apart? She’d previously taken drugs to avoid her overwhelming feelings. She’d hidden herself from the storm of feeling too much.

“I assume you said yes?” Ida whispered into her ear with a laugh.

Sophie nodded and giggled, stepping back to wipe the tears from her cheeks with the sleeve of her dress. The other secret—the far bigger one, remained tucked into the back folds of her mind.

“I’m going to tell everyone else later,” Sophie offered. “But I’m terrified.”

“A New Year’s Day party is the best place for that news,” Ida said, blinking back tears. “There won’t be a dry eye in any of these massive, beautiful rooms.”

Sophie cackled and pressed her hand on her chest. It was okay, she told herself. She was here with her sister. She was safe. And this was the first day of the rest of her life with Patrick by her side.

Chapter Eight

Katrina sat in the living room of Oriana's immaculate place, studying a modern art painting on the opposite wall. She couldn't make sense of it. It was mostly orange, with a strange right triangle painted in one corner and a blue sun painted in the opposite corner. The artist had signed the bottom-right corner, but she couldn't make out the name.

"What do you think?"

Estelle appeared beside Katrina, following Katrina's gaze to the painting. Estelle tilted her head, assessing it, giving it more consideration than Katrina felt able to. And then, Estelle sat on the couch beside Katrina, took a sip from her glass of wine, and said, "I think it's garbage."

Katrina burst into laughter. She hadn't expected such a surly opinion from Estelle, who was perhaps the most optimistic and happy woman Katrina had ever known. Although Katrina hadn't read all of Estelle's books, they always ended with happily ever afters—with the hero and the heroine riding off into the metaphorical sunset and having babies.

"Sorry," Estelle said, snapping her hand over her mouth. "I don't know how to act around 'real art.'" She used two fingers to make air quotes.

"I don't understand it," Katrina whispered, her eyes darting around the room. She didn't dare say anything uncouth in front of Oriana. "I mean, the orange? The triangle? Just looking at it makes me want to scream."

Estelle giggled. Her lips were faintly stained from her wine.

"How did it go today with your mother, Kat?"

"She's awake, thank goodness." Katrina closed her eyes, trying to shove the image of her very sick mother from her mind. "We'll head to the hospital

as soon as we get back to Nantucket tomorrow.”

“I’m sure she appreciates that,” Estelle said.

Katrina winced. Agatha wasn’t anything like Estelle’s mother, who’d passed away many years ago. Estelle’s mother had been a doll—just about the sweetest woman Katrina had ever known.

Before Katrina could think of a way to change the subject, she heard Sophie’s voice barreling out over the other conversations in the living room. Near an enormous monstera plant, Sophie was sidled up alongside Patrick, her hand over his shoulder, her eyes on his face. She was laughing and carrying on like a much younger woman at a very different party. Katrina’s stomach tightened with fear. Suddenly, Sophie and Patrick turned and headed for the hallway leading to the kitchen.

Katrina felt a sudden urge to go after them. To save them from themselves.

“I have to go,” Katrina said to Estelle.

“I’ll save you a seat.”

Katrina didn’t answer. She ducked through the crowd, past the cheeses, cookies, and chocolate trays. She weaved past conversations about football games and college scholarships and past perfume scents, most of them too floral.

Katrina paused at the entrance to the kitchen and took a deep breath. It seemed that the kitchen had cleared out. Only Sophie and Patrick were there, stationed at the counter. Patrick was pouring them two glasses of something bubbly from a dark green bottle. Katrina’s heart seized. As they raised their glasses, Katrina lurched into the room and said, “I’d ask you to think twice before drinking that.”

Sophie jumped with surprise and dropped her glass. Instantly, stares scattered to all corners of the kitchen, lining the gaps between the ornate tiles.

“Mom!” Sophie howled angrily, staring down at the wet spot on the ground. “It’s non-alcoholic champagne!”

Katrina’s heart thudded. Patrick set his glass of “non-alcoholic champagne,” whatever that was, on the counter and waved his hands. “Nobody move. I need to find a broom.” He looked calm, as though this kind of thing happened all the time.

Sophie used her left hand to tuck her hair behind her ear. There was a flash. Katrina gaped at Sophie’s hand, at the ring she’d most definitely not

been wearing at the hospital earlier today. Patrick busied himself in various cabinets, whistling, stepping lightly.

“What’s that?” Katrina asked.

All the color drained from Sophie’s cheeks. She looked at her mother fearfully.

“The ring?” Katrina demanded.

Sophie slowly extended her fingers to show it off. Together, Katrina and Sophie stared down at it, at this tiny yet uniquely vintage-looking diamond ring. Only months ago, Sophie’s divorce from Jared had gone through. And now, already, she wanted to leap into something again? With this other addict? Was she insane?

“I see,” Katrina said.

Sophie balled her left hand into a fist and returned it to her side. She looked stricken. “We were about to make an announcement.”

Patrick froze by the cabinet and turned to look at Katrina. Katrina felt frozen with indecision. She knew, abstractly, what she was supposed to do as a mother. She was supposed to throw her arms around Sophie and Patrick. She was supposed to cry with happiness.

But before Katrina could respond, Oriana entered the kitchen. “Did I hear something break?”

“We had a little accident,” Patrick said, his voice bright.

“That’s all right!” Oriana assured them. “I’m the biggest klutz in this house. Reese says I break a glass once a week!”

Sophie’s face calmed, and she matched Oriana’s smile. Suddenly, she extended her left fingers again and said, “I was just freaking out a little bit. Because Patrick proposed. And I’ve been trying to figure out how to tell everyone!”

Oriana’s jaw dropped. “Engaged?” she cried, loud enough that the word seemed to reverberate through the house. “Goodness! Leave the glass. Let’s get you out here to celebrate!” Oriana took Sophie’s hand and guided her out of the kitchen and into the living room. “Patrick, you too!” She announced, “Everyone! These lovebirds have a wonderful announcement! Gather around to hear!”

Katrina remained in the shadows of the kitchen, listening as all one hundred and fifty people championed her daughter’s newfound love. There was so much they didn’t know about Sophie. There was so much they would never understand. The glass at Katrina’s feet sparkled ominously, and she

walked carefully to the larger broom closet in the hallway to retrieve a dustpan and a broom. As everyone covered Sophie and Patrick in hugs and kisses, Katrina took extra care to clean the kitchen floor. Over and over again, she asked herself if this engagement was part of Sophie's redemption. Or would it lead to her demise?

It was so hard to tell with Sophie. Katrina had seen it all before.

* * *

Oriana gave Grant and Katrina the larger of the four guest rooms. The space featured a California King, antique furnishings, more modern art, and a bay window that pressed out against the sharp January winds, illustrating a backdrop of stars and the spindly shadows of the trees that lined the property. Katrina sat all by herself on the edge of the bed, with only the bedside lamp on. The party continued downstairs as voices reverberated through the stairwells and hallways. Every once in a while, Katrina was sure she heard someone exclaim, "Sophie! You're getting married!" Katrina hadn't seen Sophie once since the big reveal. She alternated between feelings of intense shame and fear.

There was a knock on the door. "Kat? It's me, Grant."

Katrina fell back across the mattress with her arms on either side. "Come in."

Grant tiptoed in.

"Don't turn on the light," Katrina said, wincing.

Grant flicked it off and closed the door. He was a sturdy shadow toward the far end of the room, hands in his pockets. He smelled faintly of beer and cigars. Reese was a frequent cigar smoker and often brought out the best of the best at parties.

"I haven't seen you since I heard about the engagement," Grant said.

Katrina cleared her throat.

"What do you think?" Grant stepped closer and peered down at her on the bed.

Katrina forced herself back up, shifted her legs onto the mattress, and leaned against the fifteen-plus throw pillows Oriana had arranged at the head of the bed. "I think it's fast," she said.

Grant was quiet. Katrina stewed in shame.

“I think she looks really happy,” Grant offered. “Happier than I’ve seen her in years.” He wiped the back of his hand over his mouth. “Don’t you think that’s proof of something? I mean, Ida says she’s trying really hard. That rehab helped.”

It was rare for Katrina and Grant to speak about Sophie’s addiction so openly. This was one of the only black holes in their marriage. The truth was that Katrina had kept Sophie’s teenage addiction a secret from Grant, too. She’d meant for the secrecy to protect them both. She was no longer sure it had been the right strategy. But you couldn’t go back and adjust the past.

Katrina forced herself to look up at Grant. She huffed.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Katrina said, sounding crueler than she meant to. “You’re going to tell me I sound like my mother. That I’m just as stubborn as she is. But I never put my mother through what Sophie put me through.”

Grant raised his hands in defeat. “I wasn’t going to say that.”

Katrina closed her eyes and filled her lungs. “I want my daughter to be happy. I want her to be in love. I do.”

Grant sat down beside her on the bed and took her hand. “I know it’s hard to forgive,” he said. “But you’ve forgiven your mother over and over again. Why not your daughter, too?”

Katrina couldn’t answer him. Exhaustion and anger rolled through her chest, pressing against her like a boulder.

“Just let me rest a few more minutes,” Katrina said. “I’ll come back to the party. I promise.”

Grant shifted toward her and kissed her gently on the forehead. Tears sprung to Katrina’s eyes.

“I love you, Kat,” Grant said. “It’s the first day of 2024. We’re going to plan our daughter’s wedding this year. And it’s going to be beautiful. Okay?”

Katrina nodded tentatively. Grant got up and retreated from the room, ambling back down the staircase and to the hubbub below. Katrina rolled onto her stomach and pressed her nose into the floral comforter. She hated it so much when she wanted to disagree with Grant and tell him that he didn’t understand. Usually, she understood he was the voice of reason, which hurt even worse.

Chapter Nine

The text from her mother arrived on January 4th at nine in the morning. Sophie was halfway through a “yoga for pregnant moms” YouTube exercise, which she promptly stopped.

MOM: Do you have plans today?

MOM: I could use some help at Grandma’s house. If you have time.

Sophie’s heart pumped. She was on her feet in a flash, padding across the yoga mat and heading for the bathroom. She couldn’t see her mother without unwashed hair, perfect makeup, lotion, or pristine clothing. Katrina was always on the hunt for clues that Sophie was using again. One strand of hair out of whack could send Katrina spiraling.

As the water got hot, Sophie texted her sister to see if she planned to stop at their grandparents’ house that day.

IDA: I’m not going to make it, unfortunately. Frankie and Nellie head out tomorrow, and we have a to-do list a mile long before they go.

IDA: Does this mean Mom invited you?

SOPHIE: She did. I feel like it’s a trap.

IDA: Just lean into it. She’s not the Big Bad Wolf.

IDA: And I think she feels bad about how she reacted to your engagement news.

IDA: Mom has a heart, you know? She's just overly emotional sometimes.

Sophie scrubbed herself clean, dressed, did her makeup, ate a piece of toast with peanut butter, and drove slowly out to Siasconset, where, once upon a time, her grandma Agatha and her grandpa Calvin had raised Norm and Katrina. As a kid, Sophie had thought the house was something out of a fairy tale. It was three stories, numerous bedrooms, ornate wallpaper, two different libraries, a study, and a gorgeous dining room that, in the past, doubled as a ballroom.

“That’s one of the only reasons your grandpa Chuck let your father and I date,” Katrina had told Sophie once. “My parents had money. The kind of money the Colemans respected.”

Sophie had grown up with all the privileges of a Whittaker and Coleman. She’d taken private horseback riding lessons, French lessons, and sailing lessons and vacationed in the French Riviera at the age of twelve. But she’d never felt she fit the “mold” of the families. She’d always been messy, unscheduled, disoriented. Drugs had been a wonderful way to uncoil from their demands. They’d been her way of taking control—by having none at all.

Sophie parked next to her mother’s car and headed up the walkway. When she reached the front door, Katrina opened it quickly, beckoning for Sophie to enter. Her face was stoic.

“I don’t want to get all the warmth out,” she said.

Katrina wore a pair of leggings, a trim-cut sweater, and a pair of house shoes.

“Here,” Katrina said, handing Sophie a pair of house shoes. “I bought you a pair. I don’t want to scuff up the floors any more than they already are.”

Sophie changed into the house shoes and followed her mother to the living room, where a large fire blistered her eyes. Katrina poured Sophie a cup of tea from a pot on the living room coffee table and began to speak very quickly—spitting instructions at Sophie quicker than she could make sense of them. None of her words hinted at an apology for how she’d acted about the engagement. And none of them were congratulations, either.

“Remember,” Katrina was saying, “my father had a bit of a habit. A horrible habit. He was a drinker. As you go through things today, it’s possible you’ll find a few bottles here and there.” Katrina stared at the fire as though saying this to Sophie’s face was too difficult.

Sophie grimaced. “I won’t drink anything, Mom.” Alcohol had never been her biggest trigger, anyway.

“I just had to tell you,” Katrina said, throwing her hands. After a pause, she added, “I’ll have sandwiches delivered around one. You still like that place on Main Street?”

“I love it.” Sophie smiled.

“Very well.” Katrina stood and whacked her thighs. “Let’s get started. This old place won’t clean out itself.”

Sophie took a few empty cardboard boxes to the second floor, where she set to work on the bedroom that had belonged to Uncle Norm. Over the years, Grandma Agatha had adjusted it to allow guests to stay over, meaning there was only a whisper of Norm left. There were Broadway posters, old books about writing and acting, and art prints—plus several old, moth-eaten sweaters that Sophie immediately stuffed into a trash bag.

Sophie couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen her uncle Norm. He’d lived out in Los Angeles for decades at this point. She had a few Whittaker cousins out there, none of whom understood the magic of Nantucket Island. Perhaps Norm had painted a different portrait of Nantucket than the one Sophie had. Perhaps he only remembered his alienating, alcoholic father.

Sophie had talked about her grandfather in rehab. She was far from the only one who had family members who’d struggled and subsequently died from their addictions. “But I loved my grandfather,” Sophie had said. “And sometimes, when he drank, he became so loving and excited. He told the very best stories with whiskey on his breath. Maybe that means I glamorized his addiction as a young girl. I don’t know. My mother never glamorized it, though. I don’t even know if she had any love left for my grandfather when he died. That didn’t mean she didn’t mourn him, though. She was completely broken when he died.”

Sophie wondered what would happen when she passed on. Would her child mourn her? Or would she have done something heinous by then? Would she have destroyed their relationship?

“No,” Sophie said aloud. “No!”

It felt nice to hear her own voice. It grounded her back in the year 2024. It would be her first year of complete sobriety since age twenty.

Sophie boxed up Norm’s books, his art prints, old calendars, and old journals. She decided to send these to Norm in California. They formed a time capsule. Curiosity tugged at her to open Norm’s journals and read what

he was up to back then, but she shoved it aside and kept working.

At one, Katrina came upstairs to tell Sophie the sandwiches were on their way. “You got quite a bit of work done,” she said, leaning in the doorway with her arms crossed.

As Sophie stood, her stomach cramped, and nausea rippled across her lower abdomen. She grimaced. Nausea had come on strong a little more than a week ago. It was part of the reason she’d bought a pregnancy test in the first place. She told herself to get used to it. To keep it under control. Especially here, under the watchful eye of her mother.

She could just imagine what Katrina would say about the pregnancy—that she wasn’t ready, it was too soon, or she was reckless.

More than that, she might say that Sophie wasn’t fit to be a mother at all. And the thought of that terrified Sophie. Perhaps she could find a way never to tell her mother about the pregnancy until the baby was born. By then, it would be too late. And Katrina wouldn’t know what to do except shower the little baby with love.

Downstairs, Katrina made another pot of tea and talked about the work she’d done so far on the house. “We have tentative plans for an auction at the end of March or so,” she said, lacing her fingers together. “By then, your grandmother will be safe and sound in a nursing home, and we can hand this place over to the highest bidder.” She cracked her knuckles on the counter.

Sophie felt a lump in her throat. “Have you talked to Norm about it?”

“He doesn’t care about this place,” Katrina assured her. “He ran as far away from here as he could.”

“Were you jealous of that?” Sophie surprised herself with the question. She clutched her mug of tea, terrified her mother would turn on her heel and yell at her.

Instead, Katrina took it in stride. “Of course, Broadway seemed so glamorous, especially when he first started out. But I never had dreams like that. I wanted to be a wife. I wanted to be a mother.”

“Grandma must have appreciated that.” Sophie gestured around the kitchen, where Grandma Agatha had probably cooked thousands of meals.

“She didn’t think about it,” Katrina said. “It was expected that women wanted to be wives and mothers back then. Who knows? Maybe if I’d been born a few decades later, I would have wanted to be something else.”

“Like what?” Sophie dug deeper. She and her mother had never opened themselves up like this.

“Who knows?” Katrina didn’t take the bait.

The doorbell rang, and Katrina sped off to grab the sandwiches. Sophie remained at the kitchen table, watching the snow fall daintily across the dead grass lining the beach. Katrina returned, bringing a wave of roast beef, onions, Italian sausage, and cheese with her, and Sophie’s mouth watered.

“That was one thing about you,” Katrina remembered as they unfurled their sandwiches from their wrappers. “You were never a picky eater, not like Ida. She was worried about every animal and sometimes cried at the dinner table. I had never seen anything like it. She was a vegetarian for decades.”

“I think she still is. Sometimes.” Sophie took a large bite of her sandwich and chewed, overwhelmed with the fresh vegetables and the spicy sausage.

Katrina put down her sandwich. “I know that.”

Katrina obviously hadn’t known Ida was still a vegetarian. Sophie could hear it in her voice. But she needed to pretend to know—for reasons far too complex for Sophie to approach right here. And Sophie had to play along.

“I know! Yeah. Ida’s great for sticking to vegetarianism like that. But I would never give up this sandwich,” Sophie said, trying to make a joke.

Katrina picked back up her sandwich and smiled. A bit of mustard dropped down from the bottom. “You know, honey,” she began.

Sophie’s heartbeat intensified. She was terrified her mother was about to say something horrible.

Instead, Katrina said, “I think it’s really sweet you’ve spent so much time at the hospital.”

Sophie breathed a sigh of relief. “Grandma means a lot to me.”

Katrina’s eyes glinted. She took a bite of her sandwich and chewed, watching the snow. “We’ll have to get a wheelchair for her,” she said. “For the wedding.”

Sophie’s heart seized. She fought every urge to throw her sandwich down and wrap her arms around her mother.

“We were thinking early April,” Sophie offered softly.

“Soon.”

Sophie wanted to say, “Not soon enough.” She wanted to shout her love for Patrick across the bluffs and over the rooftops. She wanted it to echo across the Sound.

Instead, she said in a meek voice, “I’ve never loved anyone like Patrick.”

And her mother said, “I like the way he looks at you. It seems like he loves you a lot.”

After that, Katrina returned her attention fully to her sandwich, as though that was all the kindness she could offer Sophie today. But Sophie's chest was warm and fluttery. It was the first time her mother had shown any affection for Patrick. It was the first admission that Sophie was actually going to get married soon.

We all have to start somewhere, Sophie told herself. We all have to find ways to heal.

Chapter Ten

Twenty-Two Years Ago

It was autumn in New York City. Trees burst with oranges, reds, and yellows just as bright as the taxi cabs that whipped along the streets, and pigeons waddled through parks, their eyes puny and round. Katrina and Agatha walked around Madison Square Park and found a bench in a sunbeam, where they unfurled their bagel sandwiches from a paper bag and feasted.

Agatha was sixty-three years old. This was her first trip to the city, and it was clear from her surly, distrustful glances at passersby that she wasn't too sure about it yet. Katrina did her best to distract her.

"There are so many delicious smells here, don't you think?" Katrina was asking. "I mean, we could eat at a different place for breakfast, lunch, and dinner and never run out of new options."

"There are plenty of disgusting smells, too," Agatha reminded Katrina, taking a bite of her cream cheese and lox bagel. "Back in Nantucket, all we know is the sea and the sand. And that's about enough for me."

Katrina tried to smile and focus on the positives. She was forty-three years old, an empty nester, on a trip to the city with her mother. They planned to see Norm in his final Broadway production before heading out to Hollywood to "make something of himself," or so he put it. This fascinated

Katrina. Wasn't he already "something" here in New York? Wasn't Broadway enough?

As Agatha cleaned up after the bagel sandwich, wiping her mouth with her napkin, she asked, "And? Have you heard from our Sophie lately?"

Katrina's stomach tied itself into knots.

"I told you I haven't seen her since last Christmas, Mom," Katrina said. She knew her mother was bringing this up just to dig her nose in it—to remind her she'd failed as a mother. "Have you been over to see Ida's baby lately?"

Agatha's eyes shimmered with the memory of her first great-granddaughter. "She's a doll, isn't she?" Her smile melted. "But don't you think Sophie's out there somewhere? Getting into trouble? We need to go find her, Kat. We need to bring her home."

Katrina's heart felt bruised. She wrapped the remaining bagel in the foil and shoved it into the paper bag.

"I'm sure she's fine," Katrina said. "Let's keep walking, shall we? We have to meet Norm in a few hours."

Katrina's youngest daughter, Sophie, was a nightmare. At fourteen or fifteen, she'd begun drinking and using drugs. Katrina was the only one who knew—a fact that had become a tumor, growing ever bigger. Because Sophie was a high-functioning addict (if Katrina really wanted to use that term, which she didn't), she managed to pull off good grades throughout high school. Immediately after high school, however, she left the island. She'd disappeared. And Katrina had nightmares almost daily about where she'd ended up.

Over Christmas, Katrina had begged Sophie to come back home so she could keep an eye on her. But Sophie had scoffed. Of this, Grant had said, "She's trying to find her own way." But Grant didn't know about the drugs.

On the walk toward Broadway, where Norm was set to perform that evening, Agatha brought up Katrina's father for the tenth time that afternoon.

"He would have given anything to see Norm perform like this," she said dreamily. "He was so proud of his boy, you know."

"I know, Mom," Katrina said.

Calvin had been dead for three years. When he'd been alive, he hadn't mentioned Norm's profession aloud once, not since Norm had left the island more than twenty years ago. News of his success hadn't thrilled Calvin in the

least. He knew his friends talked ill of him because Norm was an actor rather than an accountant or a doctor. Norm knew this, too. He'd made appearances at numerous Christmases and Thanksgivings, but not all of them. And now that he was married, he didn't come to the island as often.

Katrina and Agatha reached the theater at four thirty that afternoon. Almost immediately, Norm breezed out in a pair of slacks, a trench coat, and big Aviator sunglasses. He looked sleek and sophisticated. Katrina threw her arms around him, overwhelmed with love and pride for her older brother. Norm kissed Agatha on the cheek and blinked down at her as though seeing their mother in the big city was strange.

"You're here!" he announced.

"We made it in one piece," Katrina said with a laugh.

Norm led them to a place called Junior's, where they bought cappuccinos and big, New York-style cheesecakes. Agatha's eyes were enormous. She dug her fork into the end of her cheesecake with more passion than most children to candy. When Agatha excused herself to the bathroom, Norm caught Katrina's eyes over the table.

"I can't believe you got her off the island," he said.

"Me neither." Katrina laughed. "She complained on the entire drive here."

"I'm not surprised. That's our mother."

Katrina set down her fork. "How are you feeling, Norm? Everything is about to change for you! Again!"

"Change is inevitable," Norm said. "I'm tired of the city. I'm tired of being so cold! California is calling my name." He bowed his head. "Just a few more months."

Silence spilled over the table. Katrina was terrified that she and her brother no longer had anything to say to one another. He was too "artistic" now, maybe. She was too "small town."

"You know, Mom talks about Dad all the time," she explained. "But her version of him isn't the one I remember."

Norm chuckled sadly. "I've noticed that. When I call, she tells me every time that Dad would be proud of me. I don't have the heart to correct her."

"Well, I'm proud of you," Katrina blurted. "I can't shut up about you sometimes."

Norm waved his hand. All the color drained from his cheeks. "And? How are your daughters doing?" He stuttered slightly.

Katrina sucked the air from her cheeks. “Ida just had a baby.”

“Wonderful.”

“And Sophie?” Katrina picked back up her fork and drew lines into her cheesecake. Tears sprung to her eyes. “Sophie has gone the way of Dad, I think.”

Norm furrowed his brow. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, she’s sick, I think. I mean, I don’t think she can help it.”

“Drinking?”

“And other things,” Katrina went on. “But I’ve never told anyone.”

Norm bit his lower lip and studied Katrina intently. “You haven’t told anyone?”

Katrina shook her head. Shame bubbled in her stomach.

“There are things you can do. Clinics you can take her to. I know of several outside the city. If you bring her here, I can make sure she meets with the very best doctors.”

“How do you know those doctors?” Katrina asked, caught off guard.

A strange look passed over Norm’s face. Katrina remembered, now, that Norm hadn’t wanted wine with Christmas dinner. In fact, she couldn’t remember seeing him drink anything in a long time.

Was he an addict, too?

“I’ve worked long and hard,” Norm continued. “But I’m healing. And I want to help Sophie find the help she needs.”

Katrina closed her eyes. A wave of terror and pain crashed into her chest. Before she had a chance to gather her thoughts, Agatha returned, complaining about the line to the bathroom.

“There are just so many people in New York!” Agatha cried. “You can’t find a place anywhere!”

Katrina and Agatha were seated in the center of row twenty, what they were told were “extraordinarily lucky seats.” Agatha sat, her eyes enormous, enthralled with the old-world theater with its glinting chandeliers and thick red curtain over the stage.

“They certainly put a lot of money into places like this, don’t they?” Agatha said after not speaking for nearly fifteen minutes.

Katrina found her mother’s excitement adorable, but she was careful not to show it. The minute Agatha felt you belittling her in any respect, she bit.

The lights dimmed overhead, and Katrina could hear Agatha suck in all her breath. On stage, a spotlight illuminated a figure toward the far back

corner. The actor was dressed in clothes from the fifteenth or sixteenth century, and he spoke English with an accent that was almost unintelligible. It took both Katrina and Agatha nearly ten seconds before they reached for one another's hands in realization. It was Norm!

A moment later, the orchestra began to play, and Norm began to march toward the front of the stage, singing in a low, wonderful baritone. Katrina forgot to breathe. She watched every twitch of her brother's face; she allowed his voice to carry her away. By the time he finished the first song with a resounding climax, Katrina's cheeks were wet with tears. The lights went out immediately afterward, and Katrina and Agatha clapped louder than anyone else in the audience. They were off to the races.

The theater production lasted more than three hours. Ordinarily, Agatha would have complained about sitting still for so long. But even at intermission, she refused to get up.

"I don't want to get distracted," she explained, her eyes still on the stage, as though she expected Norm to burst out from behind the curtain any moment.

"If only your father could see this," Agatha muttered again. "He would be blown away."

After the show, Katrina and Agatha waited for Norm in the lobby. Agatha ripped the edge of her bulletin and watched everyone as they passed by, speaking a little too loudly about what they were wearing and how bright some woman's lipstick was. Katrina tried calming herself down by remembering they would never see these people again. Agatha's cruelty wouldn't come back to bite them. Not this time.

Norm appeared around a half hour after the show finished. He still wore some of his stage makeup, which gave him an exaggerated, emotional look. Katrina hugged him and squealed, and Agatha kissed his cheek exuberantly.

"My darling son!" she cried, glancing around to make sure a few people heard her. "You were wonderful."

"It wasn't the best performance," Norm assured them. "But it wasn't the worst, either."

"You sound so optimistic," Katrina said with a smile.

They decided to head back to Katrina and Agatha's hotel for a quick meal at the hotel restaurant. Norm was famished, and Agatha had seen a chicken Caesar salad on the menu that she said had her name on it. Katrina longed to dine out at one of the numerous Manhattan restaurants on any of the

surrounding streets, but she also didn't want to push her mother out of her brilliant mood. It was rare to see her like this.

The hotel hostess led them to a booth near the window. There, Agatha ordered a mojito, of all things, along with the salad she'd been excited about all day. And then, she said, "We just watched my son's performance on Broadway!"

"Is that so?" the server hardly glanced up from her notepad. "Congratulations."

After the server brought their drinks, champagne for Norm and Katrina and a mojito for Agatha, Agatha raised her glass and said, "Here's to you, Norm. The artist in the family. Your father would have been so proud."

At this, something cracked in Norm's perfect smile. He placed his glass of champagne back on the table and blinked at Agatha. All the color drained from his cheeks.

"You have to stop saying that," he said simply. There was no malice in his voice.

"Oh, honey. It's true," Agatha said, her voice cracking. "Your father would be doubled over with pride! You know how much he loved movies."

"I know how much he liked screaming at me after drinking an entire bottle of whiskey," Norm offered. "In hindsight, it was a wonderful performance. He should have had a full stage."

Katrina's stomach dropped. She stared into her champagne, watching the bubbles trace their paths to the top.

"Your father gave you everything," Agatha rasped. She clutched her mojito with her claw-like hands. "And if he needed to have a drink every now and again..."

"I don't want to hear it," Norm said. "I've been through too much therapy and too many rounds of rehab to sit here and listen to this."

"Therapy?" Agatha gasped.

Katrina placed her hands over her face. Terror rocketed through her.

"Yes, Mom. Therapy. Heard of it? I think you could use a few thousand rounds of therapy yourself," Norm said. He burst to his feet and reached for his coat.

"Norm!" Katrina cried. "Don't go."

Norm glared down at Katrina with even more vitriol than he'd shown their mother.

"We don't have to talk like this," Katrina begged. "Come on. We were

having such a nice time.”

Norm stuttered. “Why the heck are you so bent on forgiving them, Katrina? Come on. You were there, too.”

And with that, Norm turned on his heel and sped out of the hotel restaurant into the swirling city night. Agatha remained in stunned silence, gripping her mojito, eyes glazed. Katrina bit her tongue to avoid bursting into tears.

Chapter Eleven

Katrina and Agatha drove home from New York City without speaking. Agatha's eyes were stormy, and she angrily put lotion on her hands, snapping her palms and the tops of her fingers. Katrina gripped the steering wheel with white fingers, her head awash with everything Norm told her during their brief trip to the city. That he'd confessed he'd gone to rehab, he'd told her to get Sophie help, and that he'd insinuated Katrina was a coward because she'd decided to remain in their mother and father's lives rather than abandon them. "Why the heck are you so bent on forgiving them, Katrina?" The words had felt like a slap to the face.

Katrina dropped Agatha off at the Whittaker family home. Katrina carried Agatha's suitcase inside and put it on the foyer floor. Agatha passed wordlessly into the kitchen. A moment later came the sound of the kettle on the stovetop. Katrina waited for a minute, expecting Agatha to return and invite her to stay for tea. She didn't. Katrina rubbed her temples and left. All she wanted in the world was to drop into bed and sleep till tomorrow. She wasn't even sure she wanted to tell Grant what had happened. Maybe she could pretend it had all been a dream.

But when Katrina got home, she found a mysterious Toyota in the driveway. She parked next to it, got out, and traced a path around it, peering into the tinted windows to try to make out who it belonged to. Nobody she knew drove this sort of car. Did Grant have someone visiting? They hadn't spoken at all last night. Katrina hadn't told him they were coming home early.

A horrible thought shot through her. What if Grant had taken Katrina's

trip as an opportunity to have a sordid affair?

But just as quickly as the thought sprang, Katrina killed it. If she could trust one thing in the world, it was Grant's love for her.

Katrina walked to the front door and tried the knob. It was unlocked. As quietly as she could, she slipped into the foyer, perking her ears up to hear a conversation from three rooms away. There seemed to be four voices. No, five. One of them was Grant, another was Ida, and then she heard Rick, Ida's husband. But who were the other two?

And then, the sound of Sophie's laughter swelled through the house. Katrina's heart stopped beating. She touched the wall to balance herself. It had been ages since she'd heard that laugh, even longer since she'd actually recognized good humor and happiness in that sound. Even last Christmas, Sophie's laughter had sounded tragic. Sophie had seemed half blacked out at the time.

Katrina tiptoed to the kitchen. All of the hairs on her arms stood up straight.

"I couldn't believe when he got down on one knee," Sophie was saying. "I was like, 'Jared! Get back up!'"

"She really thought I was joking," Jared said.

Katrina stopped short, her eyes widening. Jared! Jared was Sophie's high school boyfriend, a handsome and intellectual young man with whom Sophie had always attended prom and beach parties. Because Katrina hadn't seen him since Sophie's high school graduation, she'd assumed they were broken up. She'd mourned the loss of that relationship far more than she should have. After all, Katrina had seen Jared as Sophie's final link to Nantucket Island, future children, and a life she could be proud of.

Katrina had assumed, too, that Sophie had broken up with Jared to allow herself the freedom of partying and dating other men.

Was it possible Sophie was far healthier than Katrina thought? Was it possible she'd been incorrect about the severity of Sophie's addiction?

Light flooded through Katrina's chest. For the first time since last night at the hotel in Manhattan, she smiled. And then, she stepped into the kitchen to find her beautiful, clear-eyed Sophie holding hands with Jared, who was even more handsome than he'd been two years ago. His jawline was sharper and wider, his hair was curlier, and he'd developed biceps and muscular shoulders.

Already, Katrina was imagining the babies they would have. She couldn't

help it.

“Mom!” Sophie’s lips parted with surprise. “You’re early!”

Sophie then cleared the space between them, flying into her mother’s arms, bringing with her the scent of her jasmine perfume. Sophie hadn’t hugged Katrina like this since she was a girl. Katrina’s heart melted.

Grant and Ida wore big smiles, watching Katrina and Sophie hug. The radio was playing a Top 40 hit, and the guitar chords jangled happily.

“What did I just hear you say?” Katrina asked, drawing away from her daughter to look her in the eye. “Jared got down on one knee?”

Sophie laughed and wiggled her left finger in front of Katrina to show off a large engagement ring. Incredibly, it was even larger than the one Grant had given Katrina all those years ago. And Grant was one of the proudest and wealthiest guys Katrina knew!

The size of Sophie’s ring meant many things. Namely that Jared had enough wealth to take care of Sophie and that he loved her enough to give her the very best.

More than that, Sophie was healthy enough to accept. She was healthy enough to recognize that this was the correct path forward.

Katrina could see it in Sophie’s eyes. They were clear and white, without any of the red capillaries that had so often appeared during Sophie’s heavy drug years. Katrina nearly gushed with happiness.

“Darling, that’s wonderful,” Katrina said, squeezing Sophie’s hands.

“We have to celebrate,” Grant said. “I was thinking of a big Coleman celebration this weekend. What do you say? Jared? Sophie?”

“Whatever my bride wants,” Jared said.

“Of course! I want to celebrate with as many people as possible,” Sophie said.

“When were you thinking of having the wedding?” Ida asked.

“As soon as we can,” Sophie said. “Maybe New Year’s Eve?”

“That sounds magical!” Ida said. “We’ll have to get started right away.”

Grant disappeared briefly to order pizzas to the house. It was a gorgeous, eggshell-blue autumn day, and they decided to eat on the back porch, watching the sun fade over the sound. Katrina hugged Jared and said, “I’m so thrilled to see you back in Nantucket!”

“Sophie and I have been talking about moving back here all year,” Jared said.

Katrina caught Sophie’s eye. Sophie read her expression immediately and

took Jared's arm.

"Neither of us wanted to be broken up," Sophie explained. "But Jared was brave enough to come find me in Boston."

"I knew I'd lost the best girl in the world," Jared said. "And I couldn't rest until I made her understand just how important this relationship is to me."

"It's so romantic," Ida said.

From upstairs came the sound of Ida's baby crying. Ida disappeared to tend to her, and Rick followed shortly after, unsure of himself around Ida's family. This left Jared, Katrina, Sophie, and Grant in the living room, gushing about the upcoming union of their families.

Only hours ago, Katrina had thought her daughter's life was in jeopardy. This was the about-face of the century.

That weekend, Grant invited Aunt Jessabelle, Roland, Estelle, Sam, Hilary, Charlie, their partners, and Agatha over for an engagement party. Ida took everyone's coats as they entered and passed them a glass of champagne to start. Katrina waded through the party dressed in an elegant emerald green dress she'd purchased just for the occasion, keeping an eye out for Sophie. There was enough champagne present to field a fraternity party. She was terrified of Sophie imbibing and making a fool of herself. It had happened before at other family parties. Why not this one, too?

Sophie wore a modest white dress with a vintage feel. Every time Katrina passed her, she carried no glass of champagne and smiled demurely, nervously. It seemed clear she wasn't accustomed to all this attention.

"She looks so happy," Grant said as he passed by Katrina, touching Katrina's lower back tenderly.

"I can't remember the last time she smiled so much," Katrina agreed.

When Katrina retreated into the kitchen to refill a bucket of ice, she found Sophie at the sink, washing her hands and gazing out the window. Sunlight glinted across her face and made her freckles pop. Katrina remembered Sophie as a little girl, begging her mother to take her freckles off. "I don't want them!" she'd cried adorably.

"There's the bride!" Katrina said.

Sophie flinched and cut the water. A split second later, she smiled.

Katrina hadn't been alone with Sophie since she'd come home. She felt heavy with questions. The return to the island was spontaneous. She was terrified it was all a dream.

“You never told me how Uncle Norm’s Broadway show was,” Sophie pointed out.

Katrina’s smile fell slightly. “Oh. Your uncle is so talented, Sophie. If you have time, you and Jared should go into the city and see him perform. Not a lot of time before he heads out west.”

“We might have to do that,” Sophie said. “And what did Grandma say about it? I would ask her myself, but she isn’t here yet.”

Katrina had, of course, noticed her mother was a no-show. She pictured her alone in that massive house, wandering through the shadows, building up a story about Calvin Whittaker that never existed. “He was a saint. He loved his children so.”

“Grandma was captivated,” Katrina answered. It was honest. She held her elbows and continued to stare at Sophie, wondering if she was brave enough to say what was really on her mind.

“You know, your uncle told me something I never knew,” Katrina stuttered.

“Yeah?”

Katrina swallowed the lump in her throat. “He told me he went to rehab. I think he might have gone a few times.”

Sophie blinked several times but betrayed no other emotion. “Wow. Did he say when?”

“No,” Katrina said.

Silence hung heavily between them. Katrina twitched her gaze out beyond Sophie toward the glinting horizon of the Nantucket Sound.

“You know, he told me he could get you a spot,” Katrina continued, her voice like a string. “He knows all the best doctors. It wouldn’t be a big deal or anything.”

Sophie’s smile fell completely. Her face was ashen. “I’m obviously sober now, Mom.” She said it as though she spoke of the weather.

“Right. Okay. Great.” Katrina inhaled deeply. “And you’re going to, um, AA? Or NA? Or whatever it is?”

“I’m sober without it,” Sophie said. “I mean, I’m happier than I’ve been in my life. I don’t need the drugs anymore. Jared and I are building something.”

Bit by bit, light returned to Sophie’s eyes, and Katrina found herself falling into them.

“That’s great to hear, honey,” Katrina said. “Really.”

Sophie leaned over the counter so that her face was no more than six inches away from Katrina's. "And I have a secret."

Katrina's heart somersaulted.

"I'm pregnant," Sophie whispered, her smile widening.

Katrina's jaw dropped. She couldn't believe it. "You're what?"

Sophie nodded and stepped around to Katrina's side of the counter. "We just found out two weeks ago. That's when we officially got out of our lease and decided to come back here."

"Just like that?" Katrina asked.

"We want our babies to be close to their grandparents," Sophie said simply.

Katrina fell forward and wrapped her daughter in a hug. The relief she felt was enormous. She hadn't realized that Sophie's addiction had been like an elephant sitting on her chest for many years. She'd hardly dared think about Sophie lately for fear that she would learn the worst had happened.

Instead, Sophie had made the best possible decisions. She'd recognized the poisons in her life. She'd moved back home. And now, she was about to make the ultimate transformation—becoming a mother.

"I'll help you every step of the way," Katrina promised. "I love you, honey. And the best is yet to come."

Chapter Twelve

Present Day

Patrick insisted on taking Sophie's car to the auto shop for a tune-up. It was the kind of thing Jared had screamed at her for not doing enough. "You're going to kill that car! You're so reckless! You don't take care of anything, least of all yourself." By contrast, Patrick had simply made the appointment, asked Sophie to drive to the auto shop, and picked her up after she handed over the keys. Now, she sat in the passenger seat of his truck, beaming at him as they waited for the red light to turn green.

"What's that look about?" Patrick asked, giving her a crooked smile.

Sophie knew better than to talk about Jared too often. He lurked in her mind like an evil ghost, but she didn't always need to share.

Instead, she shrugged. "I just love you. And I appreciate that you pay attention to the little things in my life. The details. Like my car."

Patrick raised his shoulders as though it were nothing. Sophie's heart swelled. Patrick was the sort of man to have babies with, grow older with, and tell all your secrets to.

"You mentioned wanting to see your grandmother this morning," Patrick said, lifting his foot from the brake. "Would you like to do that now?"

"I can always go later," Sophie said. "I don't want to hold you up."

"Hold me up? I don't have any plans in January," Patrick reminded her.

“I can be your chauffeur all month long.”

The temperature hovered around freezing, and a gray sky spat them with a rain-snow mix. Patrick pulled up beneath the overhang outside the hospital and said, “I’ll park. Get inside where it’s warm.”

Sophie kissed Patrick and leaped into the chill, hurrying into the foyer to wait for Patrick. She scanned the cars in the parking lot for her mother’s and couldn’t find it, a rarity for this time of the day. Without Katrina there, Sophie felt more confident sharing the good news about their upcoming wedding with Grandma Agatha. Having Patrick by her side would complete the picture nicely. She could already hear Grandma Agatha gushing about how handsome he was.

As Patrick and Sophie strode through the halls, Sophie greeted several nurses by name. One of them waved happily and said, “Your grandma looks better and better every day!” Another asked, “You headed up to see my favorite patient?”

Sophie knew it irritated Katrina that Agatha was so well-liked at the hospital. Grandma Agatha doted on several of the nurses, calling them the “beautiful daughters I never had.” Once or twice, Sophie had heard her say that in front of Katrina. Katrina had winced but kept a smile on her face.

It had been more than two weeks since Grandma Agatha’s fall. Now, as Sophie entered her hospital room, Grandma Agatha was propped up on several pillows that Katrina had brought from home. Her makeup was done; her lipstick was a cherry red, and foundation covered the majority of her bruises, even the ones on her hands. One of the nurses told Sophie that Grandma Agatha insisted on doing her makeup before seeing the doctor. “He saw me looking like a clown for too many days as it is,” she’d said.

“Grandma!” Sophie said, leading Patrick into the hospital room. “Look at you. You’re gorgeous as ever.”

“My darling Sophie!” Grandma Agatha smiled serenely as Sophie kissed her on both cheeks. “And my! Look at this handsome man you’ve brought with you!”

Sophie blushed and turned to catch Patrick’s eye. “You remember my boyfriend, Patrick?”

“I do,” Grandma Agatha said. “Pleasure to see you, Patrick.”

“And you. I hope you’re feeling better?” Patrick asked, sitting gingerly in a plastic chair. He looked at her, rapt with attention, slightly terrified.

“I keep telling them to send me on home, but you know how they are,”

Grandma Agatha said. “But there’s plenty of television to watch here. And your mother brought me a stack of books.” Grandma Agatha pointed toward the end table beside her bed, upon which were piled biographies and a few women’s fiction novels. “She brought me heaps of romance novels. If your grandfather were here, he would make fun of me.”

Sophie laughed gently and sat next to Patrick, taking his hand. The flash of the ring caught Grandma Agatha’s eye immediately—nothing got past her. She arched her left eyebrow and watched them like a hawk.

“Don’t tell me you kids are getting married!” She feigned accusation, her tone warm and loving.

Sophie raised her left hand again to show off the ring. Agatha inspected the tiny diamond close-up, her eyebrows raising and lowering. Sophie was sure she was comparing the ring to Sophie’s previous engagement ring, that gaudy, preposterous thing Jared had put on her finger all those years ago. Jared had needed the world to see him adorning his wife in jewels. When she’d been using, she’d often taken off the ring and thrown it across the room, watching it bounce.

Sophie had given back the ring when they’d divorced. It had always felt separate from her, like a part of the costume for the role she was trying to play. She’d failed spectacularly.

“We’re going to get married in April,” Sophie announced, taking back her hand.

Agatha’s eyes widened. “So soon! Well, that’s just like you, isn’t it, Sophie? You like to leap.” She winked. “You know, you really should have your wedding at my house.”

Sophie’s heartbeat quickened. According to her mother’s plan, the Whittaker House wouldn’t belong to anyone in the Whittaker clan by April. For the better part of two weeks, Katrina, Sophie, and Ida had boxed up numerous items, driven to secondhand shops, and listed various items online for resale. The auction was planned for the end of March.

And it seemed Agatha didn’t know about it.

“The dining room is enormous,” Grandma Agatha was saying. “It once was used as a ballroom, you know. Of course, you’ll get married in the church I grew up in. And afterward, I’ll host the party. I’m thinking French cuisine. Five courses, at least. Plenty of champagne. Oh, it will be divine.”

Sophie and Patrick gave one another sidelong glances. Grandma Agatha’s eyes sparkled as though she could already see the party before her.

“I’ll have to find my jewelry from my wedding,” Grandma Agatha said. “Your grandfather was so nervous, he almost fainted, you know. Nobody ever tells that story.” She laughed, her chest shivering beneath the white sheets. “So many people think they knew your grandfather, but they simply didn’t. He was a wonderful man. The kindest I’ve ever known.”

“I loved Grandpa,” Sophie interjected.

But Grandma Agatha hardly heard her. She’d fallen into a world of memories.

The sound of footsteps came down the hallway. Recognizing the gait, Sophie straightened her spine just as Katrina breezed through the open door.

“Good morning, everyone.” There was a question in her voice. “How are we today?” She bent to kiss Grandma Agatha on the cheek and then turned to pat Patrick first and Sophie on the shoulder.

“I don’t know why everyone’s kept Sophie’s wedding a secret from me,” Grandma Agatha said, her eyes accusatory. “Do you think I’m too old to handle it?”

Katrina stuttered. “I assumed she would tell you herself!”

“And I did,” Sophie said, her adrenaline spiking.

“Because I’m not too old,” Grandma Agatha said as though she hadn’t heard. “In fact, I think we should have the wedding at my house. You know as well as anyone how perfect the dining room is for such an occasion. Katrina, I’d like you to contact a wedding planner at once and show her the space. If Sophie is really getting married again, we need to send her off right.”

Sophie’s stomach dropped. Sensing her nerves, Patrick reached over and took her hand.

Katrina’s shoulders dropped. She sat without fanfare in the plastic chair next to Patrick, clasped her hands, and said, “Mom, we can’t have the wedding at your house.”

Grandma Agatha chuckled. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I can say what happens in my house. I brought you there after giving birth at this very hospital, Katrina Whittaker.”

Katrina pressed her lips together. Sophie had the sudden urge to jump up and run as quickly as she could away from here. Patrick looked trapped.

“Mom, the doctor said you can’t go back home to live,” Katrina said delicately.

“What? That’s ridiculous,” Agatha said, waving her hand. “Bring him in

here immediately. I'll set the record straight."

Katrina didn't twitch. Very quietly, she said, "I don't think it's a good idea for you to go home. Not by yourself. Not in such a big place."

Grandma Agatha's cheeks were gray. Slowly, she returned her hands to her lap and gaped at Katrina as though she'd never seen her before. "That house can't just stand empty and alone."

"It won't," Katrina said. "We're going to sell it."

Grandma Agatha's eyes were slits. "Nobody told you that you could do that, Katrina Whittaker."

"My name is Coleman, Mom," Katrina returned coldly.

"My soulmate bought that house," Grandma Agatha shot back.

Katrina's face was stiff with sorrow and confusion.

"Why don't you go do something useful?" Agatha demanded. "I need some water."

Katrina jumped up, grabbed Grandma Agatha's cup, and disappeared in the hallway. Before she knew what she was doing, Sophie followed after her. "Mom!"

Katrina stalled in the center of the hallway and leaned against the wall. Her shoulders shook. Around them, nurses rushed to and fro, accustomed to seeing people break down in the middle of the hospital. It was just another day.

"Mom, I'm sorry about that," Sophie said, touching her mother's back.

Katrina turned to face Sophie. Her eyes were blotchy. "She'll never listen to me," she said. "She'll never respect me."

It was a rare moment of honesty between Katrina and Sophie. Sophie swallowed.

"I know. It's awful," Sophie breathed.

Katrina blinked back tears and continued to look at Sophie. It seemed like she was waiting for Sophie to save the day—for once.

"I mean, we don't have to sell it immediately?" Sophie said in a meek voice.

This was the wrong thing to say. A wrinkle formed between Katrina's eyebrows. "What do you mean?"

"I just mean," Sophie began, already in over her head, "that, you know, maybe we could keep the house in the family? It's so gorgeous. It's filled with memories."

Katrina's jaw was tight. "Mom can't live there alone."

“I know! I know. But what if, I don’t know, Patrick and I move in?” Sophie clasped her hands. “What if we raise our family there?”

Katrina reared back and gaped at Sophie. “Your family?”

Sophie’s heart pounded. All at once, she was taken back to the first time she’d told her mother about her pregnancy—twenty-two years ago. How joyful Katrina had been. How sure of the future she’d said she was. How they’d wrapped their arms around each other, both certain of the glorious forgiveness that awaited them in the future.

It had been wrong to hope. It had been wrong to dream.

But was it wrong, now?

“I’m pregnant,” Sophie breathed, not loud enough for anyone to hear but Katrina.

Katrina’s cheek twitched. For a long, horrible minute, nothing else happened. It was as though time had stopped. As though they were frozen.

And then, Katrina said, “Not this again.” She turned on her heel and stormed down the hallway, turning out of sight. She left Sophie impossibly alone, both hands over her abdomen. Only when Patrick came out a few minutes later did Sophie remember where she was.

“Come on,” Patrick urged. “Let’s get you home.”

Chapter Thirteen

Agatha's doctor set her release date for February 14th, Valentine's Day. The hallways were decorated with paper and plastic hearts, all shimmering, and nurses and family members carried bouquets down the hallways. Katrina reached for Grant's hand as they neared Agatha's hospital room, and he laced his fingers through hers. "It's going to be great," Grant assured her.

"I hope you're right," Katrina breathed.

Already, Agatha was dressed, her makeup perfected, her hair in perfectly kept curls in a sort of dome around her head. She sat in her wheelchair, chatting amicably with one of the nurses as though they'd known one another all their lives. It took Agatha a good thirty seconds to turn her head and acknowledge Katrina at all.

"This is my daughter," Agatha said to the nurse.

"We've met many times, Mrs. Whittaker," the nurse reminded her. "Katrina has been here almost every day since you came! What a wonderful daughter she is."

Katrina's stomach tightened into knots as the nurse said goodbye to Agatha and retreated back on her rotation. Agatha crossed her hands in her lap and said, "She's a very kind woman." She said it distractedly, her eyes to the window.

The doctor appeared a few minutes later to say goodbye and shake Katrina's and Grant's hands.

"We're going to miss you around here," he said to Agatha. "But don't come back soon, okay?"

Agatha giggled flirtatiously. "I'm off to the old folks' home, Doctor. Did you hear?"

"They won't know what to do with you there!" the doctor said.

Katrina gripped the back of the wheelchair, anxious to get out of there as soon as possible. "Thank you for all your help, Doctor," she chimed in. "We're so grateful she's out of the woods."

If she wasn't mistaken, she thought she caught Agatha rolling her eyes.

Grant hurried out in front of them to grab the car and pick them up. Agatha sniffed and said, "Terrible day, isn't it?" And it was. The temperature was twenty-two, but the wind chill made it feel like fifteen. Snow was coming sideways from an ominous stretch of dark clouds. "But I imagine the old folks will have a Valentine's celebration? A silly one, surely." Agatha sniffed. "I wonder if they'll even give us food we have to chew."

Katrina sighed. "Mom. The food there is divine. Grant and I tried it out a few weeks ago to make sure. You know we're watching out for you. Right?"

Delicately, Agatha reached up behind her and patted Katrina's hand on the handle of the wheelchair. It was such a subtle act of love, one that Katrina hadn't anticipated. She felt a sudden urge to burst into tears.

With Agatha seated comfortably in the passenger seat of the car, Katrina rode in back and watched the snow. Agatha flicked through radio stations, displeased with the selection and eager to tell Grant how horrible she thought modern music was.

"Music was the best when I was young," Agatha said. "The fifties! When Elvis was still something special!"

"I can't imagine watching Elvis's rise to fame like that," Grant said. "And the Beatles!"

"I didn't care for the Beatles," Agatha said, sniffing. "I was a wife and mother by then. What time did I have for them?"

"Of course," Grant said.

"It was a different time," Agatha went on. "By the time I was Nellie's and Frankie's age, I had two babies!"

"We did, too," Grant said, catching Katrina's eye in the mirror.

"I suppose it's not bad," Agatha continued. "Young women have more time to figure things out."

Katrina puffed out her cheeks. If she'd told her mother she needed "more time to figure things out" forty years ago, Agatha would have said she was a fool.

“Sophie came by a few times this week,” Agatha said. “I told her again she can use the house for her wedding.”

Katrina winced. Just hearing Sophie’s name felt like a dagger through her heart. In truth, she hadn’t seen her once since the incident at the hospital a month ago. Katrina could still hear what she’d said to Sophie, ringing in her ears. “Not this again. Not this again.”

She’d spoken to Sophie without love. With judgment. With anger. Katrina still hadn’t found the nerve to apologize. She supposed it had something to do with the fact that she still couldn’t trust her. Too much had happened. There had already been a pregnancy. History was repeating itself, and it terrified Katrina. It felt as though they’d jumped on the same horrible roller coaster. It wasn’t clear if they would make it to the other side this time.

“I told you, Mom,” Katrina said, not unkindly. “Sophie can’t get married there. We’re selling the house.”

Agatha pretended not to hear. She remained quiet until they pulled into the parking lot of the nursing home, where Grant stalled by the door to allow Katrina to scramble out, unfold the wheelchair, and help her mother shift gently into it. She then turned the wheelchair around and headed inside.

The nursing home had maybe three times the number of Valentine’s decorations as the hospital. Hearts were strung around every surface; they hung from ceiling fans and along fireplaces. Residents were decorated with hearts around their necks or pinned to their chests. Both regular and low-sugar candy was on offer in several little bowls. As they strolled past, Grant grabbed a handful of Hershey’s kisses and winked at Katrina.

“You’re still a kid,” Katrina said in a laugh-whisper.

One of the main nurses led them to Agatha’s new residence. An apartment-style home with a kitchenette, a large bathroom with a rail, a television, two sofas, two armchairs, and an enormous bookshelf in which Katrina herself had aligned more than two hundred of Agatha’s books from home. Several of them she’d taken from her father’s study—including the ones he’d written himself.

Agatha stared at the collection of Calvin’s books for a little while, then reached out to slide her finger along one of the spines. Her eyes sparkled with tears.

“We think you’ll be happy here,” the head nurse told Agatha, clasping her hands. “If you need anything, Agatha, you have to tell us. It’s our job to make you happy.”

“It’s time for coffee and cake,” the nurse announced. “Everyone gathers in the main room to eat and chat. There’s tea and low-sugar cake for those watching carbs and caffeine. We can accommodate anything.” She smiled at Katrina. “Family members are welcome, too.”

Agatha looked fearful, not unlike Sophie on her first day of kindergarten. It was clear that Katrina had to push her a little. She had to help her feel comfortable.

“Let’s go, Mom,” Katrina said. “I’d love a slice of cake.”

“You aren’t twisting my arm,” Grant joked.

Agatha insisted on doing her makeup another time before they went to the common room. Katrina and Grant sat quietly in the main room as Agatha retreated into the bathroom to apply lipstick, eyeliner, and eye shadow. You couldn’t see any of her bruises when she emerged. It was miraculous.

Katrina wheeled Agatha to the common room, where, twenty-five people were already stationed around the room, eating tiny slices of carrot and chocolate cake, sipping coffee and tea, and chatting. Just from the doorway, Katrina recognized upward of fifteen people. Agatha’s eyes brightened.

“Henry?” she cried as they drew closer. “I had no idea you were here!”

The man named Henry smiled mischievously. “Agatha Whittaker? I haven’t seen you in ten years. Where have you been?”

“I should ask you the same,” Agatha teased. “I assumed you left the island with that city wife of yours.”

Henry shook his head. “She went back to the city without me, I’m afraid.”

“Oh. I’m sorry to hear,” Agatha said.

Henry cackled and slapped his thigh. “I was happy to see her go! Good riddance is what I said the day she left. She took a good deal of my inheritance, but it was worth it to never have to say her name again.”

Agatha grinned. It was as though they were a couple of kids on the playground, cracking jokes.

“Gosh, how long has it been since we lost Calvin?” Henry asked.

“It’s been twenty-five years,” Agatha said wistfully.

“That long?”

“It’s hard to believe,” Agatha agreed. “But you know how Calvin was. That personality shone a light over everything. He still lives in everything I do. And I swear I can still hear his voice, echoing through our house.”

“I think that laugh is responsible for taking out one of my eardrums,”

Henry said, pointing at his right ear. “That Calvin! A wild man. One of a kind.”

Katrina’s heart thumped. This was the way older people spoke about the past, as though it had all been lined with gold.

Grant disappeared to grab them two slices of cake—carrot for Katrina and chocolate for himself. Katrina and Grant sat together and listened to the rhythm of Agatha’s conversation as she easily fell into the fold. Everyone was pleased to see her. Everyone was happy to agree that Calvin Whittaker had been the greatest man to ever live. Agatha was over the moon.

Halfway through coffee and cake hour, Grant squeezed Katrina’s thigh and whispered, “Why don’t we leave your mother to her devices? We can come back tomorrow.”

Katrina was grateful he’d made that decision for her. She’d felt trapped, wanting to make sure her mother was okay.

Katrina and Grant kissed Agatha goodbye and waved as they exited the room. Moments after they turned the corner, Katrina heard her mother.

“Isn’t she gorgeous? She’s my pride and joy. Married a Coleman, you know,” Agatha said.

Katrina had never heard her mother speak of her like this. She stalled and pressed her hand across her chest.

It was just Agatha’s way, she knew. She never gave compliments to Katrina’s face, but her love was always there.

It just wasn’t always easy to feel it.

Back at home, Grant urged Katrina to rest. “I have a surprise for us later,” he said. “Be dressed and ready to go by seven-thirty.”

Katrina’s heart jumped. “That’s vague! What on earth should I wear?”

“Something nice, of course,” Grant said, wrapping one of her curls around his finger. “I’ll be wearing a suit.”

Katrina’s eyes filled with tears. Through the stress of securing her mother’s spot at the nursing home and boxing everything up at the Whittaker House, she’d hardly considered Valentine’s Day at all. Grant was thoughtful like that. He picked up the slack.

Katrina decided on a dark red dress with a tight-fitting bodice and a long skirt with a slit up the side. She did her makeup with expert precision, remembering what her mother had taught her as a teenager.

Absently, she wondered if her father had ever remembered to take Agatha out for Valentine’s Day. It stood to reason he’d been too drunk. Katrina’s

heart felt bruised at the thought. Twenty-five years after his death, Agatha continued to sing his praises. She'd given him a tremendous love that he might not have deserved.

Katrina appeared downstairs right on time. Grant was in his suit, cologne a small wave around him, and his hair was styled with gel. He took one look at her and placed his hand over his chest.

"I don't know what I did right in this life to have you," he said, kissing her gently on the cheek so as not to mess up her makeup. "And I don't know if I deserve you. But I'm so glad I married you."

Grant drove them out to the Italian restaurant located alongside the bluffs. A sharp draft of wind rushed through their coats as they clambered up the walkway, but the orange lights in the windows beckoned, drawing them toward smells of oregano, garlic, and tomato. Katrina nestled herself against Grant until they entered the warmth of the restaurant, where a hostess took their coats and led them to a two-top with a flickering candle and a one-page menu.

"The menu changes every weekend," Grant explained. "But today, they have an exclusive Valentine's Day menu."

They ordered Primitivo for the table, plus antipasto, burrata, ravioli, gnocchi, and a chocolate soufflé. Between courses, they held hands over the table and alternated between telling funny stories, speaking wistfully of the past, and making plans for the future. Katrina thought it was finally time to go on a wine tour of California. Grant said he wanted to go on a sailing expedition together. After their first glass of wine, they decided to do both.

"What the heck! We're retired. We can do whatever we want," Grant said.

Katrina folded her lips. For the millionth time that month, she remembered the baby.

"What's up?" Grant asked, taking a sip of wine.

"I have to tell you something," Katrina breathed.

"Okay." Grant's eyes echoed his confusion.

"Sophie's pregnant again," Katrina said, bracing herself.

But immediately, Grant's face transformed. His cheeks were pink, and his eyes were filled with laughter. "Our Sophie? Pregnant?" He clapped his hands, and a moment later, the server arrived, asking if they needed anything. Grant apologized and said everything was fantastic.

"You don't look very happy about it," Grant said, his smile fading.

Katrina pressed her lips together. Sophie had told her about the pregnancy a month ago. This was the longest she'd ever kept a secret from Grant.

"I'm worried," Katrina breathed. "I just don't know if she can handle it."

Grant's face was stony. He took both of her hands. "We have to trust her, Kat. We have to help her trust herself. And the only way I know to do that is to show her more love than she's ever felt."

"We've always shown her love," Katrina protested.

"I know we've made mistakes as parents."

Katrina furrowed her brow.

Grant smiled. "We're not as bad as our parents," he reminded her. "But we have to own up to our own faults. Otherwise, history will repeat itself, again and again."

Katrina took a sip of wine. The server returned with their second course, a burrata with gorgeous, homemade bread. As Katrina ripped a slice of bread apart, she blurted, "How did you get so wise, Grant?"

Grant burst into laughter. "Baby, I've never been wise. Not once in my entire life. I only know how to love my family. And I don't even do that very well."

Katrina touched his hand. "Your love is the purest love I've ever known."

And as they gazed at one another over the flickering candle, Katrina recognized the truth in what Grant said. She had to make peace within herself and with the past. And she had to find a way to heal—for Sophie and her new grandbaby's sake.

Maybe this one was really coming. Maybe history wouldn't repeat itself. She had to keep her mind open to the possibility of change.

Maybe that was the worst symptom of addiction, she thought now. The idea that nothing could ever change and that you couldn't outrun your circumstances or yourself. You had to turn to something else.

"What are you thinking about?" Grant asked.

"I'm just hoping," Katrina offered, her voice cracking. "I'm hoping so hard that it isn't too late."

Chapter Fourteen

The mid-February doctor's appointment revealed a startling discovery that Sophie wasn't entirely sure she was ready for. Finally, it was confirmed that Sophie was three months pregnant. She'd crossed the invisible boundary from first trimester to second trimester, which, for many, meant the pregnancy was viable. Ultimately, a baby would be born at the end of nine months. Patrick looked dizzy with excitement. He held Sophie's hand as the technician spoke eloquently about the growing fetus in Sophie's belly, about Sophie's diet, and what to expect next. Sophie blinked back tears and gripped Patrick's hand tighter until he winced with pain. Still, he didn't complain. Not the way Jared would have.

It was three days after Valentine's Day, and a bright February sun glimmered across the snow and ice-slick rooftops. Sophie and Patrick walked hand in hand toward Patrick's truck, thrumming with excitement.

Patrick was delicate about the conversation. Since they had told each other everything, Sophie didn't have to tell him again that she'd already carried a baby past the three-month mark. Still, something about the glint in his eyes told her this time would be fine. Their love was stronger than anything. They would make it.

Patrick drove them to his apartment building, where his brothers finished packing up and loading the last of Patrick's things. With nearly a year of sobriety under their belts, they'd decided to throw out the rules and move in together. The baby was coming. Sobriety and love formed the glue that held them together. "It's a better foundation than most couples have," Sam had said, assuring Sophie it would be all right.

Derek clapped Patrick on the back when he announced they were having a baby. Brent, the oldest, bear-hugged the two of them, then turned to hug Sophie gently, handling her as though she were breakable.

“Moving in, marriage, and a baby?” Derek howled. “You two know how to party!”

Sophie cackled. Tears sprang to her eyes. A small voice in the back of her head called out, fearful about announcing it so early, reminding her of what had happened before. But then again, three months was when you were “supposed” to tell everyone. And Derek and Brent were so joyful and exuberant. Up until last year, they’d thought Patrick was a lost cause, just as Sophie (and her mother) had thought of herself.

With the moving van loaded up, Sophie and Patrick led the troop back to Sophie’s house, where Derek, Brent, and Patrick unloaded the boxes and lined them up in the living room and foyer. It was incredible to see Patrick’s things aligning with hers, to watch in real time as their lives became one. As they worked, Sam pulled up outside and hurried in, carrying a big container of lasagna.

“I figured you wouldn’t want to cook on moving day,” Sam said, hugging Sophie close.

Sophie thanked Sam and led her into the kitchen, where she pre-heated the oven. She felt slightly frantic but wanted the news to come from her rather than Derek. When she turned to meet Sam’s eyes, she blurted it out.

“I’m pregnant. Three months.”

Sam’s jaw dropped. “Pregnant!” she repeated. She threw herself forward and wrapped her arms around Sophie, then jumped up and down like a teenager. “My goodness, Soph! Congratulations!”

Sophie pressed a napkin over her eyes to mop up her tears. “I can’t stop crying,” she explained, wadding the napkin up in her hand and laughing at herself.

“Who else have you told?” Sam asked, wrapping her hair in a ponytail that she immediately let fall again. Her eyes were wide as saucers.

“We just told the brothers,” Sophie said, nodding toward the foyer, where Brent, Derek, and Patrick continued to celebrate. “And you. And, well.” Sophie bit her lower lip. “My mother knows, too.”

Sam wrinkled her nose, sensing something amiss. “How did she handle that?”

“How well does my mother handle anything?”

Sam sighed and crossed her arms over her chest. Sophie watched her face for some sign of what to do, a map for how to handle this. Sam had worked with hundreds of addicts and their families over the years. She'd helped many reunite and see eye to eye after horrendous backstories.

Sophie knew she didn't have it half as bad as most Sam had worked with. Katrina resented Sophie's addiction—she didn't trust her, and she'd spoken cruelly. But that was nothing compared to some of the things that Sam saw on a daily basis.

"I can't imagine she won't want to get to know her grandchild," Sam offered. "You remember how Aunt Katrina was when Frankie and Nellie were born? Ida basically had to kick her out of the house sometimes."

Sophie shifted nervously at the memory. It hadn't been so long after her first pregnancy, and watching Katrina dote on her granddaughters like that had felt like a knife through the heart. "You can try again," Ida had told her, urging her along. But by then, Sophie had been heavily using again. Her body felt alien to her. She didn't want to ask more of it than she already was.

"But do I really want a woman like that to know my child?" Sophie asked, her voice cracking. "A woman who makes me feel so small. A woman who refuses to forgive me?"

Sophie's throat tightened, and she found it difficult to breathe. Was she being unfair? Before Sam could respond, Patrick entered the kitchen and wrapped his arms around Sophie, calling out to his brothers. "Pizza? The place on 2nd Avenue?" And Brent and Derek were hollering back, "Yes! Tell the delivery driver to bring all the pizzas he can fit in the car! We need to feast!"

Sophie laughed and raised her chin to kiss Patrick. His eyes shone. She wanted to remember how he looked at her right now, when he shared their good news with his family. She needed to remember that although she'd been a dark smudge on her family's life, she'd been a bright light in Patrick's. And he in hers, too.

The delivery driver brought ten pizzas to Sophie and Patrick's place—greasy, cheese-laden slabs of pepperoni, sausage, anchovy, vegetarian, and alfredo. They lined them up on the large coffee table in the living room before the crackling electric fire and feasted on Sophie's plates. As she passed them around, she remembered having been gifted them by Jared's mother after the wedding. It was funny, living in this house for so long. Everything was a memory. Everything threatened to jump out and remind her

of something she didn't want to think about.

"What baby names are you considering?" Derek asked, then took a large bite of sausage pizza. "If it isn't too early to ask."

Sophie and Patrick eyed one another and laughed. The baby had been such an abstract idea. Naming that baby made it much more real—in a terrifying and wonderful way.

"I know," Brent said, clapping his hands. "What about Merlin?"

Sophie threw her head back with laughter. "Merlin?" she cried.

"What?" Brent demanded, clearly teasing them. "Merlin is only one of the most powerful wizards of all time. Don't you want that for your baby?"

"I think it's especially a girl's name," Sam joked, winking at Sophie.

Sophie laughed sarcastically. "Great idea, Brent. We'll put it on the list."

"What do you like, Derek?" Patrick asked, sipping his Coke.

Derek rubbed his beard and glanced at Sam lovingly. "I was always partial to the name Samantha. Sam for short."

Sam rolled her eyes. "You're such a flirt, Derek."

Sophie cackled and placed her hand on Patrick's thigh. "Maybe we'll just come up with the name on the day she or he is born?"

"Yeah," Patrick said. "We can see what the baby looks like and decide from there."

"A friend of mine couldn't name her baby for days when she did that," Sam said. "She went back and forth and finally settled on Frank."

"Frank?" Derek, Brent, and Patrick said the name in unison and cackled.

"Imagine spending four days thinking about a name just to end up with Frank," Sophie said, her eyes filling with tears of laughter.

"I'm just saying," Sam said with a shrug. "You have to watch out. Immediately after the birth, you'll be awash with so many hormones. There's no telling what you'll do or what name you'll come up with."

Sophie's smile was so big that her cheeks ached. Patrick wrapped his arm around her shoulders and tugged her into him, kissing her on the cheek. Sophie closed her eyes and tried to imagine that fateful day when she would finally become a mother. She imagined herself and Patrick squabbling over a name. She imagined feeling like the luckiest mother in the world.

"All mothers think they're giving their babies the best name," Sam offered. "When I named Darcy and Rachelle, I was pretty sure I was a genius."

Everyone laughed appreciatively.

“They’re great names,” Derek said, raising his Coke.

“It’s a lot of pressure,” Sam admitted. “The name sets them up for the rest of their lives.”

Sophie stacked her hands over her abdomen, considering the collection of cells in her womb—an entire, nameless person who would be her future. Sam was right. It was a lot of pressure to name a person. But she wanted to be the sort of woman to take that on without fear. She wanted to be like those mothers suddenly strong enough to lift vehicles off their babies or fight bears. There was a strange magic to motherhood. And Sophie had never been allowed to experience it. Not until now.

Chapter Fifteen

Twenty-Two Years Ago

Jared's alarm blared at six-thirty every morning. It rattled through Sophie's dreams, yanking her into the chilly black morning. A dutiful fiancée, she padded downstairs while Jared showered to make a big pot of coffee and breakfast: eggs, sausages, and toast. They were young, twenty and twenty-one, their metabolisms raging, and they treated every meal like a feast.

As Sophie slid Jared's breakfast plate in front of him, he arched his brow. Sophie's stomach dropped. She studied the eggs, the sausages, and the coffee, searching for what she might have done wrong. Jared liked everything to be made in a very particular way. If she did one thing wrong, it could throw off his entire day—a day in which he was required to attend meetings and impress the right people. And Sophie wanted to be the kind of fiancée and wife that set up everything just right.

"What is it?" Sophie asked, her heartbeat quickening.

Jared sipped his coffee. "Baby, it's just the eggs. Look." He gestured vaguely with his fork at a bit of the whites, which were runnier than he liked them.

"Oh! I didn't even notice. I'll just redo them. Not a problem." Sophie's cheeks burned. Swiftly, she turned on her heel, opened the fridge, and grabbed two more eggs from the carton. But as she hurried to the skillet, she

dropped one of them. The yolk splattered across the floor.

“Calm down,” Jared ordered, his voice like a spike. “You’re acting like a fool.”

Sophie’s shoulders quaked. “I’m so sorry, Jared.” She spoke to the floor, too terrified to look up at him.

Silence filled the kitchen. Sophie didn’t dare breathe.

“Baby, it doesn’t matter.” Jared smiled, but there was a crack in its formation as though he were hiding his true anger. He got up from the kitchen table, walked over to her, and wrapped his arms around her so that his hands were pressed over her pregnant belly. She was now three and a half months along, and she’d begun to mention the fact of her pregnancy casually in conversation, perhaps as a way of getting accustomed to the idea herself.

“Just try not to do it again next time,” Jared said sweetly, lining her neck and shoulder with kisses. “We can’t waste eggs across the kitchen floor. I shouldn’t have to tell you that.”

“I know, baby,” Sophie whispered.

“I’ll just eat these ones,” Jared said, returning to his stool happily and digging into the egg whites he’d previously been disgusted by.

Sophie blinked at her plate of dry toast and decided she wasn’t hungry. Her belly fluttered with anxiety.

After Jared left that morning, Sophie scrubbed the kitchen counters and the floor, spinning with adrenaline. It was always after she made a mistake with Jared—bad breakfast, bad cleaning, bad conversation—that she thought most about using again. She remembered it easily: how she’d drifted away from reality with one glass of wine or a pill. It had been so simple. In that way, she’d struggled to understand why everyone didn’t use it all the time. Life was difficult as it was. Didn’t they know about the escape hatch?

But no. Sophie was clean now. She knew her life would be better without the pills. She had clearer thoughts. She was healthy-looking. Her eyes were white rather than bloodshot.

Sophie hadn’t gotten sober because of the baby. She’d gotten sober because she’d wanted to be good enough for Jared—and she’d recognized that drinking and using drugs made her sloppy and weak. When she quit everything cold turkey, Jared’s love for her intensified. When they’d gotten engaged and pregnant, Sophie had thought *that’s it, I’m finally free*. I finally have a reason never to use again.

Later that morning, Sophie’s mother called. Sophie was napping, but she

answered on the fourth ring, grateful for somebody to talk to. These long days alone were lonely. She'd considered getting a job, but Jared insisted she stay home. "I want to take care of you," he'd said.

"Hey, honey! Do you have plans this afternoon? I thought we could go to that little sandwich place, then check out the baby clothes across the street."

Sophie smiled into the receiver. She could picture her mother in the kitchen of her childhood home, beaming. Her excitement for Sophie's baby (and Sophie's sobriety) had made Sophie her "favorite" child for the time being. For Sophie's entire life, she'd known Ida to be the favorite—so it was nice, for once, to be thought of for things as ordinary as lunch and a bit of shopping.

"I'd love to," Sophie said.

Katrina picked Sophie up at twelve thirty. In the car, she hugged Sophie and prattled on about what was going on at home. Apparently, Sophie's father hadn't had good luck trading on the stock market that week, which affected the mood in the house.

"Of course, your father never stays in one of those moods for long," Katrina said as she parked the car outside the café. "He's always one good meal from returning to his normal self."

Sophie smiled, thinking of Jared and the egg incident from that morning. She hadn't kept a record of how many times that had happened, but it was beginning to stack up. She told herself once the baby came, Jared would stop sweating the small stuff. He'd laugh about a fallen egg.

Inside the café, Katrina ordered an egg sandwich with chips, and Sophie went for a BLT with fries.

"And a salad," Katrina ordered as the server sped away. "Nutrients for the little one."

Sophie waved her hand. "Don't worry about that. I'm obsessive about vitamins and minerals. I make a smoothie almost every day."

Katrina's eyes glowed. "Your father and I are just so proud of you, honey. Look at the life you've built for yourself."

Sophie's cheek twitched. The server came with their tea, and Sophie blew at the steam. How many times, when she'd been using, had she craved her mother's pride? It had seemed like the furthest thing in the world from her. Unattainable. "We're all disappointments," one of her druggy friends had said one night in Boston, laughing. "Not a single one of our mothers loves us."

“You know,” Katrina said, folding her lips, “I feel I wasn’t honest with you and your sister about my own upbringing. Perhaps you’ve gleaned things here and there. Children always know far more than we think they do. You’ll find that out all too soon.” Katrina closed her eyes for a moment as though she wasn’t sure she wanted to keep going. “My father’s alcohol use was never healthy. And it significantly altered just about everything in my life growing up. He wasn’t himself after a few drinks—and he used to terrorize my brother, my mother, and me.” Katrina’s eyes darkened at the memory.

Sophie shook her head. “I knew something was wrong. But I never knew how bad it was.”

Katrina raised her shoulders. “I wanted to hide it. I wanted to pretend it wasn’t happening. But it was always a present horror—until he died.” Katrina sighed. “And I’m just so grateful, Sophie, that you’ve recognized your own patterns. That you’ve pushed yourself to be better. To be a loving wife and mother. To put your family and yourself before your addictions.”

Sophie’s eyes filled with tears. Again, Jared’s face from that morning floated in her mind’s eye. Hating her. Hating everything she stood for. Loving his power over her.

Maybe it was all in her head. Maybe he really did love her enough. Maybe it would all be fine.

“Thank you, Mom,” Sophie whispered.

“Of course, honey. I’m just so glad we can talk like this,” Katrina said. “Out in the open.”

Sophie sipped her tea. Would her mother be open to hearing what was actually going on? Could they talk, woman to woman? She decided to try.

“It’s scary getting married,” Sophie began delicately. “I sometimes wonder, like, is this the right guy? Forever?” She tried to laugh. “How does anyone know?”

Katrina tilted her head with surprise. “I imagine most people have doubts before their wedding day. I was sure, totally sure. But a few friends verbalized their fears to me before walking down the aisle. It’s normal.”

Sophie furrowed her brow. How could she get her mother to acknowledge her specific fears?

“Sometimes Jared says things to me that catch me off guard. That makes me wonder if he really sees me. I don’t know if that makes sense?”

Katrina waved her hand. “Of course. But you know how men can be. He’s distracted. He has a baby coming, for crying out loud. And I’m sure he’s

just as scared about getting married as you are. Probably more so. You should have seen how green your father's face was on our wedding day. It was even greener the day Ida was born. Women are just better at handling big life changes like that. We were built for them."

It was already clear Katrina wanted to sweep Sophie's worries under the rug. She could hardly hear them over her own excitement for Sophie's future. Finally, Sophie had aligned herself with Katrina—with the way Katrina had always lived.

"I just hope Jared doesn't get even meaner," Sophie offered with a wry laugh. It was a Hail Mary.

"Jared? Mean?" Katrina sounded incredulous. "Oh, honey. You've always been too sensitive. I'm sure he isn't being mean at all."

Sophie's cheeks were hot. She drank the rest of her tea, feeling a strange sense of loss. She'd thought Katrina had opened up an honest dialogue between them. But it was clear, even now, that she was alone.

"Jared loves you," Katrina said happily, patting Sophie's hand. "You're carrying his baby! He's going to protect you. He will be there for you every day for the rest of your life. I know things are probably strange right now. You still have morning sickness, right?"

"It comes and goes."

"There you go," Katrina said. "When you feel sick, it's easy to doubt everything."

Sophie's heart thumped.

"You're going to be so happy, Sophie," Katrina said. "Mark my words. This time next year, we'll sit here at this café with your little babe and laugh about your previous worries. That's how it always goes." Katrina took a long sip of tea, then added, "You just have to keep yourself sober, honey. If you do that, everything will fall into place."

After their sandwiches came to the table, Sophie excused herself to the bathroom and allowed herself to cry into her hands for one minute. Just one. Then, she mopped herself up, practiced her smile in the mirror, and returned to the table to talk about the upcoming wedding, how many infant outfits they should actually purchase, and when they should have the baby shower. There was so much to plan, so much to be happy about. And Katrina was probably right about everything. Sophie needed to stop worrying. She needed to fixate on the positives—the baby, her engagement, her new life in Nantucket.

"You'll be a gorgeous bride, Sophie," Katrina said as they walked from

the café, giving her hand a light squeeze. “Back when you were a teenager, I was terrified that we wouldn’t get to enjoy these beautiful family moments together, you know? I was terrified we would spend our lives apart.”

At that moment, Sophie resolved to be good, kind, and agreeable. She decided to build a life her mother could be proud of. She had to fixate on this during moments of profound fear and unhappiness at home. She could always clean up a broken egg. She could always cry in the bathroom alone. It was fine.

Chapter Sixteen

Present Day

Katrina's birth year was 1958, which put her firmly in the baby boomer generation. And just like most others her age, she not only resisted therapy but she fully demonized it, assuming it was something for the weak-minded or very, very sick. "Good people deal with their own problems," she'd said many times. "They don't look for outside help."

Why, then, was Katrina seated in a therapist's office? She crossed and uncrossed her ankles, staring out the office window as an early March rain spat past the window. The therapist, a woman named Beth Waters, had stepped out to speak to her secretary, leaving Katrina to doubt every decision she'd made to bring her here today. By the time Beth breezed back in, smiling warmly, Katrina's heartbeat was doing overtime. She wanted to run out to the parking lot and drive back home as quickly as she could.

"Sorry about that," Beth apologized, taking a seat across from Katrina and adjusting her glasses on the bridge of her nose.

"That's all right," Katrina said. She blinked at the therapist, then turned her attention to the four framed university degrees on Beth's wall. Katrina was impressed. She was also, strangely, jealous. Many years ago, Beth Waters had made a decision about her life and committed herself to a goal. What had Katrina's life goal been? The answer came in an instant. She'd

wanted to be a good wife and a good mother. It had pleased her completely. She'd adored every minute. But she'd also failed in numerous aspects. Sophie, for one. And now, she still couldn't bring herself to apologize to Sophie. She couldn't stare at her own mistakes too long for fear they would destroy her.

That was the reason she was here, she supposed. She'd kept it a secret from everyone. Even Grant.

"I'm sorry," Katrina stuttered. "I don't know how to start."

"That's all right. There's no real correct way to begin," Beth assured her. "You can't mess up."

Katrina's nose twitched.

"Why don't you start by telling me a little bit about your life right now?" Beth suggested.

"Okay. Well." Katrina swallowed. "My daughter is pregnant. And she's getting married."

"That's reason to celebrate," Beth said.

"You would think so. But Sophie? Sophie is a very, very sensitive person," Katrina said, her eyes misting. "Up until recently, she abused drugs and alcohol. And now that she's sober, I feel she's rushing into marriage and children. I've seen her do it before. And I've said some things to her. Things I can't take back."

Beth nodded. "Do you want to have a relationship with Sophie?"

"More than anything!" Katrina cried, then clapped her hand over her mouth. "I'm sorry."

"It's a very complicated situation," Beth assured her. "As a mother, you're programmed to want to help your daughter. And it sounds like she's fought your help."

"She's fought me at every turn," Katrina offered, returning her gaze to the angry March afternoon outside the window. After a long pause, she added, "And I know it's my fault. They're my genes."

"The addiction?"

Katrina nodded and blinked back tears. "My father. And my brother. But my brother had the good sense to get away from all of us and start a new life."

"Where did he go?"

"First New York. Then California."

"Do you resent him for running away?"

Katrina closed her eyes and sifted through her emotions. She was surprised to find resentment for Norm, caught up in her pride for him. Why wasn't his Nantucket family good enough for him? Why had he left her all alone to deal with this mess?

"I'm such a typical case," Katrina offered. "Family trauma. Difficult relationship with my child. I must be so boring for you."

Beth remained quiet. Katrina opened her eyes to find Beth leaning forward in her chair.

"What would you say your goal is?" Beth asked. "Here in therapy?"

Katrina raised her eyebrows. Only one answer was obvious.

"I want to have a relationship with my daughter," Katrina whispered.

"And you need to overcome the past in order to build that relationship," Beth finished.

Katrina nodded, and her throat swelled.

"Okay," Beth said, clasping her hands on her lap. "Let's get started."

* * *

After therapy, Katrina drove to the Whittaker House to meet with an antiquarian. She'd hired him to go through the bigger, more expensive items in the house. He needed to price everything for the upcoming auction. She wanted to make sure they got their money's worth.

The antiquarian arrived ten minutes after she did. Katrina felt strangely loose and happy after her therapy session, as though part of the weight on her chest had been removed, and she found herself cracking jokes with the antiquarian as they moved through the house.

"This is exquisite stuff," he said, making a note on his clipboard as they inspected Katrina's father's old desk.

"Growing up, I had no idea how special it was," Katrina said.

"And you aren't going to save any of it for yourself?"

Katrina raised her shoulders. "I just don't have the space for it. My husband and I have our own style."

The antiquarian didn't need to know the truth—that she thought of these items as partially haunted. That she could feel her father's soul in his desk. That she could remember very dark things about her past as she walked the halls. All the antiquarians saw were incredibly pricey items, gorgeous

wooden carvings, ornate paintings, and stylish sculptures.

Katrina walked the antiquarian downstairs. “We’ll see you on the thirty-first?” she said brightly.

“Looking forward,” the antiquarian said. “It’s not every day Nantucket has such an incredible auction. Happy to be involved.”

As the antiquarian eased his car out of the driveway, another familiar car took its place. Estelle Coleman waved and jumped from her vehicle, tightening her coat around her neck as she ambled through the growing darkness.

“What are you doing here?” Katrina called, smiling. She hadn’t realized how much she’d dread being alone in that house until the antiquarian had reached for his car keys.

“I was over at Sam’s,” Estelle said, “and thought I’d drive by to see if you were here.”

“Come in,” Katrina ordered. “It’s miserable out here.”

Estelle scurried inside, removed her coat and boots, and fluffed up her hair, which was damp from the rain.

“Who was that man?” Estelle asked, pointing a thumb behind her shoulder.

“The antiquarian for the auction,” Katrina explained, leading Estelle into the kitchen to put a kettle on. “He’s going to advertise the auction for us, too. He thinks some of his friends in the industry will come from far and wide to buy some of this stuff. And those who can’t travel will be there virtually.”

Estelle slid onto a kitchen chair. “Virtually? Wow. Isn’t that something?”

“Modern technology meets antiques,” Katrina tried to joke.

Estelle folded her lips. Katrina studied her face, sensing something amiss. Estelle had just been at Sam’s place, after all. And Sam and Sophie were like two peas in a pod these days. It stood to reason Estelle and Sam had spoken about Katrina and Sophie’s feud.

“It must be complicated,” Estelle offered now, “selling your family home.”

Katrina shrugged. “Everyone assumes that. But it’s not quite true.”

Estelle’s eyes sparkled with intrigue.

Katrina wasn’t sure what had come over her. Perhaps it was runoff from going to the therapist. She was willing to talk about everything.

“Even now, in the year 2024, I still hear echoes of my father screaming drunkenly upstairs,” Katrina went on, stuttering. “I can still remember the

terror. I feel it in my stomach.”

Estelle furrowed her brow.

“Sophie and Ida have wonderful memories here,” Katrina went on. “And for that, I’m grateful. But as far as I’m concerned, this place could be destroyed tomorrow. I wouldn’t care at all.”

The kettle screamed, and Katrina turned to pour them two mugs.

“You know,” Estelle began tentatively, “it just occurred to me that we’ve never talked about this. And I don’t know why.”

Katrina placed a mug in front of Estelle and perked up her ears. “We’re from that generation,” Katrina said. “The one that doesn’t talk about our problems.”

Estelle laughed wryly and blew at the steam over her tea. “My father was an alcoholic, too. Did I ever tell you that?”

Katrina’s heart stopped beating. She gaped at Estelle. “Oh, my goodness. Estelle. I didn’t know.”

Katrina suddenly felt like the worst kind of fool.

“He left after my mother was diagnosed with cancer,” Estelle went on. “His addiction no longer fit into our lives because our lives got much more serious in an instant. And yeah. If I’m honest with myself, I hardly ever missed him when he was gone.”

Katrina blinked back tears. Of course, she’d read Estelle’s Christmas novel, which included an alcoholic father. But it had never occurred to her that Estelle’s father had been the same as hers.

Katrina ached. Estelle could have been her support system. But they were old now. Too much damage had been done.

“None of your children,” Katrina stuttered, remembering. “None of them struggle like your father. And my father.” She paused, then added, “And Sophie.”

“And for that, I’m grateful,” Estelle said. She paused for a long time before continuing. “But remember, Katrina, addiction isn’t a choice. It’s an illness. Sophie got a bad hand. And right now, she’s doing her best with that hand. The girl is a success story. She’s remarkable.”

Katrina was unable to look at Estelle. She sat down across from her and gazed out the window as the night swallowed the gray day. According to gossip, Sophie and Patrick’s wedding was to be held at the beginning of April—only a month away. She didn’t have much time to make amends.

“I do know that,” Katrina offered. Tears swam down her cheeks. “I just

can't help but think too much has happened between us. I've said too many horrible things."

"Katrina, it's not too late," Estelle said softly.

Katrina forced her eyes back to Estelle's. "How do you know?" she asked, feeling like a child.

"Because Sophie is a bright and loving woman," Estelle said. "She knows how much pain you've been through. And she knows that love means forgiving and forgiving, again and again."

Katrina's throat nearly closed.

"But we never forgave our fathers," she pointed out softly.

Estelle raised her shoulders. "My father never needed my forgiveness. But Sophie is still here on the island. Her baby is getting bigger every single day. She doesn't need you, Katrina. She's too self-sufficient for that. But she does want you by her side. And that's even better. Don't you think?"

Chapter Seventeen

After Sophie's divorce from Jared had officially been confirmed, she'd entered her walk-in closet in a dream-like state and removed her wedding dress from its protective wrapping. Nostalgically, she'd donned the dress and looked at herself in the mirror, marveling that this had been her costume when she'd officially signed herself up for a lifetime with a monster. It was a miracle she'd gotten out. It was a miracle she was only forty-two with, God willing, several decades in front of her—to change, to grow, to become something more than a washed-up woman who'd wasted her life. She'd then unzipped herself from the dress and sold it online for two hundred dollars to a woman who'd called the cut “timeless.” She'd shipped it for free, hoping that the dress would go on to have a better life in Connecticut. The dress had never been the problem, after all. And she no longer believed in curses.

Sophie's marriage to Patrick would be different. It required a different wedding dress, a different style. The dress Sophie had selected was vintage with pearl buttons up the back and a high neckline, which reminded her of the 1940s with a modern twist. Sam had approved it during an initial shopping outing in February, and now, Sophie, Sam, Hilary, and Ida were all at the wedding dress shop for a fitting. It was just one month till the wedding. The caterer had been confirmed, and the wedding cakes had been tasted. Nearly all loose ends were tied.

It had been almost too easy. Sophie wasn't sure whether or not to trust it.

Ida buttoned Sophie up and stepped back to allow Sophie to whirl around, showing off the dramatic flourish of the bottom of the dress. Luckily, the

dress poofed out slightly at the waist, which meant Sophie's pregnant belly could expand as much as it wanted to before the wedding.

Ida, Hilary, and Sam gasped.

"You're stunning, Soph," Hilary said.

"Absolutely gorgeous," Sam said, clasping her hands.

"Totally agree. It's the perfect choice," Ida said. "And you know what? I think I love it eight thousand times more than your first one."

Sophie raised her eyebrows, surprised that Ida had brought up her first wedding. She was immediately intrigued. "Really?"

Ida nodded, her smile falling. She looked as though she'd waded into the deep end of the pool without realizing it and was now unable to swim back.

"Why?" Sophie probed.

"Oh, gosh." Ida tugged her ponytail. "You were married in 2002, right?"

Sophie nodded.

"The styles were outrageous that year," Ida hurried to say.

"But my dress was classic," Sophie reminded her. "I sold it last year. Another bride said it was timeless. That's really the word she used."

Ida grimaced. "But something about that day was off. Maybe I've implanted it on the dress."

Sophie caught Sam's eye. "Is that how all of you remember my wedding day?"

"I mean," Hilary stuttered, "you looked gorgeous, Sophie. Everyone thought so."

"That's not what I asked," Sophie said with a laugh.

How clear had it been that her marriage was already off to a wretched start? Could they feel the fight she and Jared had had that morning? Had they seen a devastated bride walking down the aisle, headed for her doom?

It was true that she'd married Jared not long after they'd lost the baby. She'd been devastated, lost. She'd alternated between not sleeping and sleeping too much. And, of course, she'd been drunk that day. Terribly drunk. Aching for drugs. For darkness. It had eventually come.

"You just didn't look super happy," Sam admitted with a grimace. "I remember thinking I wanted to give you a hug."

"Maybe that's what I remember about the dress," Ida said. "That no matter how beautiful it looked on you, you still looked miserable. Which is so unlike this dress you're wearing right now. I mean, look at you! You're so happy. And it shows in everything you do. You're glowing."

They were quiet, exchanging glances.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bring up your first wedding,” Ida hurried to say. “I feel like an idiot.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Sophie said, straightening her spine. “To be honest, I’m just happy to hear you noticed. In retrospect, that was a horrible day. And I remember Mom fluttering around, telling me how happy she was. And how happy I was going to be.” Sophie’s eyes filled with tears. “I remember her telling me I would get pregnant again soon.”

“We should have said something,” Sam said, her eyes on the floor.

Ida nodded furiously.

“I feel so ashamed,” Hilary breathed.

The seamstress in charge of the fitting approached Sophie, interrupting the intense moment with bright words. “Look at you! You’re stunning!”

Sophie blinked back tears and smiled. The seamstress handed her a tissue. “Don’t worry about it. Most brides cry during their fitting.”

“Thank you,” Sophie said. “I love the work you’ve done. I think it’s nearly finished.”

As the seamstress worked, making notes on final adjustments on a yellow pad, Sophie couldn’t help but think of Katrina. The seamstress was approximately Katrina’s age, and right now, she doted on Sophie as though she really were her daughter. It made Sophie’s heart feel bruised.

Katrina should have been here. She should have seen Sophie’s dress and realized the depths of her happiness. Regardless, Sophie still hadn’t heard from Katrina since that horrible day when Katrina had said, “Not this again,” as though Sophie’s pregnancy was a costly decision made on the stock market or a badly cooked casserole. Grandmothers in their right minds didn’t say “not this again” about having more grandchildren. And because Katrina hadn’t reached out, Sophie had begun to try to re-arrange her mind. Perhaps her baby wouldn’t have a grandmother. But with Sam, Ida, Hilary, and numerous other Coleman family members doting on her, she felt sure her baby would be blanketed with love. It had to be enough.

After the fitting, Sam announced she’d made dinner reservations for the four of them at Rachelle’s restaurant.

“We need to celebrate!” she said, wrapping her arm around Sophie’s shoulders.

The restaurant was a five-minute walk east. They left their vehicles at the wedding dress shop and hurried together through the brisk March evening,

chatting happily. After their conversation about Sophie's first wedding, Sophie felt euphoric and free (a result, she supposed, of finally speaking the truth), and she joined her arm with Ida's as they entered the restaurant.

The hostess at Rachelle's restaurant led them to a table near the window and brought them a basket of sliced, rustic baguette and the most divine French butter Sophie had ever had.

"There are salt crystals inside the butter?" she whispered to the others conspiratorially.

"I don't know if I'll ever be able to have ordinary butter again," Sam groaned.

Just before they ordered, Rachelle snapped out of the kitchen, her face blotchy from the heat of the ovens and stove top, her hair in a tight ponytail that tugged her eyebrows back toward her scalp. She kissed her mother on the cheek and waved happily, her smile not quite reaching her eyes. Frantic was the word that came to mind. Sophie remembered meeting several addicts who'd worked as chefs. They'd told her it was the only way they could get through the stress of twelve-hour shifts in boiling conditions.

Rachelle told them she had everything set up for their dinner—four courses with non-alcoholic wine, which came specially recommended by the restaurant's wine connoisseur.

"It's amazing how different things are," Sophie explained as Rachelle returned to the kitchen. "When I first got sober at age twenty, there wasn't any non-alcoholic wine. Not that I can remember, anyway."

"Rachelle tells me that her generation isn't so keen on partying," Sam explained.

"It's proof the kids are smarter than the rest of us," Sophie said. "They see the generational trauma in the past and ask themselves, 'Can we be better?' Whereas I only asked myself, 'How do I escape this?'"

"It's incredible how things have changed," Hilary agreed. "My Aria says the same thing."

Sophie took a bite of buttered bread and closed her eyes at the intensity of flavors. As she chewed, she touched her stomach under the table and smiled.

"Sophie," Hilary sighed, shaking her head, her long black hair shimmering in the restaurant's candlelight. "Ever since you announced your pregnancy, I've had the most startling case of baby fever. It's my first case ever since having Aria."

Sam and Ida cackled in unison as Hilary nodded, deathly pale.

“I’m going crazy,” Hilary said. “Now that Marc spends so much time in Nantucket rather than San Francisco, I’ve been weighing up whether to bug him about it, you know?” She chewed her lower lip. “He missed so much fatherhood with Aria. He never saw her take her first steps or say her first words. And I know that devastates him.”

“Hilary?” Sam whispered, her smile falling. “Are you serious about this?”

“I’m forty-four,” Hilary said, tugging her hair. “Which means I don’t have a lot of time left. But the doctor says we could make it work. There’s a window.”

“You’ve already asked the doctor!” Ida cried.

The server appeared with their non-alcoholic wine, interrupting the sharp tension at the table to pour them glasses and wish them well. As soon as he was gone, Sophie raised a glass toward Hilary and said, “I can’t imagine raising my baby alongside anyone else. He or she will certainly need a playmate. And I need another mother by my side, pushing me along. Reminding me that I’m not old yet.”

Hilary’s eyes shimmered. She looked relieved, as though she’d had this thought circling her mind for ages. She clinked her glass with Sophie’s and laughed at herself.

“You think I can really do it?” she asked the table, her voice cracking.

“My darling sister,” Sam said, “is there anything you can’t do?”

After a wonderful dinner of balsamic chicken, feta cheese foldovers, brussels sprouts with parmesan cheese, and a wonderful potato dish with plenty of garlic, Sophie hugged her family goodbye, hopped in her car, and headed back home to Patrick. She felt girlish and euphoric, and she sang (badly) along to the radio, her voice out of tune, the words all wrong. Still, she felt like a star.

The sound of the television led Sophie into the living room, where she found Patrick asleep on the couch with a book propped up on his chest and his eyes flickering behind his lids. Sophie felt an inexplicable surge of love for him. Tenderly, she removed his book, placed a bookmark where he’d stopped, and set it on the side table. She then sat on the chair beside him, turned down the volume on the television, and flicked around the channels, looking for nothing in particular. Patrick let out a light snore, and Sophie smiled to herself.

How many nights had she spent in this living room over the years?

Hundreds. Thousands. But now that Patrick was making the living room partially his, these nights were different. They were cozy and slightly messy. Two teacups sat on the coffee table. Patrick had left a candy wrapper beside them. If Jared had seen the slight chaos, he would have snapped—telling Sophie what an incompetent housewife she was.

Sophie flinched at the memories. Despite Hilary's remarkable interior design changes, this home would always feel partially like Jared's. She would always feel haunted by his ghost.

It embarrassed her to admit that Jared still had such a hold over her psyche. She'd read online that codependent relationships had a stronghold over your body that you couldn't just shake off.

Even her love for Patrick wasn't enough to chase Jared's darkness away.

Suddenly, a strange pain trickled down her chest and into her lower abdomen. Sophie collapsed against the cushions and clutched her stomach, gasping for breath. It was just a cramp. It would pass. It had to. But a moment later, the pain twisted and intensified, and she cried out, sweat billowing on her neck and forehead.

"Not this again. Not this again," Sophie muttered, echoing what her mother had said. She felt frantic. Still, Patrick remained fast asleep, his chest rising and falling. She didn't want to wake him.

Sophie stood and tiptoed to the bathroom. Her stomach writhed with pain. When she entered, she gripped either side of the sink and spoke to her reflection angrily. "Nothing bad is happening. It's just one of those things. A mysterious pregnancy thing."

But after another wave of pain crashed through her, Sophie dared to check herself. And what she found there left her shuddering.

Candy-red blood. It was gushing down her leg.

The next few minutes were a blur of panic. Sophie remembered barreling from the bathroom, crying Patrick's name. She shook him awake, then she screamed into her hands. Before she knew it, she was in the back seat of Patrick's truck, writhing with pain as he rocketed them to the hospital. The only soundtrack of the drive was him telling her, over and over again, that she was going to be fine, that he was going to take care of it. But Sophie had been around the block enough to know that once a terrible thing like this was off to the races, there was very little anyone could do to stop it. She just had to brace herself and hold on.

Chapter Eighteen

Twenty-Two Years Ago

Katrina had always been dutiful about her calendar. In her beautiful cursive, she kept it updated with her entire family's activities—doctor's appointments, dentist's appointments, vacations, and meetings with tax advisers. She saved all her calendars in the upstairs office long after the year was through and was able to return to, say, 1991's *Gone With The Wind*-themed calendar and see that Ida had cheerleading practice on Thursday or Sophie had piano lessons. Time was always passing a little too quickly. This was her only way of catching it.

Today, Katrina's calendar read: "Sophie - doctor. 2:30." Katrina smiled and sipped her coffee, making a short to-do list in her mind. She wanted to throw a load of Grant's jeans, socks, and underwear into the washer. She wanted to bake some zucchini bread—enough to share with Sophie and Jared. Now that Sophie was four months pregnant, every day was something to celebrate.

Katrina bustled around the house, delivering cups of coffee to Grant in his office, sliding zucchini bread into the oven, and scrubbing the kitchen counters. At eleven, she called Sophie and asked if she wanted to grab Mexican food after her appointment, and Sophie agreed, sounding grateful for the company.

More than a week ago, Sophie asked Katrina pointed questions about marriage and Jared, specifically. She'd insinuated Jared was "mean," whatever that meant. Since then, Sophie's questions and fears had haunted Katrina's mind. But she had to believe it was all in Sophie's head. She had to push her daughter to be strong. "Everyone has doubts," she'd told her. "But your love for Jared and your baby is enough to pull you through this difficult time."

Since then, Sophie hadn't mentioned any other doubts. Maybe they were no more.

At two, Katrina knocked on Grant's office door. "Come in!" Grant called. Katrina entered to find Grant stationed at his desk, his phone off the cradle as though he waited for someone on the other line, and numerous stacks of paper in front of him. It was impossible to understand the method of his madness. Like his father before him, Grant worked as a very successful day trader, which required a separate phone line and what seemed to be thousands of headaches. Still, Grant said he liked the "thrill of the chase." That, and the chaos.

"How's it going?" Katrina asked.

"Things are moving and shaking today," Grant announced.

"As always," Katrina joked, draping her head over the doorframe. Her heart swelled with love for him. "I'm about to head to Sophie's. Any requests for tonight?"

"I don't need anything at all, darling," Grant said. "Just you, safe at home."

Katrina giggled and hurried across the room to kiss him. A split second later, a voice came from the phone, calling Grant's name. It was probably someone stationed on the thirty-second floor of some far-off New York tower, a self-important man in a suit.

"I have to get this!" Grant said. "Drive safe."

Katrina drove over to Sophie's and waited in the driveway for a few seconds, watching the front door for signs of Sophie. Ordinarily, she burst from the front door immediately after Katrina pulled in, ducking into the passenger seat. But today, the door was shut, and nothing moved behind the windows. Katrina shut off the engine and continued to wait, stretching the fabric of her blouse. Maybe Sophie forgot her gloves. Maybe she forgot something upstairs and was racing to get it.

When the door remained closed, sturdy as a tomb, Katrina stepped out of

the car and hurried up the walkway, glancing at her wristwatch. They still had plenty of time before the doctor's appointment—they were perpetually early. Even still, a strange voice had begun to bubble in the back of Katrina's mind—a reminder that, ordinarily, Sophie always did this sort of thing. She always dallied. She always let people down.

Sophie used to be like that, Katrina reminded herself, trying to beat back against the voice in the back of her head. But Sophie's different now. Everything has changed.

Katrina steeled herself at the front door and rang the doorbell. The sound blasted through the house, far louder than necessary. It practically made the windows rattle. A blast of cold wind cratered into Katrina, and she zipped her coat all the way to her chin. She hadn't anticipated any time outside.

"Sophie?" Katrina said her name softly, as though it would somehow call her to the door. Again, she pressed the doorbell, then waited another thirty seconds and did it again. When nobody appeared, she smacked her hand on the door, and her elbow vibrated. "Where are you?" Katrina rasped. "What's happened?"

Katrina was dizzy and fearful. Black spots appeared in her vision. She turned on her heel and limped back to her car, cranking the heat and watching her windows steam up. Maybe Sophie was at the grocery store or running errands. Maybe she hadn't written down the doctor's appointment in her calendar, as Katrina had recommended. She'd forgotten. That was it. That was simple.

Even as she considered this, Katrina's stomach tightened into knots. This was Sophie she was thinking about. And when Sophie Coleman didn't show up to something, that meant one thing, beyond a shadow of a doubt. She was up to no good.

It was best not to beat around the bush. It was best to stare the truth in the face—no matter how much it chilled her to the bone. Katrina fell forward, her forehead planted on the steering wheel, and her heartbeat filled her ears.

Katrina remembered how Sophie had asked her about Jared last week, how she'd hinted that maybe he wasn't the one for her. That maybe she wanted something else.

Had Sophie let those thoughts overtake her? Had they driven her so insane that she'd started using again?

Katrina's hands were in fists, and her nails nearly cut through the skin of her palm. She felt frantic. She needed to start the engine, drive back home,

and tell Grant what was going on. But her instinct was to stay here in Sophie's driveway and wait for her to return. When and if she did, maybe Katrina would catch her high or drunk. Maybe then, she could do what she needed to do—insist that she take care of herself. "You're pregnant, for goodness' sake," she imagined herself screaming. "You can't be so selfish anymore!"

How could Sophie do this? How could she throw everything she'd worked for away? When Sophie had first told Katrina about the pregnancy, she'd spoken of it as though it were a miracle, a blessing. How could she decide it didn't matter anymore? Just like that?

Katrina's thoughts raced. Twice, she smashed her fist on her thigh, aching for answers. She imagined Sophie in all sorts of horrible situations—clutching a fifth of vodka, laughing with her horrible friends. The friends Katrina had thought she'd left behind in her old life. The friends who'd dragged Sophie to the darkest of depths.

Katrina needed to get a hold of Jared. She needed to team up with him. They couldn't let Sophie do this.

Suddenly, another car whisked down Sophie's street and turned into the driveway. It all happened so quickly, a blur. For a horrible moment, Katrina thought the car might crash into her.

"Grant?" Katrina said incredulously, still seated alone in her car.

Through the windows, Grant looked stricken, his hair a wild mess. He looked as though he'd sped the entire way here, his foot pressed hard against the pedal. Katrina stumbled out of the car, gaping at him. Something was wrong. Something enormous. But she couldn't begin to name it.

Katrina got into the passenger seat of Grant's car and shut the door, enveloping herself in the warmth. Grant reached for her hand and held one of hers in two of his. His eyes were rimmed with red.

How long had it been since Katrina had left Grant in his office at home? It couldn't have been more than thirty minutes. It suddenly seemed like a lifetime.

"Kat," Grant whispered. He brought her hand toward his lips and kissed her fingers gently. He looked unable to speak.

"I don't know what's going on," Katrina stuttered. She thought, maybe, if she spoke enough and filled the silence, Grant couldn't tell her whatever he'd come to tell her.

"I've been ringing the bell and knocking on the door. Sophie's always

here when I pick her up. She hasn't missed a single doctor's appointment. Something must have happened."

It was still important to Katrina not to tell anyone else about Sophie's addictions. She wanted Grant to think of his youngest as a treasure. A princess. She wanted him to believe in a different truth.

That's what love was, she decided. A sort of lie. A cushion against the horrors of the world.

"I'm sure she just went to the store or something," Katrina said. "People forget things. It happens all the time. I can call the doctor when we get home. We live on a tiny island in the middle of the ocean. Not so many women are pregnant here. We can always go tomorrow. I'm sure it'll be fine."

Grant closed his eyes, and a tear drifted down his cheek.

"Not long after you left, the downstairs phone rang," Grant said. "I was going to let it go, but I had a horrible feeling. An instinct."

Katrina narrowed her eyes. She wanted to jump out of the car and run away from him.

"It was Jared," Grant continued, staring through the front window. "They're at the hospital. Sophie started bleeding this morning. It got bad, so they went to the hospital." Grant pressed his lips together. All the color drained from his face.

"She lost so much blood," Grant finished. "They nearly lost her."

Katrina flared her nostrils. "And the baby?"

Grant twitched and turned his face back toward her. The look in his eyes told her everything she needed to know. The baby hadn't lived. After just four months, Sophie's pregnancy had failed. It was a tragedy.

And Katrina couldn't help it. She felt, in her heart of hearts, that Sophie had caused this. Just as she always did, Sophie had done something wrong. She'd driven herself to misery. She'd taken a drink. She'd used. It had to be so. The pregnancy had been fine up until recently. Sophie, in all of her ways, had pulled the plug.

And why had Katrina thought it would turn out differently? Why had she thought Sophie could change? Katrina had watched her father destroy himself. She'd watched him hurl insult after insult at her, Norm, and her mother and wake up the next morning none the wiser about what he'd said.

Grant leaned over and wrapped Katrina in a hug, bringing her back to the year 2002. He wailed and shook. Katrina wrapped her arms around him, but she didn't cry. She couldn't. The devastation was so complete that it was like

she'd forgotten how to mourn.

"I can't believe she did this," Katrina mumbled into Grant's shoulder.

Grant flinched and drew back. "What did you say?" His eyes were filled with confusion.

Katrina understood. She couldn't blame Sophie publicly. She couldn't prove herself to be that kind of monster. Grant didn't understand how far Sophie had fallen. He'd never picked up on her dead teenage eyes or the alcohol on her breath. He'd never understood that Sophie was just Katrina's father in a different form.

"I can't believe she's going through this," Katrina said instead of repeating herself.

"We should go to the hospital," Grant said.

Katrina furrowed her brow. She wasn't sure she could handle that. The minute she saw Sophie, she wouldn't be able to control what she said. She could feel the vitriol bubbling up to the surface.

But Grant was already starting the car, waving his hand, insisting that Katrina stay with him. "We'll pick up your car later."

On the way to the hospital, Katrina sat in stunned silence, gripping her thighs. And when Grant dropped her off in front of the hospital doors, she set her jaw and prepared herself. Whatever happened next, it wouldn't be pretty. But the wheels had already begun to turn. And she was along for the ride.

Chapter Nineteen

Present Day

Impossibly, Sophie was back in the hospital. Although she was twenty-two years older than last time, with laugh lines around her eyes and a gray tint to the roots of her hair, not so much had changed when she thought about it. Not really. Just like back in 2002, she was approximately four months pregnant and on the verge of losing everything. Over the years, she'd done everything to forget that horrific day, and now, it was as though she was forced to relive it.

Sophie was in a hospital gown, clutching Patrick's hand as though it was the only thing keeping her attached to the planet. Patrick's eyes were bloodshot. Every time a nurse or doctor entered the room, he burst to his feet and peppered them with questions, demanding what was wrong.

This, Sophie knew, was different from last time, too. Patrick's love for her echoed in everything he did.

The nurses and doctor said the same thing. "We're still waiting for the results of the tests. Sit tight. We'll be with you soon."

"I'm sorry," Patrick apologized over and over again. He sat back down and blinked away his tears. "It's going to be fine," he told Sophie as the nurses and doctors returned to the hallways, marching up and down, attending to other patients, their shoes squeaking. "I promise. Whatever this

is, we'll get through it. Together.”

Sophie couldn't help but remember that long-ago day—when she'd lost her first baby. She couldn't help but bring back the images and the terror. It played out in her mind's eye as Patrick stuttered with more questions, trying to save their current baby. But maybe the baby was already lost.

Back in 2002, Sophie had had a doctor's appointment planned for that afternoon. Katrina would take her; she'd confirmed that morning, asking Sophie if she'd put the doctor's appointment in her calendar. “I still haven't hung the calendar on the wall,” Sophie said with a laugh. “I'm getting around to it.”

That morning, after the bleeding had begun, she'd called Jared at work. He'd told her to drive herself to the hospital, that he'd meet her there after his meeting. His meeting? Sophie had hardly registered that Jared went to a meeting before joining her at the hospital. Terrified, Sophie had limped to her car and driven alone, leaving a tear-drop-shaped stain of blood on her car seat—one she'd had to scrub off the next week, tears raining down her cheeks, her womb barren.

When Sophie had reached the hospital, the nurse in the lobby had taken one look at her pants, stained with blood, and ordered her to sit down on a nearby stretcher. She'd been wheeled off immediately. By then, Sophie had already disconnected from reality. The pain in her abdomen felt separate from her, like something she watched from a great distance. She was twenty years old, but she felt ageless, lifeless. The future she'd drawn for herself was disintegrating.

Jared arrived after she changed into a hospital gown and charged up and down the room, his hands clenched behind his back. He'd brought all his volatile energy from the office—the attitude he'd used to “get things done.” He angrily demanded answers from the nurses, but he hardly looked at Sophie, and he certainly never touched her. Alone in bed, still bleeding, Sophie felt alone and vulnerable. She'd never wanted to use drugs more in her life.

When the doctor told them they had lost the baby, Jared looked on the verge of punching him as though it was the doctor's fault. As though Jared could find a single person to blame for their failed baby. Jared had never lost anything in his life. Sophie bowed her head and closed her eyes, wishing she was anywhere else. That she wasn't engaged to marry Jared. That she'd never come back to Nantucket, hoping for the best. It was all an elaborate

nightmare.

And then, she'd heard Jared growling at the doctor. Telling him he didn't know how to do his job. Telling him he would sue him. "Jared!" she'd cried. "Shut up!" And Jared had turned on his heel and cast his darkness upon her. What was it he'd said to her? "You're the one who ruined your body. I should have known it wouldn't be viable. It's pathetic."

But now, twenty-two years after that horrific day, a different doctor entered the hospital room and greeted Patrick and Sophie with a soft and gentle smile. Light shone from his eyes. Sophie could imagine that he'd delivered hundreds, if not thousands, of healthy babies. He seemed the sort of person to welcome new creatures to the world.

"Hi. Thank you for your patience. Before we get started on the specifics, I'll tell you this. Your baby is fine," the doctor said.

Sophie gasped, filling her lungs with more air than she'd allowed herself since they'd entered the hospital. Patrick dropped his head forward and wept audibly. It was then that Sophie realized they'd both thought it was over. They'd momentarily lost all hope... for their baby, for their relationship, and maybe even for their sobriety, although that was something they would have to discuss later.

The doctor wasn't done. "The baby's heartbeat is solid. According to the tests we took when you came in, your vitals are fine. We don't know what's causing the bleeding yet, but we will find out. Sit tight for a little while longer, okay? We're going to get out in front of this."

"Thank you, Doctor," Patrick hurried to say.

"Does that mean I still might lose the pregnancy?" Sophie demanded. She didn't want to be blindsided like last time. She wanted to prepare.

"Your pregnancy is still viable," the doctor said. "We're going to keep you overnight to monitor everything. You may have to go on bed rest, which is a completely normal thing. Many pregnant women who go on bed rest go on to have happy, healthy babies. And they make complete recoveries, too."

Sophie breathed even deeper. Bed rest? She could do that. It was easy. For the next five months, she imagined herself watching television, reading books, and growing her baby until he or she was strong enough to live in the real world. She would do anything for this baby. She would have done anything for the last one, too. If only she'd been allowed to save it.

About an hour after the doctor informed Sophie her baby was still alive, there was a knock on the doorframe. Ida popped her head inside, smiling, her

cheeks glinting with tears. “Is anyone home?”

“Ida!” Sophie smiled and reached out for her sister, who hurried across the white linoleum and wrapped her tenderly in a hug.

“Oh, my darling sister,” Ida breathed into her hair.

When their hug broke, Sophie dried her cheeks with the back of her hand and tried to laugh at herself. “I’m sorry. I’m such a mess.”

“And you have every right to be,” Ida assured her, dropping into the plastic chair by the bed.

Patrick shifted his weight and then bent to kiss Sophie on the cheek. “I’ll go grab a cup of coffee. Need anything?”

“Nothing,” Sophie assured him. “Come back soon, okay?”

“I won’t be gone long,” Patrick said.

Patrick walked regretfully out the door, glancing back a final time before disappearing. With him gone, Sophie felt a heaviness against her chest.

“I’m so glad you texted me,” Ida burst, her cheeks blotchy.

Sophie raised her shoulders. She wasn’t entirely sure why she’d reached out to Ida. Ninety percent of her was fine with only Patrick by her side. But then again, her newfound commitment to sobriety demanded that she pay attention to her support system. It demanded an acknowledgment of her loved ones and her need for their love in return.

“The baby is still okay,” Sophie repeated.

“I’m so glad, Soph,” Ida blubbered. “You must have been terrified.”

It was difficult to describe just how frightened Sophie had been. The entire day now felt like a horrible nightmare. Her memory was foggy.

“They’re going to keep me overnight,” Sophie said.

“Good,” Ida said. “They have to figure out why this happened.”

Sophie wanted to tell Ida she knew why. She wanted to tell Ida she didn’t deserve this kind of happiness. She’d already made too many mistakes, and she needed to pay.

But that was her addiction talking. That wasn’t rational.

Instead, she said, “I felt like I was reliving a nightmare.”

Ida winced and took Sophie’s hand. “I wondered about that. Weren’t you about four months along back then?”

“Yes,” Sophie said.

“What are the odds?”

Sophie remained quiet as Ida furrowed her brow.

“I remember coming to see you a few days after it happened,” Ida said

softly. “I felt like a horrible sister. I didn’t know what to say.”

Sophie hardly remembered Ida’s visit during the week she’d lost her baby. By then, she’d been using. Losing the baby had been like flipping a switch. One minute, she’d had something to live for. The next, she’d had nothing.

“I don’t know if I ever told you about what happened at the hospital,” Sophie said, her voice crackling.

Ida tilted her head. “Twenty-two years ago?”

“Right.” Sophie tried to smile, but her lips fell into a flat line. “Mom came shortly after we found out the baby hadn’t made it.”

“I knew Mom came,” Ida went on. “She called me from the hospital. She was crying.”

Sophie laughed wryly. The sound was strange in her ears. “She didn’t cry when she saw me.”

Ida’s lips hung open.

“She was too busy to cry,” Sophie went on. “She stormed into my hospital room like a maniac and started screaming at me. I was stuck in bed, and I could hardly walk. And she cornered me while Jared and Dad were down the hall.

“She accused me of everything under the sun,” Sophie remembered. “She was so sure I’d been using again. That was why I’d lost the baby. She insisted that she’d seen ‘signs’ in me recently, that she should have listened to her instincts. It was ridiculous. I hadn’t touched anything since long before the pregnancy. But her disappointment and her blame really did a number on me. I remember crying all night and the next day.

“Do you want to know the first thing I did when I had a day to myself?” Sophie went on, her voice crackling.

Ida sighed. She knew what was coming.

“I already knew how to hide my drug and alcohol use,” Sophie said. “And in a weird way, using it made my engagement and subsequent marriage to Jared more bearable. It helped me ease into my life a little more. And it certainly helped me forget the trauma of losing that baby.”

Sophie sighed and crossed her arms tightly over her chest. Ida continued to blink at her.

“And just like that, I ruined the next two decades of my life,” Sophie added. “I became a stranger even to myself.”

Ida sputtered with disbelief and then took a deep breath. It seemed to

stabilize her. “First of all, thank you for sharing that with me. I hate that you haven’t felt like you could be honest with me. I’m here. Forever.”

Sophie felt the words like a balm over her aching heart.

“Second,” Ida went on, her voice gaining strength, “you’ve been through so much. But you’ve also had tremendously good instincts. You found Patrick. And you managed to get clean and build a new life. You can’t let Mom or anyone convince you otherwise.”

“Sometimes, all I want is for Mom to give me an enormous hug and tell me everything will be all right,” Sophie confessed. “Other times, I remind myself that she’s been the source of so much heartache for me. And me for her. Maybe it’s too late.”

“It’s not too late,” Ida rasped. “As a mother, all I can say is Nellie and Frankie could do anything. They could wreck my car. They could burn my house down. I’d still welcome them back into my life with open arms. My love for them is a level of insanity I can’t fully explain.” She smiled. “I know you’ll have the same for your baby.”

Sophie placed her hands over her stomach and shifted deeper into the hospital pillow. Fatigue had begun to roll over her, and her eyelids crept lower. There was something about her memories, she thought. Going into the year 2002 made her feel like she’d just run a marathon.

“That said,” Ida went on, “I’d understand if you don’t want to forgive Mom for what she’s said and done. I’ll support your decision. And I’ll help you every step of the way with that baby. Mark my words.”

Sophie thanked Ida, her voice hardly a whisper. A moment later, Patrick returned with a cup of coffee, and the solace of hearing him again, of knowing he was near, allowed her to finally close her eyes. As she dropped into sleep, she felt the rhythm of Patrick and Ida’s conversation as they grew to know one another, to love one another as in-laws. Sophie had never felt so protected.

Chapter Twenty

Katrina entered the nursing home Wednesday morning to discover a wonderful surprise. Seated in the waiting room with his head in a book was a familiar face—one she'd previously known like the back of her hand. Katrina's heart dropped.

"Norm?"

Norm jumped up, pocketing his book, and smiled warmly. He looked older than the last time she'd seen him, worn around the edges, but no less handsome. If Katrina looked hard enough, she could find their father's features in Norm's face—but she hurriedly blinked them away, reminding herself that Norm was just Norm. And neither of them was their father.

Katrina hurried to hug him. "I had no idea you were in town!"

Norm laughed and palmed the back of his neck. "I wanted it to be a surprise."

This wasn't like Norm. Norm kept a healthy distance from their island and their family. Via text, Katrina had informed Norm of their mother's nursing home's name. But she'd never in a million years imagined she'd find him here, waiting for her.

"Are you ready to see her?" Katrina asked.

"As ready as I'll ever be," Norm joked.

"She already rules the place," Katrina said. "Queen Agatha."

"I'd expect nothing less."

Katrina led Norm through the nursing room, her chest fluttering. As they walked, several of the nursing home residents ogled them and mentioned Norm by name.

“Agatha is going to be so pleased to see her handsome son!” an older woman called out, waving one of her chess pieces as they passed.

Katrina led Norm to the doorway of Agatha’s suite. There, she watched the older woman for a moment. She sat regally on the couch, brushing her hair with beautiful strokes, her eyes on the television. Perhaps it was just a trick of the light, but she looked far younger than her eighty-five years. Katrina could half-imagine she was in her fifties, that Katrina was in her thirties and hadn’t yet made so many mistakes as a mother. That they could go back in time and do it all again, better this time.

But so much had happened. There was so much they couldn’t take back.

“You ready?” Norm mouthed across the doorway.

“As I’ll ever be.”

Without hesitation, Norm stepped into the suite. Perhaps it was that Hollywood confidence. “Mother?”

Agatha flinched and eyed Norm curiously, one of her eyebrows cocked. It was almost as though she didn’t recognize him. And then, a split second later, a smile broke out over her face as quick as a firecracker. And she cried, “Norm! My son!”

In spite of herself, Katrina felt her heart melt. Norm knelt to hug Agatha as Agatha gushed about her love for him, how long it had been and how much she’d missed him.

It was the first time the three of them had been together in ages. Katrina put a kettle on the stovetop as Agatha peppered Norm with questions about Hollywood and his children, who were much younger than Sophie and Ida.

“You’re an old father,” Agatha said, her voice edged with judgment.

“I keep up,” Norm said.

Agatha cackled and slapped his thigh. “You always had a way about you, Norm. You always did everything exactly the way you pleased. Just like your father.”

Katrina’s heart sank. She turned slowly, expecting Norm to fly off the handle. Norm’s cheeks were pale, and he gritted his teeth. But after a moment’s pause, he shifted his expression and righted his smile. She was too old to argue. She was stuck in her ways.

It was best to love her as she was. Warts and all, as they said.

“I’d like to bring them out here,” Norm was saying of his children, showing off photographs. “They’re California kids, you know. Strangers to the Nantucket way of life.”

“You must bring them,” Agatha ordered, then arched her brow. “If only Katrina wasn’t selling the house. They could stay there as long as they want.”

Katrina placed three mugs on the coffee table between them. Norm winked at her secretly, careful not to let Agatha see. He understood why Katrina wanted to get rid of that mansion full of awful memories. He hadn’t come to meddle in those affairs.

In fact, it was easy for him to pick back up with another topic of conversation, to fold easily into Nantucket gossip or news of his latest film projects. Agatha was rapt with attention. And for once, she wasn’t poking and prodding Katrina, demanding more of her than she could possibly give. Katrina was able to breathe.

After tea, Agatha wanted to walk through the common areas to introduce Norm to her friends. Norm pushed her wheelchair happily and greeted old-timers from Nantucket days past, remembering most everyone’s names. This boggled Katrina’s mind.

“Do you remember everyone’s name in California, too?” she asked.

Norm tapped his temple with the tip of his finger. “It’s a business strategy. People appreciate it when you remember their names.”

“It’s not just a business strategy,” Katrina said. “Remembering all these names from your childhood isn’t getting you anywhere in Hollywood.” She laughed. “I think you’re just too kind to forget. You care about people. That’s your secret, isn’t it? Don’t worry. I’ll never tell.”

Norm’s cheeks flashed to a cherry red. For a moment, he looked heavy with doubt, and Katrina swayed, cursing herself for calling him out.

“I don’t know,” Norm said finally. “I left you here alone with them.”

Agatha was too busy with another female resident, whom Katrina knew only as Ms. Rodgers. She didn’t hear the conversation her children had above her. Thankfully.

“I’m sorry,” Norm said. “I’ve always known I left you with that burden. But I haven’t wanted to fully acknowledge it.”

Katrina felt tears welling up, which she quickly blinked away. Keep it together, Katrina. Stay in the moment.

Suddenly, below them, Agatha’s voice was like a spike. “What now?”

Katrina and Norm turned their attention to the older women, listening as Ms. Rodgers explained herself.

“That’s what my Jessica told me this morning,” she said. “You know she

works up at the hospital.”

Agatha turned her head to gaze up at Katrina incredulously. Something in her eyes made Katrina’s heart thud with dread.

“Did you hear that, Katrina?”

“What happened at the hospital?”

Norm touched Katrina’s elbow gently, preparing to be her support, her shield.

“Sophie was at the hospital last night,” Ms. Rodgers explained. “My Jessica works in a different department. She can’t tell me anything else, just that she’s still up there. Sleeping soundly.”

Katrina’s knees gave way as though they were made of jelly. She would have fallen to the ground if it hadn’t been for Norm, who scooped her up and placed her delicately on the chair beside her mother’s wheelchair. Her legs quivered, bouncing off one another, as she listened to Ms. Rodgers and her mother continue to chat. They were talking about Sophie’s pregnancy. They were saying that sometimes, women weren’t meant to be mothers—that their bodies couldn’t handle it.

Through the fog of their voices, Katrina heard herself bellow.

“My Sophie will have a baby. She’ll be fine.”

Ms. Rodgers blinked at her sorrowfully as though she’d just learned Katrina had lost her mind and wasn’t sure what to make of it. Maybe she really had lost her marbles. But as Ms. Rodgers gaped at her, Katrina found herself playing over the last time Sophie had been to the hospital. She remembered storming into that hospital room. She remembered saying the cruelest things she could think of. She remembered Grant asking her afterward, “What happened in there? Sophie can’t stop crying.” She hadn’t been able to tell Grant the truth. She hadn’t wanted him to know what a disaster her and Sophie’s relationship was. It was an acknowledgment of how she’d failed as a mother.

Regret shimmered through her stomach. She thought she might throw up.

As Agatha and Ms. Rodgers returned to their conversation, Norm bent down to whisper in Katrina’s ear. “Do you want to get out of here for a while?”

Katrina breathed all the air from her lungs. “More than anything.”

After interrupting the older women yet again, Norm kissed their mother goodbye and announced that he’d return after lunch. “Katrina and I have a few things to do.”

“Has she recruited you to help her get rid of my beautiful home?” Agatha demanded. “Is that where you’re off to?”

“You have a beautiful home here, Mom,” Norm reminded her, gesturing to the ornate living room with the crackling fire in the stone fireplace. “You live with some of your best friends. What more could you want?”

And because Norm was beloved, as are all children who leave their families behind, Agatha smiled at him happily. “I know just what you mean, Norm. You always had a way with words. Drive safe and come back soon. You’ve hardly met half my friends.”

Once Norm and Katrina were outside, Katrina placed her hands on the nose of her car and whispered, “I can’t believe this. I don’t know what I’ll do if she loses another baby.”

“You don’t know anything else yet,” Norm said quietly. “Don’t let yourself spiral.”

Norm led Katrina to his rental car, where she texted Ida as he drove them out to the old diner. He’d insisted on it, needing to see the place again, needing the comfort of those leather seats, the greasy food, and the fifties music through the speakers. As high schoolers, they’d spent hours at the diner together, doing homework and eating french fries and strawberry milkshakes—killing time away from home, away from their father.

KATRINA: How is she??

IDA: How did you find out? Did she tell you?

KATRINA: I heard through the Nantucket gossip channels.

KATRINA: I’m worried sick.

IDA: She’s still in the hospital.

IDA: But the baby is okay.

IDA: The doctor says he’ll release her tomorrow.

IDA: She’ll probably be on bed rest for a few days.

Katrina’s heartbeat slowed, and she breathed deeper, pressing the phone against her chest. “The baby’s safe,” she whispered.

“And Sophie?” Norm asked.

“She’ll leave the hospital tomorrow.”

Norm adjusted his hands on the steering wheel, his eyes widening with a mix of relief and confusion. It was an onslaught of emotions. Katrina imagined this was bizarre for Norm—driving through the streets he’d once

known like the back of his hand. Things had changed imperceptibly for her. Bars had switched ownership. Restaurants had become retailers and vice versa. Houses had been created and destroyed. But for Norm, everything was different; the island had the same streets and the same air, but thousands of tiny changes over the years had added up to a completely altered reality.

KATRINA: Do you think she'd be up to seeing me?

IDA: She's delicate right now.

IDA: But yes. To be honest with you, she needs you.

IDA: No matter what has happened in the past, you're her mother.

IDA: And I love you, Mom. But you have to give Sophie a break. Please.

Katrina's eyes welled with tears. The world around her blurred, and she hardly recognized it when Norm pulled into the diner parking lot and cut the engine. "She needs you" echoed in her mind. She couldn't help but feel that Sophie had already given her too many chances.

"Come on," Norm urged quietly. "When was the last time you ate something?"

Katrina followed her big brother into the diner, where a woman less than half their age sat them at a booth by the window and poured them mugs of coffee. Norm didn't even glance at his menu before he said, "I'd love a Denver omelet, hash browns, and a biscuit with apple butter."

It was one of his favorite orders, something he'd probably eaten here one hundred times. Just hearing him say the words again made Katrina's throat swell.

"Should I order for you?" Norm gave her a mischievous grin. When Katrina nodded, he said, "A patty melt with onion rings. And a Coke?"

Katrina shook her head.

"Diet Coke," he corrected. "That's a change."

Katrina laughed as she passed her menu to the server, who disappeared with their orders. "I can't believe you remember that."

"I remember so many hours here with you," Norm said, his eyes darkening.

Katrina placed her hands over her face and exhaled. "Oh, Norm. Oh, how did we get so old?"

Norm laughed and sipped his coffee. Fatigue rolled through Katrina, and

she collapsed on her elbows on the table. She felt malleable, as though she could melt right off the leather booth and form a puddle beneath the table.

“Do you think Dad ever realized his mistakes?” Katrina asked, surprising herself with her earnestness.

Norm thought for a moment. “I think he did,” he said. “My theory is that every morning, he remembered his mistakes. And then, he drank until he forgot them again.”

Katrina winced and rubbed her temples. She remembered that day in New York when Norm had confessed his addictions to Katrina. It pained her to remember he’d gone through so much all by himself and hadn’t wanted her help.

Then again, Katrina hadn’t proven herself to be a worthy help to anyone. She was too broken. Maybe the therapy would eventually help. She considered telling Norm she’d begun therapy, that she wanted to probe her mind and demand answers from herself. But she kept it to herself.

“I wish we knew how to ask for help in this life,” Katrina said. “And I really wish I had taught that to my children.”

“You did a wonderful job,” Norm assured her. “Sophie is working against genetic forces beyond her control in many ways.”

Katrina sighed. “I don’t know if any parent actually does a wonderful job. But we do our best, don’t we? And then, we fixate on the horrible things we’ve done.”

“I certainly fixate,” Norm said. “My children are much younger than yours. But their generation has its own problems. Its own heartaches. And I’ve contributed to those heartaches in more ways than one.”

“I’m sure you’re a wonderful father,” Katrina breathed.

“I love them to pieces,” Norm admitted, spreading his large hands across the table. “And I’ve convinced myself that has to be enough. Some days, I’m imperfect. And I don’t always know how to give them the world. But I give them my big, messy self. And I hope they know it’s all I have to give.”

For a little while that afternoon, Katrina was allowed a wonderful reprieve from the real world. Like old times, she and her older brother dove into delicious, greasy diner fare, sharing stories from the past and pretending that the blues weren’t biting at their toes. Real life awaited them outside that door. And they would greet it with open arms and open hearts—when they were ready.

“Do you think it’s a mistake to sell the old house?” Katrina asked as she

slid one-half of her greasy patty melt into a to-go container.

“Do you?” Norm asked.

Katrina shuddered. “I keep thinking it’s the responsible thing to do. But I don’t know if throwing away our memories is ever responsible. It’s not like we can pretend that never happened.”

“What would you do with the old place?” Norm asked, furrowing his brow.

And again, Sophie’s face floated in Katrina’s mind’s eye; her voice echoed, reminding her of how much she loved the old Whittaker House. Of how earnest she was about creating a new era. A new destiny.

“I might have an idea,” Katrina said, closing the to-go box tight and clasping her hands.

“You look like you’re up to something,” Norm said with a wry laugh. “The sparkle in your eye reminds me of you sixty years ago.”

Siblings were remarkable, Katrina thought now. They saw you through every era of your life, God willing—through your first steps and losing your teeth, through puberty and heartaches, through the first growing pains of adulthood and beyond. She reached across the table and touched Norm’s hand, grateful he didn’t flinch away. Unknowingly, he’d provided her with tremendous strength; he’d been her protection during a colossal, emotional storm.

“By the way,” Norm continued, his lips shining from the butter in his omelet. “I hope I’ll see you at Sophie’s wedding in a few weeks?”

Katrina’s heart pumped. Was it possible she’d be allowed a second chance?

“I can’t imagine being anywhere else in the world that day.”

Chapter Twenty-One

The doctor committed Sophie to one week of bed rest—a time that demanded heaps of roasted vegetables and soups, movie marathons, and not a whole lot else. Patrick doted on her, setting up a bed in the living room so he could easily bring her supplies and help her to the bathroom when she needed it. He even took an entire week off work, an easy task when your coworkers were your brothers. Still, Sophie felt gooey with love for him. It was never far from her mind that Jared would never have helped half this much. That she'd finally chosen a partner who helped her carry the ache in her heart.

To keep them occupied, Sophie selected a wide array of cozy films—*You've Got Mail*, *While You Were Sleeping*, *The Holiday*, most of which Patrick had never seen. She amused herself by watching Patrick gaze at the screen, captivated by the beauty of the characters as they fell in love. During *Pride and Prejudice*, Patrick even shed a tear and wrapped his arm around Sophie's shoulders.

"Don't you dare ever tell Derek and Brent about this," he said with a choked-up laugh.

"Your secret is safe with me," Sophie said, her smile so big it hurt her face.

Ida and Sam came over frequently, bringing news from the outside world, plenty of snacks, and happy-go-lucky attitudes. It seemed everyone wanted to keep Sophie's mood up after her fearful time at the hospital—and Sophie was grateful for their distractions.

Sophie's father came by, as well. With large bags under his eyes, Grant

looked fatigued, but he sat happily at her bedside and told her funny stories from the past about sailing expeditions and escapades with Uncle Roland. He was careful not to mention Katrina, but it was as though he walked through a field of landmines. Grant and Katrina were inextricably tied to one another. It even felt strange to see them apart.

“Thank you for coming, Dad,” Sophie told him each time, kissing him on the cheek after they hugged. “It means the world to see you.”

“You just get better,” Grant insisted. “And we’ll see even more of each other.”

On the last day of Sophie’s bedrest, Ida appeared with Frankie and Nellie in tow. They were home for spring break and bubbling with excitement to be back on the island. Sophie insisted they sit on either side of her bed and tell her all about their campus drama. “Please, darlings. I’m so bored being cooped up here. I need gossip.” Nellie gushed about a guy she had a crush on in her linguistics class, while Frankie spoke only about other people in her academic year—the parties they’d thrown, the heartbreaks they’d experienced. Sophie understood. Frankie wanted to keep her lives separate. She wanted to be private. Sophie had been the same way.

After Nellie and Frankie excused themselves to find snacks in the kitchen, Ida stretched herself out on Sophie’s makeshift bed like a cat. “We were at the Whittaker House this morning.”

Something cold and hard dropped into Sophie’s stomach. “Oh yeah?” She hated thinking about Katrina, about her insistence on moving on from the past by brushing it under the rug. She hated to think about the distance yawning between them and how difficult it would eventually become to reunite again.

Ida propped herself up on her elbow and bit her lip thoughtfully. “She wants to see you, you know. I think she has for a long time. But she doesn’t know how to reach out.”

Sophie stared down at her hands. “We haven’t spoken in two months.” It felt like a tiny infinity. “And she probably just feels guilty that I went to the hospital again. She’ll forget. Time will move forward.”

“I think it’s more than that,” Ida said quietly.

Sophie raised her shoulders. She wasn’t sure how much credit she wanted to give Katrina. She didn’t want to be lured back into her trap, only to be bitten again.

“I heard her on the phone this morning,” Ida said. “She canceled the

auction at the house.”

Sophie furrowed her brow. “Why would she do that?”

“I asked her,” Ida said. “And she says she’s having doubts about selling the old house. About giving up Grandma and Grandpa’s beautiful things.”

“Mom? Having doubts about a decision she’s already made? That doesn’t sound like her. Are you sure she isn’t sick?”

Ida swatted Sophie’s thigh lovingly, and Sophie shimmered with regret. It didn’t serve her to act so sarcastically about such a complicated matter.

“She told me she’s going to therapy,” Ida said after a moment’s pause.

This time, Sophie turned her head so abruptly that a shot of pain went up her neck. “Mom? In therapy?”

“It boggles my mind, too.”

Sophie tried to imagine Katrina on a soft chair in a shadowy office somewhere, attempting to articulate her feelings to a faceless therapist. What would she say? Would she spend her time blaming Sophie for everything?

“Anyway, the girls are thrilled the house will remain in the family,” Ida stated. “They begged me to spend spring break there, so that’s what we’re doing. We’re going grocery shopping after this to fill up that big pantry. And I guess tonight, we’ll order pizza, eat it by the fire, and watch movies. We’ll bring some spirit back to the old place again.”

Sophie’s heart swelled with memories of doing just that with Ida and Grandma Agatha many years ago. Katrina had never stuck around.

“I already asked Patrick if there’s any way you could come,” Ida said mischievously. “And he said he’s happy to make it work. If you’d like to join us.”

Sophie pressed her hand over her heart. It was all she wanted in the world.

As Ida, Frankie, Nellie, and Patrick bustled around her, preparing a bag for her to take to the house and setting up Sophie’s wheelchair, Sophie sat upright in bed, stirring with longing. It felt as though the past was reaching out from the darkness, tugging on her heartstrings. It felt as though they were all being given a second chance.

And before she chickened out, she reached for her phone and texted her mother.

SOPHIE: We’re spending the night at the Whittaker House tonight.

SOPHIE: I hope to see you there.

Once they reached the old mansion, Patrick was dutiful about setting up another bed in the living room for Sophie. Twice, Sophie waved her hand, saying, “I’m off bedrest tomorrow. I’ll be fine.” But Patrick pressed on without giving her a moment’s notice. This was his baby’s health she was talking about. This was his future bride.

With Sophie situated beneath a wave of thick sheets, Patrick dropped down to kiss her on the lips and whispered, “Let me know if you need anything. Anything at all. I can be here in ten minutes.”

Sophie glanced around the room, at Ida, at Nellie, at Frankie. She had everything she needed. She kissed him with her eyes closed and said, “I love you. So much.” Patrick’s eyes shone. “I love you, too.”

With Patrick gone, Nellie and Frankie nestled into bed on either side of Sophie as Ida set up a streaming service on the large television.

“Good thing Grandma Agatha bought this big TV to watch her soaps,” Ida joked.

“Does she still watch those?” Sophie was incredulous, remembering the hours of Grandma Agatha’s life in which she’d spent captivated by melodramatic daytime stories.

“Now that she’s in the nursing home, she’s caught up in her own dramas,” Ida said with a laugh. “I swear, it’s worse than high school.” Ida’s eyes shimmered with secrecy. “Mom mentioned she thinks Grandma has a boyfriend. But it’s not confirmed.”

“What!” Nellie and Frankie cried in unison.

“Who’s the guy?” Sophie asked. It warmed her heart to think of her eighty-five-year-old grandmother flirting girlishly. Romance never died. It lay dormant within everyone, waiting for an initial spark.

“Mom says she thinks it’s some guy named Ben,” Ida explained. “He passes by Grandma’s room all the time and gives her little candies. He dotes on her.”

Sophie’s heart swelled. Her grandmother deserved this flirtation, whatever it was. For decades, she’d been married to someone whose idea of flirtation was getting drunk and passing out on the hallway floor. Agatha had been through too much. Maybe her icy heart would begin to melt.

Ida ordered pizza online—five different pies and breadsticks—and announced it would be a little more than forty minutes before they arrived. Nellie and Frankie squabbled about what movie to begin with for their evening marathon. *Legally Blonde* was in the running, as was *Friends with*

Benefits.

“I never liked Justin Timberlake’s hair,” Ida said, wrinkling her nose.

“Girls, he was huge when we were your age,” Sophie remembered, feeling ancient as stone. “We couldn’t get away from him.”

“I tried,” Ida said. “But he’s always lurking around the corner. Now, even my daughters want to watch his movie!”

Nellie and Frankie giggled.

“I think he’s kind of cute,” Nellie admitted.

Ida clapped her hands over her face dramatically. “I’ve failed as a mother.”

Eventually, Nellie suggested *Sweet Home Alabama*, and they settled in, ears perked for the sound of the doorbell. Immediately, they were drawn into the world of small-town Alabama, long-lost loves, and second chances—themes that made the four of them swoon.

When the doorbell rang, Nellie popped up, paused the television, and said, “That must be the pizza!” She hurried to the door with Frankie hot on her heels. But when they opened it, they squealed in recognition. “Grandma!”

Sophie’s heartbeat quickened, and her tongue tasted like sand. It was showtime.

Ida joined her daughters in the foyer, greeting Katrina and ushering her inside. “We’re about twenty minutes into *Sweet Home Alabama*,” she explained.

“I love that movie,” Katrina said softly.

Sophie felt cornered in bed, incapable of running. As Katrina drew closer, she imagined her face twisted with rage; she imagined violent words, accusing Sophie of horrible things.

But the woman who entered the living room was just Katrina Whittaker Coleman—a Nantucket islander of five-foot-five, with dark hair with honey highlights, kind eyes lined with wrinkles, and a smile that opened up her face. Sophie filled her lungs with air. This was the woman she’d feared. It couldn’t be.

“We’ll head to the kitchen,” Ida said, ushering Nellie and Frankie back down the hallway.

It was time for Katrina and Sophie to talk. The intensity of it pressed hard against Sophie’s chest.

“Hi,” Katrina said finally, lacing her arms behind her back.

“Hi.”

Katrina stepped closer, bringing with her the chilly smell of the sea winds that burst against the mansion. Sophie was reminded of being a young girl when Katrina had tended to her during illnesses, bringing her soup in bed. “Stay right where you are,” she’d said. “Your body needs to heal.”

“How are you feeling?” Katrina asked.

Sophie tried to brighten her voice. “I feel okay, all things considered.”

“That’s wonderful.” Katrina tugged at her sweater. “When I heard the news, I felt so...” She trailed off. “Helpless is the word. And awful.”

Sophie bowed her head. A moment of silence passed, and the intensity in the room seemed to double.

Katrina shifted forward and sat at the far corner of Sophie’s bed. “I realized something,” she continued, pushing herself. Sophie wondered if she’d talked to her therapist about this if she’d asked her for advice. “I never properly apologized for what happened in the hospital twenty-two years ago.”

Sophie was caught off guard. Although she’d been awash with memories from that horrible day, she hadn’t realized her mother had been, too.

“I am so sorry, Sophie,” Katrina whispered, her voice cracking. “I’m so sorry that I stormed into your hospital room, accusing you. You’d just gone through one of the most traumatic events of your life. And there I was, blaming you for it.” Katrina’s eyes filled with tears. It looked as though it pained her to maintain eye contact with Sophie. To her credit, she did.

“I have no explanation for it,” Katrina said. “I never properly dealt with my ‘daddy issues,’ so to speak. But those never should have extended onto our relationship, Sophie. I never should have let my anger toward my father affect my opinion of you.”

Sophie swallowed. Her throat felt thick.

“I wasn’t using,” Sophie offered. This was the first time she was able to tell the truth—the first time she’d been able to fully say just how painful it had been. “Maybe my body wasn’t healthy enough for a baby because of what I’d already done to it; maybe that was true. But I hadn’t done anything purposely to hurt that pregnancy. Back then, that pregnancy was all I was living for.” She coughed and blinked back tears. “I did everything I could think of. I drank smoothies. I got enough sleep. I went on long, slow walks on the beach. But still. That baby didn’t want to stick around.”

Katrina reached for Sophie’s leg and touched her knee tenderly. “Oh,

honey. Oh, gosh. I'm so sorry."

Sophie rubbed her eyes like a child.

"And I'm sorry I didn't listen to you." Katrina's voice was hardly a whisper. "When you were trying to tell me you weren't happy with Jared. I'm sorry I pushed you."

"Nobody forced me to marry Jared."

"I know," Katrina offered.

"And I really did love him. Or I thought I loved him."

Katrina bent her head and studied her hand on Sophie's knee. "I've thought about you in that house ever since he left. How painful it must be."

This was something Sophie hadn't told anyone—that she could sometimes hear Jared's voice echoing through the halls as though he'd just returned from work. She often woke up from nightmares in which she was thirty-five and still trapped in a loveless, abusive marriage.

Katrina bit her lower lip and turned to view the living room, the crackling fire, and the paintings hanging from the walls. Sophie imagined she could see Katrina's memories playing out on her irises. She imagined she could feel the depths of pain this place brought out in her.

"Maybe Ida told you I don't want to sell anymore," Katrina said.

"Why the change of heart?"

Katrina forced her eyes toward Sophie's, and a shiver raced up and down her spine. "I want to give it to you."

Sophie's jaw dropped. The immense house around her seemed far bigger, with its echoing, empty rooms. The grounds rolled into the bluffs on either side and filtered out into a sparkling beach—all of which had belonged to Agatha and Calvin. It seemed impossible that it could ever be Sophie's.

"I'm serious," Katrina went on. "This old place is haunted for me. I walk the walls and remember my childhood of neglect and fear. And it's never been comfortable. I've never been able to outgrow it. But you, Sophie? You don't have those memories. You have your own. Your nightmares exist within that house you and Patrick live in. And I don't want you to live in that space anymore. Not with that baby coming. You need a fresh start."

Sophie had never seen such generosity echoed back in her mother's eyes. The contrast to Katrina's old ways was alarming. Sophie gaped at her as tears welled.

"You don't have to do this," Sophie said quietly.

"But I do," Katrina assured her. "I'll never stop blaming myself for all the

trouble I caused you. For all the blame and anger I sent your way. But maybe, with this new era in this house, we can both start anew. If you can find it in your heart to forgive me.”

Sophie closed her eyes, and tears shot down her cheeks and dripped down her chin. She felt choked. “I was horrible to you,” she said through tears. “As a teenager, I lied to you. I got the best of you at every turn. And I made you feel like a horrible mother. I see it so clearly, especially now that I’m headed into motherhood again.”

Katrina furrowed her brow. “I should have done everything in my power to get you the help you needed. But I was weak. And I didn’t want to believe that what you were going through was all that serious. I wanted to believe you were just a bad kid. But you weren’t! You were spectacular. You were kind and compassionate with the world at your feet. Your only real problem was…” She tugged at her hair.

“Addiction.” Sophie finished for her. She’d grown accustomed to saying it aloud. To calling herself what she was. “I’m an addict.”

“But you’re also my daughter. You’re my Sophie,” Katrina said. “And I’ll love you to pieces till the day I die.”

Sophie and Katrina held the silence. Far down the hallway, in the kitchen, came the sound of Nellie and Frankie giggling about something and Ida speaking over them, telling them to quiet down. The sound was so familiar—a mother and two daughters—that it made Katrina and Sophie smile in spite of themselves.

Sophie patted the space beside her in bed, and Katrina scooted up and placed her head on Sophie’s shoulder. It was as though their roles had been reversed. One day—perhaps twenty years from now—that would be so. Katrina might be too old to care for herself alone. Perhaps Grant would be gone.

Oh, these were horrible thoughts. Sophie shoved them aside. She would deal with that future when it came.

“I cried for ages when I found out the baby was okay,” Katrina said quietly.

“Me too,” Sophie admitted. “But Patrick cried more than I did.”

Katrina chuckled gently. “It’s strange that history had to repeat itself the way it did.”

“It felt like a test,” Sophie admitted. “I wasn’t sure I would pass it this time.”

“But it was completely different,” Katrina offered. “Because you have Patrick, now.”

Sophie’s heart thudded. Her mother understood. She saw it now. Katrina recognized the density of Patrick and Sophie’s love.

As they lay in silence, considering the weight of the past, Sophie remembered her wedding day to Jared. It had been several months after she’d lost the baby, and she’d gotten drunk in the morning and taken several pills. She was barely able to stand on her heels, and she wavered in the side room at the church as Katrina zipped her dress and gushed about how beautiful she was. Abstractly, Sophie remembered that she and Katrina had never discussed the incident at the hospital. Katrina had stormed in, blamed Sophie for her own miscarriage, and then carried on pretending that it hadn’t happened. Guilt blossomed between them like a tumor. And they’d spent the next several decades pretending that everything was all right, as Sophie’s addictions had only worsened.

“What should we do with this old place?” Sophie asked now, her voice cracking.

“It needs a paint job,” Katrina said. “That’s for sure.”

“I don’t suppose you’d like to have a hand in the re-design?” Sophie asked. “Maybe we can make it something else. Something better.”

Katrina perked up. Her eyes were bright. “You’ll call Hilary for help, of course.”

“I wouldn’t dream of leaving out our Sotheby’s connection,” Sophie joked.

“Let’s start on the nursery,” Katrina breathed.

Sophie imagined herself in the upstairs nursery, rocking her baby to sleep. She imagined Patrick down the hall, exhausted after taking his shift with the baby, his eyes bleary but his heart full. They would walk the grounds with the little babe tied to their chests, watching the waves lap up on the shore and crash against the rocks. And they would take each day at a time—sober, in love, and building a new life.

It was the most beautiful thing she could imagine.

The doorbell rang, and this time, it was really the pizza delivery guy. Nellie and Frankie sprang into the living room with boxes of pizza and piled them up on the coffee table as Ida hurried him, apologizing for them. But Katrina and Sophie waved her off.

“We have to restart *Sweet Home Alabama*,” Sophie insisted. “For Mom.”

Nobody protested. It was already their thirtieth viewing of the film; why not a thirty-first? As Nellie restarted it, Ida piled a plate high with pizza for Sophie and handed it over, then licked her fingers of grease. Her eyes drifted from Sophie to Katrina and back again. Ida was their Switzerland, the one who stayed out of it but loved them through everything.

“Patrick and I are moving in,” Sophie said, breaking the silence.

Ida yelped and wrapped her arms around Sophie and Katrina. Nellie and Frankie looked bemused, exchanging glances before they finally fell into the Coleman-Whittaker group hug. Outside, a brash March wind tore through the trees that lined the property, but the tiniest shoots of green lined the garden, promising spring. Before long, the weather would shift, and warm temperatures would draw crowds to the beaches, their laughter echoing beneath the enormous cerulean sky.

Sophie promised herself she would soak up every inch of that sun. She was grateful for the new life she’d been given. And she needed to remind herself of it every day.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The rehearsal dinner for Sophie and Patrick's wedding was held on the first Friday of April at Katrina and Grant's home. Because there was an event at the church that evening, they couldn't have an official "rehearsal" and had decided to wing it.

"We just have to walk down the aisle, right?" Sophie had joked. "I think I can manage that without practice."

Katrina was in too good of a mood to insist. "Whatever will be, will be," she'd joked.

Many hours before the guests were set to arrive, Katrina stood in a stained T-shirt and a pair of sweats and vacuumed the living room and dining room for the third time that week, scrambling into the kitchen at intervals to check on the feast. For some ungodly reason, she'd promised Sophie she would cook a five-course meal for all of their family members and the few friends she and Patrick had invited. It was more work than Katrina had ever set for herself on purpose. And except for the endless anxiety that shot through her heart every hour on the hour, she was having more fun than she had in ages.

Grant breezed through the kitchen as the shallots sizzled in the skillet. "Smells delicious, darling," he said, then kissed her on the cheek.

Katrina blushed. "I don't know how I'll get everything done! Someone needs to pick up the cake! And the flowers? Goodness." Her head swam, but still, she couldn't get the smile off her face. She bubbled with excitement. Sophie was getting married!

"Let me handle it," Grant ordered.

Katrina had hoped for this. Quickly, she wrote him a list of everything she needed and sent him out into the promising April afternoon. With Grant gone, she worked more diligently, setting the dining room table and putting up the engagement photographs of Sophie and Patrick. She even took a moment to gaze at the photograph, noting the features in Sophie's face that belonged to her, Grant, and even Agatha. When Agatha learned Sophie and Patrick planned to move into her home, she wept with happiness. "Your father would be so proud!"

In therapy, Katrina had begun to attack her daddy issues head-on. She'd recounted numerous stories from her childhood, discussing ways her father's addiction had markedly impacted her development and her self-esteem. Slowly, her therapist had begun to untangle these events in Katrina's mind, helping her to make sense of them. Katrina was already sleeping better. And, when her mother spoke of her father as though he were a saint, Katrina was better able to let it go. A fact of life was that Agatha had loved Calvin more than anything. By its definition, love could often be blind.

Sophie arrived around four to help out with last-minute preparations. At now nearly five months pregnant, she waddled slightly up the walkway and laughed at herself as she entered. "I never imagined I'd walk like a penguin down the aisle."

"You'll be the most beautiful penguin bride," Katrina joked.

Sophie showed Katrina her three outfit options for that evening, and they took nearly thirty minutes to decide, going over the pros and cons of each. Katrina had never had so much fun with Sophie. As a teenager, Sophie had refuted Katrina's advice on fashion, insinuating that she had no idea what she was talking about. Now, Sophie often referred to Katrina as a "fashion guru."

"I think the suit is just so classic," Katrina said of the two-piece cream suit, the blazer of which worked wonders with Sophie's pregnant belly. They'd both agreed they wanted to work with the belly rather than try to hide it. After all, Sophie wasn't embarrassed to be having her first child with Patrick. At forty-two, she wanted to shout it from the rooftops. Katrina wanted to shout it with her.

"The suit it is!" Sophie said.

Sophie and Katrina got ready in Katrina's bathroom, helping each other with makeup and commenting on lip color. As Katrina finished herself off with blush, there were footsteps on the staircase, followed by a bright,

“Hello! Is anyone home?” It was Ida.

“We’re in here!” Sophie called.

Ida appeared a moment later, bringing with her a wave of expensive perfume. Her makeup was exquisitely sophisticated, and she wore a navy blue dress with a high collar and a cinched waist. Sophie hugged her and squealed. “It’s happening!”

“You both look gorgeous.” Ida sighed.

“As do you,” Katrina said, snapping the top back on her blush.

“Nellie and Frankie are downstairs,” Ida reported, leaning against the bathroom counter. “And I think I just saw Sam, Darcy, and Rachelle pull up.”

“Uh-oh,” Katrina said. “I should have known the Coleman family would come before we were ready.”

“Everyone just wants to help,” Ida said.

“And eat,” Sophie joked. “You said there would be appetizers, remember?”

“That’s what unites our family the most,” Ida agreed.

Katrina laughed and led her daughters downstairs to find Nellie, Frankie, Sam, Darcy, and Rachelle in the kitchen. Sam cracked a bottle of wine and a bottle of non-alcoholic champagne and flashed smiles and screeches of, “You all look so beautiful!” As they toasted the upcoming party, more cars parked along the road and in the driveway, and Derek, Patrick, Brent, and Norm strode up, carrying presents and bottles of wine. Katrina hurried to throw her arms around her brother. Norm’s wife, Brenda, and the kids were still at the hotel; they would be here soon.

“Uncle Norm!” Sophie cried, coming to hug him. “It’s so good to see you.”

“And you, Soph,” Norm said, his eyes shining. “I’m so happy for you. Where’s that fiancé of yours?”

Sophie led Uncle Norm to Patrick. Katrina watched as they shook hands and exchanged pleasantries. Patrick asked, “So you’re the famous Hollywood uncle I always hear about, huh?” And Norm laughed. Unlike Katrina had always suspected, he hadn’t forgotten his roots.

Grant was unable to get back in the driveway. Katrina watched as he turned around in the cul-de-sac and parked behind Sam’s SUV. Katrina donned her coat and hurried out to help him with the flowers and the cake.

“I thought we said seven?” Grant said, his eyes alight.

“Apparently, everyone was too excited to wait.”

“That’s our family, I guess,” Grant said.

Grant and Katrina re-entered the throng of partygoers, etching out a path back to the kitchen to store the cake for later. Although it was far smaller than the wedding cake for tomorrow, it was sizable enough for the entire rehearsal dinner crew. And Katrina felt sure she would be cursed with leftovers for the foreseeable future.

“There he is!” Roland called out. “The father of the bride!” He streamed into the kitchen and clapped his younger brother on the back, his eyes shining.

Katrina was moved. Grant had said that he and Roland had had numerous heart-to-hearts since Sophie’s addiction had come to light. They’d discussed issues of fatherhood, of masculinity. Of childhood trauma. And in that way, they’d become closer than ever—even this late in life. It was remarkable.

In a way, Katrina was jealous of their forever commitment to one another. Her sibling had fled. And only now, decades later, had they found their way back to one another. Her heart was heavy with regret.

As Katrina set out the flowers around her home, in the living room, on the dining room table, and even out on the back porch, which was chilly yet still beautiful for post-dinner coffee or nightcaps, she heard her mother’s voice. She immediately abandoned her mission and returned to the foyer to find Agatha—and her mysterious date. When Agatha had requested that she bring “her male friend,” Katrina had insisted on it. “He’s welcome, Mom. Anytime.”

Katrina ached with curiosity about this man. It had been more than twenty years since Agatha had had any romance in her life. And Calvin hadn’t exactly offered much in the way of romance during the majority of her marriage.

The man Agatha had brought stood five-foot-eleven, far taller than most eighty-something men. He wore a suit that was probably thirty years old, and he’d combed his hair with perfect strokes and gel. He carried a bouquet and smiled at Katrina nervously, as though he wanted to impress her just as much as he wanted to please Agatha. It broke Katrina’s heart.

“My name is Mel,” he said, passing Katrina the bouquet.

“Mel. Welcome to my home,” Katrina said, accepting the flowers.

“This is my beautiful daughter,” Agatha said.

Katrina caught herself before she burst into sobs.

Mel touched Agatha's elbow and said, "She looks just like you, Aggie."

It struck Katrina as odd, now, that her father had never called her mother by a nickname. Always, it had been Agatha. Always, it had been formal.

"Make yourself a home," Agatha said, leading Mel and her mother into the living room. "Can I get you a drink?"

"I don't drink," Mel said.

"We have non-alcoholic champagne," Katrina announced. "Or tea?"

"Tea," Mel said, breathing a sigh of relief.

"You'll never catch Mel without a cup of tea," Agatha said, looking at him as though he carried the sun, moon, and stars in his arms.

At eight, Katrina ushered everyone to the dining room table for the feast. She'd set name cards in front of her mother's China, pretending to be a "real" wedding planner. She eyed Hilary nervously, knowing that Hilary often rubbed shoulders in spectacular settings. She was invited to exclusive parties. Her boyfriend, Marc, was spending more and more time away from San Francisco—but that didn't mean he left his judgment out west.

But even Marc and Hilary gushed about the setting.

"This reminds me of that hotel in Berkeley," Marc said to Hilary, snapping his fingers. "Remember when we went to that party for Sotheby's?"

"Yes! That's what I was trying to think of," Hilary said. "Your design strategy matches theirs, Aunt Katrina."

"You're just being nice," Katrina scolded them.

But even still, her heart swelled with joy. It was marvelous to be recognized for your efforts.

Champagne, non-alcoholic and alcoholic, plus tea for Mel, was poured. And then, Grant stood and said, "I want to make a speech. A brief one. If the bride says that I'm allowed?"

Sophie laughed. "Of course, Daddy."

"What about the mother of the bride?" Grant winced at Katrina, who laughed even harder than Sophie.

"We know you're going to do it anyway," Katrina teased. "Get on with it before the food gets cold."

Grant raised his champagne glass nervously, eyeing his Coleman family members, Norm, Agatha, and Mel. His gaze finally settled on Sophie. A wave of sorrow passed over his face. Katrina could practically read his mind. She could see it all—their tremendous past together. The fact that Sophie had

taken her first steps in the next room. She'd learned to ride a bike in the driveway. How was she forty-two years old? How had they gotten so old?

"Sophie," Grant began, his voice cracking. "What can I say? I'm over the moon for you. When we first got to know Patrick, your mother and I couldn't get over the way you looked at one another. We returned to our own memories, remembering what it was like to fall in love with each other all those years ago. What you and Patrick have is real. And it's sensational." Grant raised his glass higher. "We wish you all the happiness in the world. And tomorrow, when I walk you down the aisle, I'll try my best not to cry all over you."

Everyone at the table shivered with laughter. Katrina reached up to touch Grant's elbow. Her heart shifted.

"To Sophie and Patrick," Grant said. There was a sob at the edge of his voice.

"To Sophie and Patrick," everyone repeated.

As they fell into the gorgeous evening, feasting, refilling glasses, telling stories, and laughing, the spring air wafted in through the cracked windows, invigorating them. The sound of their joy swelled from the house and filled the air over the black water.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Twenty-two years ago, on the morning of Sophie's wedding to Jared, Sophie had woken up with a violent stomachache. For nearly an hour, swirling with nightmares, she'd toiled in the bathroom, drinking, blinking at herself in the mirror, demanding answers of herself. Why was her life such a mess? Why couldn't she get it together? "Jared is right about you," she'd told herself, pointing at her reflection angrily. "You're nothing. You're lucky he's even marrying you. You should have been left alone."

These were difficult memories, Sophie knew. And now that she'd begun to see a therapist, just like Katrina, she'd begun to attack them head-on. Slowly, they'd begun to lose their power over her. Sophie couldn't wait to squeeze them dry and move on.

By contrast, on the morning of Sophie's wedding to Patrick, she woke up at her mother and father's house clear-eyed and happier than ever. She floated downstairs in a pair of running pants, a hat, and a sweatshirt, drank a cup of coffee on the back porch with her father, and then ran down the beach, her tennis shoes cutting into the sand as she went. The sun over the water was pinks and oranges, and she stopped short at the edge of the water, where the froth raced across the sands, raised her hands to the sky, and thanked God above for taking her out of the darkness of her life. "I'm free," she reminded herself.

Free from addiction. Free from Jared. Free from the terror of hating herself.

The wedding was small. Simple. Just family and very close friends. Sophie had insisted on this, telling Katrina that her enormous wedding

twenty-two years ago had been like a nightmare. “All those eyes on me. I felt like they knew how unhappy I was. I thought someone would jump up and start laughing at me.”

Yearning for simplicity, Sophie had asked Sam to do her hair rather than hire someone. Sam arrived at nine thirty with bagels, cream cheese, and a big bag of styling equipment. In her wake came Ida, Nellie, Frankie, Darcy, Rachelle, Hilary, and Aria, all of whom planned to get ready at Katrina and Grant’s place and travel to the church together. The younger girls floated with excitement. Probably, they felt they were only a few years out from their own weddings, their own gowns, their own big, life-altering decisions. Sophie wanted to tell them to take their time, not to rush into anything just for the allure of a wedding. But she knew they had to make their own mistakes. That was the nature of growing up.

And Sophie still felt like she was growing up. Motherhood would force that even more. Of this, she’d joked to Katrina, “I’m preparing myself to make one mistake after another.” And Katrina had said, “That’s what motherhood is all about.”

Sam styled Sophie’s hair with simplicity in mind, curling it in shining ringlets and drawing it into a half-updo. Her hair shimmered with hairspray, and it was tight around her temples, reminding her of old dance recitals she’d performed as a child. It gave her a funny expectation and a fluttering in her stomach. Something big was about to happen.

Hilary stepped up to do Sophie’s makeup, insisting she was better at it than Sam. Sam threw up her hands and stepped to the side. “She is,” she promised. “I can’t hold a candle to the magic Hilary makes. Some of her most iconic friends insist on her doing their makeup. Don’t they, Hil?”

“They trust me,” Hilary agreed, poring through a mighty bag of makeup she’d brought from home and drawing out eyeliner, contouring colors, various lipsticks, and a few utensils Sophie had never used or even seen before.

Sophie laughed and opened herself up to the mastery of Hilary’s makeup skills. Within the hour, her face transformed as Hilary contoured, raised, and thickened her eyebrows, sharpened her cheekbones, and plumped up her lips. The woman in the mirror was half Sophie, half *Vogue* model. Sophie smiled and watched her reflection smile back. It was far better than what she’d paid a makeup artist to do twenty-two years ago.

“It isn’t too much?” Sophie asked the women in the room.

Katrina crept toward her to investigate. Her hair was in curls, her face was perfectly done up, and her eyeliner was drawn in dramatic wings.

“Oh, honey,” she said, taking Sophie’s hands. “You’re always stunning. But right now, you look like a bride.”

An hour before the ceremony, the Coleman women loaded Sophie’s dress in Katrina’s vehicle and disappeared in their separate cars, buckling their seat belts and touching their curls gently, terrified the swift walk outside had caused them to frizz. Sophie joined her mother, sitting up front, her heart blasting against her rib cage. Ida jumped in the back with Frankie and Nellie, all of whom were already wearing their spring dresses. Ida was officially Sophie’s matron of honor, but Sophie had told her to wear whatever she pleased. Ida had answered the call with a tremendous, forest green dress.

That was the thing about Ida. She had a knack for knowing what worked. She never missed.

When Sophie was just a girl, she’d been sure Ida was the smartest person she’d ever met. She followed her around, peppering her with questions, chasing her in her roller skates, begging her to play, to draw, to sing. Ida had always done her best to make Sophie feel special. To help her feel included.

Recently, Sophie confessed to Ida, “I never wanted you to know I was using. I thought you were perfect. And if you ever found out how imperfect I was, I was sure you would stop talking to me.”

“That’s the silliest thing I’ve ever heard,” Ida said. “I remember thinking you were the coolest girl in high school. Everyone wanted to be your friend. Everyone wanted to date you. I was just your dweebier older sister.”

Sophie had blinked at her, incredulous. The past was always a matter of perspective. And it seemed to be shifting and changing at every turn.

Katrina pulled up in front of the Presbyterian church, where Sophie, Ida, Nellie, and Frankie scrambled out. Ida and Sophie carried the dress, protected in a black bag, through the side door of the church and hung it on a rack in the room they’d set aside for Sophie to dress. There was a bouquet on the table and several glass bottles of sparkling water. There was a note on the table that offered a Bible verse.

“So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore, what God has joined together, let man not separate.”

The words thudded through Sophie’s heart. She swallowed the lump in her throat, momentarily lost in thought.

“You okay, Sis?” Ida asked, touching her shoulder.

“I was just thinking about the first time I met Patrick,” Sophie offered.

They’d been so blurry with want—for drugs. For escape. But somehow, they’d found solace in one another. They’d been two lonely shores drowning in the darkness.

“It’s just crazy we ended up here,” Sophie said, blinking back tears. “Maybe we shouldn’t have made it.”

“You were always going to make it,” Ida breathed, her voice catching. “We weren’t going to let you fall.”

Sophie stepped into her wedding dress and held her breath as Ida buttoned it to the nape of her neck. Before her, Nellie and Frankie gushed quietly. Their earnestness was reflected in their eyes—proof that Sophie looked the part of the bride. Sophie placed her hands over her pregnant belly and closed her eyes, trying to focus her energy on her baby. She thought, *your father and I are getting married today. Wish us luck. And see you later.*

* * *

Katrina appeared with Sophie’s bouquet a few minutes before the ceremony. The organ buzzed through the floorboards, and the soloist could be heard, her voice shimmering far above, circling like a bird. Sophie reminded herself she couldn’t cry. Not now.

Sophie held her mother’s hand and walked to the back of the sanctuary, where her father awaited her. He was dressed in an immaculate tuxedo and looked incredibly regal, his salt-and-pepper hair sticking up due to the frantic spring winds. His eyes shimmered with tears.

“Soph,” he said, shaking his head. “You look stunning.”

“This old thing?” Sophie joked, her smile enormous.

Behind her father in the sanctuary, the last of her wedding guests took their seats. She could see Grandma Agatha and her new beau, Mel, seated in the third row, holding hands. Grandma Agatha wore an outrageous hat with a feather out to the side, while Mel wore the same suit as last night. He fidgeted but smiled, pleased to be by Agatha’s side. Sophie’s heart swelled.

The soloist was finished, stepping lightly from the stage to grab a seat toward the back of the sanctuary. The organist held the current chord for what felt like ages, keeping the audience rapt. Then, all at once, her fingers shifted, and she began “Canon in D” by Pachelbel, Sophie and Katrina’s

selection. Ida set her jaw and nodded at Sophie, then laced her arm through Derek, who led her down the aisle in time to the music. As they walked, Patrick reached the center of the far end of the aisle, his eyes shining with expectation. He hadn't shown Sophie his tuxedo yet—calling it “bad luck.” The one he'd selected was classic. It made him look like Fred Astaire.

After Ida and Derek reached the end of the aisle, Katrina squeezed Sophie's hand a final time and whispered, “See you on the other side.” She then accepted Brent's arm and allowed him to guide her down the aisle.

Sophie and Grant stood at the edge of the aisle, their toes hovering over it as though they were about to jump into a great abyss. The music continued, the most soulful and invigorating sound Sophie had ever heard.

“Are you ready, honey?” Grant asked quietly.

Sophie turned to look her father in the eye. “I'm ready.”

She seemed to remember him asking her that twenty-two years ago, too. But she couldn't remember her response. It had probably been a lie.

Sophie and Grant stepped out together, headed for Patrick. Like magic, everyone in the sanctuary stood and turned to watch her come forward as though she were royalty. Sophie met their gazes head-on, smiling at Grandpa Chuck, Oriana, Meghan, Uncle Roland, and Hilary. Their faces echoed their pride.

Before Sophie knew it, she'd reached the end of the line. Her hands were in Patrick's hands. Her eyes were caught in Patrick's gaze. The pastor they'd met through Narcotics Anonymous, who'd been instrumental in repairing their relationship with the Lord, stepped forward and raised his hands in prayer. And Patrick and Sophie closed their eyes beneath his benediction. They were becoming one.

With Sophie's eyes closed and the pastor's kind voice echoing scripture, she couldn't help but imagine the future—the hospital room where they would welcome their baby, the first songs they would sing, the sleepless, love-filled nights they would share. She imagined the love she and Patrick currently felt for one another, doubled or tripled, echoing out into the baby they'd made.

When the pastor's prayer was complete, Sophie and Patrick opened their eyes and found one another again. Sophie's smile burst as her heart skipped a beat. She marveled that love could make you feel this way and eliminate the darkness in your heart. Sophie tucked her hands deeper into Patrick's mighty ones, grateful for the strength they'd shown one another, for the hardships

they'd already carried. With this partner by her side, she was no longer afraid. And that was the grandest blessing of all.

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