

# KATIE WINTERS

## *A Sister's Blessing*



A KATAMA BAY SERIES 

# A Sister's Blessing

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A Katana Bay Series

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

**Katie Winters**

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# Chapter One

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Alyssa was always ready to leave New York. The city was no longer her home, not fully, and the glorious beaches and frothing waves of Martha's Vineyard continually beckoned, so much so that she hardly spent more than a week or two at Maggie's apartment.

Now, as she shoved underwear, blouses, skirts, and a knitted winter hat into her suitcase, November sunlight glittered through a large oak that grew powerfully from the soil of a Brooklyn avenue, and drivers honked their horns and skidded their tires. Everyone was always so impatient in the city. Why did they need to make so much noise? Was everything in their lives really that dramatic?

Alyssa smiled to herself. Martha's Vineyard had changed her in so many ways. It was there she'd learned to quiet her anxious soul.

"Alyssa?" Maggie's voice echoed from the other side of the apartment. "Can you help me for a sec?"

Alyssa popped up from her suitcase and hurried down the hallway to find her older sister in a state of panic. Her hair was in curlers, and she scurried around in a pair of tights and a tank-top with Lucy on her hip. In every way, the picture was perfect—Maggie as a young mother of twenty-six, tired yet overwhelmed with love, never with enough time, yet always eager to try her best.

The only problem, of course, was that Lucy wasn't Maggie's daughter. Lucy was the two-year-old daughter of

Hunter, Alyssa's high school boyfriend. Hunter struggled with addiction and had checked into rehab the previous spring. Now that he was clean, he'd taken a job in the Pacific Northwest while Maggie and Alyssa raised his daughter until he was emotionally ready for the task. Well, if Alyssa was honest, Maggie was more Lucy's guardian, while Alyssa picked up the slack. But Maggie, being Maggie, needed it to be that way.

Maggie's smile was nourishing as she passed Lucy to Alyssa. "She needs some breakfast," Maggie explained. "And I need to get my hair out of these curlers. I don't know what possessed me to try them in the first place. Am I a fifties housewife?"

Alyssa laughed. "All right, Lucille Ball. Where's your Ricky?"

Maggie rolled her eyes and hustled back to her bedroom, which she shared with her husband, Rex. The two of them had been married for over two years, but, to Alyssa, they'd been together for more or less forever. Unfortunately, even before they'd tied the knot, the couple had tried to conceive, chasing after Maggie's preconceived notion of a "perfect family." "I always thought I'd be a young mother, so we'd have time for five or six kids," Maggie had confessed to Alyssa. Even IVF hadn't worked out yet, despite Rex and Maggie throwing thousands and thousands of dollars at the problem.

Lucy had been a godsend. She'd filled the baby-sized hole in Maggie's life as she and Rex had considered what to do next.

With Lucy now in Alyssa's arms, she inhaled the soft and tender smell of Lucy's strawberry shampoo. Lucy rubbed her eyes, still tired and not eager to speak.

"Let's get you some breakfast," Alyssa cooed as she slid the little girl into her highchair. She then tied a bib around Lucy's neck as Lucy slapped her palms against the plastic table gleefully. "Why can't we all have as much fun as you do?" Alyssa demanded, to which Lucy giggled.

After half a year with Lucy, Alyssa was practiced in the art of mothering or something like it. She was twenty-four and had begrudgingly accepted adulthood recently, as it seemed to be a thing that was going to happen to her whether she wanted it or not. Her mother, Janine, had laughed when Alyssa had confessed this and told her, “I’ve never felt like an adult. Not one day of my entire life.”

Lucy ate sliced peaches and smeared yogurt across her cheeks. By now, Alyssa knew better than to clean her up until she was finished and instead made herself a small bowl of oatmeal and checked her phone. Her cousin, Cole, had texted her.

COLE: Heard you’re coming back today?

ALYSSA: Can’t keep me away for long.

COLE: Cool. I have some news.

COLE: I don’t know who else to talk to about it, actually.

ALYSSA: Wow. I’m intrigued.

ALYSSA: Any hint?

But suddenly, Lucy swiped her arm through the rest of her yogurt, and white gunk splashed across the floor. As she pocketed her phone, Alyssa groaned but smiled at Lucy, saying, “Are you going to make today difficult for us, baby girl?” Lucy giggled again, clearly enjoying her own game.

Alyssa prepared a bit more yogurt for Lucy and wiped up the floor, realizing Lucy’s messes no longer bothered her in the least. It wasn’t the first time she’d realized this “pretend motherhood” era had irrevocably changed her. Responsibility had woven its way into other areas of her life, as well. She always called her mother back. She got enough sleep at night. She hardly ever went out with a guy who seemed wrong for her.



“Maggie?” Rex, Maggie’s handsome husband, bolted through the front door of the apartment. His tone was harsh.

“She’s in your bedroom,” Alyssa explained as she tossed a paper towel in the trashcan.

Lucy greeted him with a vibrant “*Rex!*”

Rex’s nostrils flared. “Are you really going to the island today?”

“Um.” Alyssa tilted her head, confused. Before she could answer, Rex yanked on his tie to loosen it and walked down the hallway. “Maggie,” he called again.

“I’m right here, babe.” Maggie stepped from the bedroom, her curls bouncing beautifully, fresh out of their curlers. As she lifted onto her tiptoes to kiss her husband hello, he brushed past her and entered their bedroom.

“I need to talk to you.”

Alyssa turned as quickly as she could to avoid making eye contact with Maggie. The air in the apartment was sinister and difficult to breathe. Before she could escape back to her bedroom with Lucy, Rex slammed the door of the bedroom, and his voice came from beneath the crack.

“You can’t be serious. I put the event on the calendar months ago.”

Maggie’s voice was soft and sweet. “I’m so sorry, honey. There’s just so much going on! Lucy had eight appointments in the past few weeks, and between that and my work at the gallery, I’ve felt like a chicken with its head cut off.”

“Head or not, I need you there tonight,” Rex told her. “I’ve been moving up at the firm, Maggie. You know how important it is to these people that I make a good impression. And part of that is bringing my wife. I got married for a reason, didn’t I?”

Alyssa frowned, no longer interested in running away from this argument— she wanted to hear just how bad it got. Never in her life had she heard Rex speak so forcefully and cruelly to Maggie. He sounded like a different person.

“We’ll only be gone for about a week,” Maggie reminded him. “Carmella is about to have her baby.”

“Why does Carmella need you there so desperately for the birth of her child?” Rex demanded.

“We’ve all gotten so close over the past couple of years,” Maggie breathed. “You know that, Rex. I’ve told you how important my aunts are to me.” She paused, then added, “After everything that happened with my mom and dad, it’s been so remarkable to have this big, loving family in Martha’s Vineyard.”

“Maggie, I’m your family,” Rex insisted. “Not your step-aunts. Not that toddler out there in the kitchen. Me.”

Alyssa’s eyes widened with shock. Memories from last summer poured through her mind, reminding her that once upon a time, Rex had been very sweet to Lucy. He’d adored watching Maggie mother Lucy, watching her come alive in this new chapter of her life. This was a very different tune.

“We’re going to have kids of our own, Maggie,” Rex barked now. “And that little girl out there won’t be with us forever. Just do me a favor and don’t get too close to her, okay? The minute you get too attached, she’ll be gone.”

It took all of Alyssa’s power not to storm into the bedroom and howl that Rex was a monster. Instead, she lifted Lucy from her highchair and finally hurried back into her bedroom, where she placed Lucy on the floor and continued to pack behind a closed door.

About twenty minutes later, Maggie knocked on Alyssa’s door.

“Come in!” Alyssa’s voice was bright and shiny.

Maggie entered with a big smile and again lifted Lucy to her hip. “Is everyone about ready to go?”

Alyssa studied Maggie’s expression for a moment, looking for any hints of sorrow. There was nothing. Perhaps Maggie was the greatest actress of her generation.

Not long afterwards, Maggie strapped Lucy into the toddler seat in the back of the car, then slid into the front seat and turned on the heat. The thermometer read thirty-three degrees Fahrenheit, and the tip of Alyssa's nose burned with cold.

"Hard to believe it's almost Thanksgiving," Maggie said brightly as she drove from the parking garage and exited onto their Brooklyn street.

"Yeah." Alyssa's voice was meek. She crossed and uncrossed her ankles, weighing up what she'd heard Rex say. "Hey, Mags?"

"What's up?"

Alyssa's throat was very tight. "You'd tell me if it wasn't okay that I stay with you and Rex so often, right?"

Maggie's eyes widened with surprise. "What? Sis, if I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times. *Mi casa y su casa*. That place is way too big for just Rex and I. Oh, and Lucy, of course!" Maggie flashed a smile back toward the toddler, who said, "Maggie!"

"It almost sounds like 'mama,'" Maggie pointed out. "Doesn't it?"

*It didn't, not really.* But Alyssa nodded, agreeing with her. "It really does."

The drive from New York City to Woods Hole, where they took the ferry to the island, usually took around five hours. Because the girls were always back and forth, they'd developed little rituals and often stopped at the same places for snacks or coffee. Although it was chilly, November sunlight warmed their faces through the big front window, and their laughter was ever-present, a reminder that no matter what happened in their lives, they would always find a way to be goofy together.

Throughout, Alyssa struggled, still, with the weight of what she'd heard. *What had happened to Rex? When had he become so cruel? And did he actually dislike Lucy?* Lucy had been in their hands for quite a while now— and had she not

been so sweet, adorable, and loving, perhaps Alyssa could have understood Rex's perspective. But ultimately, Lucy had brought only good to their lives, nothing more.

Then again, Alyssa knew the constant IVF treatments and fertility struggles had been problematic for Maggie and Rex. It stood to reason it had affected their marriage.

When Maggie stopped at a rest stop to change Lucy inside, Alyssa waited in the car and googled: "should I talk to my sister about her bad marriage?"

The results were varied. Often, the advice involved domestic abuse, which, thankfully, didn't apply here. Several women explained the strange yet personal dynamics of every person's marriage, which made it clear nobody on the outside could understand. One woman wrote that she'd heard an argument between her sister and her sister's husband and tried to intervene, only to have her sister tell her, "Mind your own business. Nobody is perfect. Least of all, you."

Alyssa was just about the least perfect person there was.

When Maggie and Lucy returned to the car, Alyssa shoved her phone into her purse and greeted them warmly, making peace with the idea that Maggie's marriage was none of her business. Maggie hadn't mentioned any trouble in paradise, which probably meant Rex was just stressed and sensitive.

Always, Maggie knew best— and Alyssa had to trust her.

"All right," Maggie said as she started the engine. "Next stop, Martha's Vineyard."

## Chapter Two

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The walk from Heidi Withers' cottage to the downtown bookstore, The Dog-Eared Corner, always took twenty minutes. It was November, and Heidi, now fifty-seven years old, did her best to bundle herself up against the cold. She tugged thermal underwear over her legs, wore a turtleneck under a wool sweater, pulled a thick hat over her ears, and zipped her coat to her chin. In the mirror at the front door, she laughed at this image: a very fluffy woman who would have to waddle all the way to work.

But to Heidi, the walk was invigorating. Once she got moving, the chilly feeling dissipated, and she was left to engage with the beauty of her surroundings. All her life, she'd lived on Martha's Vineyard, yet never had she allowed herself to take it for granted. Beautiful trees lifted their limbs toward a cerulean sky, and birds twittered in their branches. Fallen leaves twisted and circled in the autumn breeze, and Vineyard residents walked their dogs and raised their hands to wave. Although Heidi wasn't exactly "popular" with other islanders, she always waved back and greeted them, grateful to feel a part of a community.

Each time an islander waved, she remembered that people had tried to befriend her over the years. She'd received dinner, coffee, movie, and drink invitations— but she'd declined them. After what had happened with David, Heidi had struggled to understand her place in the world, and bit by bit, she'd fallen into solitude.

Still, Heidi always had the bookstore. It was held in a unique and historic little colonial in downtown Edgartown, and during summer months, it enjoyed plenty of foot traffic from tourists, which allowed Heidi to make a more-or-less healthy profit. Heidi prided herself on the front window of the shop, which she decorated to fit the seasons and to feature any newly-published books she thought passers-by might enjoy.

Heidi unlocked the front door and stepped into the cozy space, which was half bookstore and half café. The café portion of the space had a single counter, behind which she kept baked goods, various snacks, and an espresso machine for coffee and specialty drinks like cappuccinos. Local artists had donated their work to hang on the walls, underneath which they had hung price tags, hopeful tourists would decide to leave the Vineyard with an artistic souvenir.

The bookstore side was modest yet precise. Sections included the History of Martha's Vineyard, Memoir, Poetry, Fantasy, Horror, Literary Fiction, and Women's Fiction, which was Heidi's favorite. Heidi had set up small reading nooks where guests could take coffee, cake, and a newly purchased book and read the afternoons away, burrowing into fictional worlds as the rest of the real world continued on without them. No— nobody had used those nooks in a few months at this point, but Heidi was hopeful reading would come back into style again and draw patrons back into the cozy space.

Heidi opened the bookstore that morning by ten and sat behind the counter with a book and a cup of coffee. For many years, she'd watched her father perform this same ritual, adjusting the glasses on the bridge of his nose as he studied philosophy or read Mark Twain. The Dog-Eared Corner had been her father's brainchild, a "magical world" of his own design. After his death, he'd passed it on to Heidi, who couldn't have imagined a greater gift.

Heidi's sister, Dee, had thought the bookstore was a black hole. "You shouldn't take it," Dee had told her all those years ago. "You'll wind up there, trapped and alone, just like Dad was."

For the first hour or two, nobody entered the bookstore. Heidi read fifty pages of a novel, made herself another cup of coffee, then threw away the stale baked goods behind the counter. With her head down as she cleaned the crumbs, she allowed herself to imagine that David was in the café, bent over his homework. When she raised her head, however, the tables were empty, gleaming in a November sunbeam. *Oh, David*, she thought. *What on earth happened to you?*

At eleven-thirty, a woman in her forties entered with a toddler. She adjusted the toddler against her hip and greeted Heidi warmly. The sight of another person in the shop overwhelmed Heidi so much that she nearly spilled her coffee.

“Can I help you with anything?” Heidi asked.

The woman smiled and shook her head. “I’m just looking for something for me and something for her.”

“Toddler books are on that little blue shelf over there,” Heidi said.

The woman thanked her and placed the little girl in front of the bookshelf. The girl swatted the books excitedly, and her mother shifted each one into the light to show cows, horses, and kitties, the main characters of books for children. Ultimately, they decided on a book about koala bears, which took place in Australia.

“Good choice,” Heidi told the woman as she slid it onto the counter. “My son would have loved that as a kid.”

After the woman selected a book for herself, she passed her debit card over the counter to reveal her name: Christine Sheridan. The name rang a bell for Heidi, although she wasn’t sure why. The Sheridan Family. *They’d been important on Martha’s Vineyard at some point, perhaps?* Then again, Heidi had lived at such a distance from the rest of the world for so long that she wasn’t sure anything she’d once known had been real. Perhaps she’d made it all up.

By midday, no one else had entered the shop. Heidi made herself a cup of tea and considered other ways to get

customers into the bookstore. An online forum had suggested she branch out to online orders, but the idea of grappling with selling books on the internet made Heidi shiver in her boots. The whole point of The Dog-Eared Corner was to spend time browsing the selection, engaging with beautiful stories you'd never heard of, and stepping away from your phone and computer screen. Heidi was not sure the world's constant connection was necessarily healthy.

Then again, if Heidi had anyone to connect with, perhaps she would feel differently.

The postman arrived at three with a stack of envelopes. Heidi thanked him and asked how his day was going, and like always, he told her it was "going swell." When he left, Heidi tugged open the first envelope to find a water bill, then a second envelope to read about a local politician's run for re-election.

The third envelope fell open like a bomb.

For a long time, Heidi blinked at the number on the bill. It was extraordinarily high— an amount of money she'd never had in her bank account. And beneath that number were the words: THIS IS YOUR FINAL WARNING.

*Final warning? That couldn't be right.* Heidi hadn't received any other "warnings" before this one, so how could it be her final warning?

Panicked, Heidi flew to the door and flipped the OPEN sign to CLOSED. She then stepped into the back office, which had once belonged to her father, and continued to stare at the letter in her hands.

For some reason, she again heard her sister's voice in her head: "You'll wind up there, trapped and alone, just like Dad was."

Heidi collapsed at her father's desk and placed her face in her hands. Images from the past summer flooded her memory, ones of a packed bookstore, of wildly successful days, and of healthier bank accounts. It was true that revenue had dropped with the temperatures, but that was expected.



*Where had this bill come from?*

Heidi turned on the desktop computer and watched as it buzzed to life. The internet was slow at the bookstore, and the screen was white for a very long time before it brought up her bank account information. As she waited, she tugged open the desk drawers in front of her, her heart in her throat.

Just before the page loaded, Heidi noticed a stack of free papers in the bottom drawer of the desk. This was strange, as she was normally quite organized and liked to keep all important paperwork in separate folders, lined up in the filing cabinet on the other side of the office. As she leafed the papers out and began to engage with the text written upon them, it felt as though ten stones dropped into her stomach.

*It couldn't be. Had it really come to this?*

In her hands was a stack of bills almost exactly the same as the one she'd just received in the mail. Each of them said WARNING, dating back to eight months ago.

*But how was this possible?*

How was it possible she'd forgotten eight months of "warning" bills?

Heidi's eyes filled with tears, and the world around her softened and blurred. Abruptly, she stood, allowing the bill to fall to her feet. She then inched toward the door as sobs burst from her lungs. *Was she broken? Damaged? What was wrong with her mind?*

Heidi made her way to the front door. When she opened it, a sharp chill erupted from the street, but it didn't deter her. Rather, she was suddenly able to breathe again. She then hurried out the door, leaving it wide open behind her as she rushed to the street. The cold was delicious across her neck and her cheeks, and she removed her hair tie from her gray curls and allowed it to stream out behind her in the breeze.

Slowly, and then all at once, all memory of the bill receded from her mind. And in these moments, as she swept through the streets of Edgartown, she felt genuinely free and happy, like a child.

*Where was she going?*

It didn't matter. All that mattered was the wind, the sun, and the sky. All that mattered was her feet, moving quickly out in front of her as she roamed the town. It was the only town she'd ever really known, and yet, she was a stranger in it.

Suddenly, a middle-aged woman approached and touched Heidi gently on the shoulder. Heidi leaped back, petrified. *What was this woman doing? Why had she invaded Heidi's personal space?*

The woman lifted her hands. "Hi, there. I hate to bother you, but I was wondering if you're all right?"

Heidi frowned at the woman, who now seemed so nosy. "I'm absolutely fine," she said, although she noticed her words were slurred together and difficult to understand.

The woman then turned to speak to the man beside her. *Who was he? Was he her husband?* Heidi wanted to scream at them to leave her alone, but the fear in their eyes told her something was really wrong. *What? Was it her? Were they in danger?*

"Why don't you come with us," the woman said. Heidi could tell she tried to make her voice sweet and serene.

"I don't think so," Heidi told her. "I don't run off with strangers."

After this, everything seemed to happen quickly. Heidi again felt the woman's hand on her arm, but Heidi had the sense that she would fall without it, and she allowed it to happen. Sirens screamed in the distance, and then they were very close to her, so close that they seemed right in front of her. Other unfamiliar people approached, and a man asked her questions, mostly ones she couldn't answer. *Why did so many people want to talk to her suddenly?* She lived her entire life alone, and she did that mostly on purpose. "Leave me alone," she told them a few times, but by then, it was already too late. Someone led her into the back of a very large truck, and sirens screamed around her. In those moments, she felt terrified, although she did not want to show how frightened she was. "I

need to go back to the bookstore,” she told the men around her. *Didn't they understand?* She'd told her father she would care for the bookstore. She'd told him it would be safe in her hands.

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## Chapter Three

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The labor and delivery waiting room of the hospital was packed. Balloons that read “congratulations” bubbled against the ceiling, flowers of all varieties and scents made the air thick and difficult to breathe, and nurses and tired-looking fathers ambled from private hospital rooms to announce births.

Alyssa was caught up in the madness. Only hours before, when she and Maggie had boarded the ferry to Martha’s Vineyard, they’d received word that Carmella had gone into labor. She was about a week early, which was nothing to worry about, and the entire Remington clan was ecstatic, filling the seats of the waiting room as they waited for news. According to the doctor, it wouldn’t be long now.

Alyssa’s mother, Janine, sat between Alyssa and Maggie with Lucy on her lap. Her cheeks were rosy from laughter, and she bounced Lucy on her lap with the joy of a woman who craved grandchildren just as much as Maggie wanted to give her them.

“She’s gotten so much bigger in the past few weeks,” Janine said. “What are they feeding you, little Lucy?”

“She’s a hungry little thing,” Maggie explained as she searched through her bag for a snack.

“She’s just like the rest of our family,” Janine said. “We’re always waiting on the next meal!”

As Maggie and Janine laughed and chatted easily about Lucy, Alyssa stood and walked toward the hallway, where she

used the bathroom and checked herself in the mirror. Only a few rooms away, Carmella delivered her very first baby in her mid-forties, which was an incredible thing. If there was anything Alyssa's "new" family had taught her, it was that life didn't end at thirty. At twenty-four, Alyssa still had a nearly infinite number of opportunities to change the path of her life.

Alyssa wandered the hallways of the hospital for a little while to stretch her legs. At a vending machine, she bought a Diet Coke and a bag of popcorn and crunched distractedly, eyeing the clock on the wall. It was nearly ten at night, which meant it was only seven in the Pacific Northwest. Perhaps it was time to text Hunter.

Alyssa began with several photographs of Lucy— one with yogurt on her cheeks, another in a little pair of pink overalls, and another wearing Maggie's sunglasses. Hunter texted back right away, which was a necessary relief. Alyssa prayed constantly he wouldn't use again. She prayed he would keep himself safe.

HUNTER: That's my girl!

HUNTER: Miss her so much.

HUNTER: How are things, Alyssa?

Alyssa smiled to herself as she texted him back minor details about Lucy, about their family, about her silly little life. So many years ago, now, Hunter had been her first love, the teenage boy who'd lit her soul on fire. Now, she felt her and Maggie's decision to care for Hunter's daughter honored their previous love. After all, that love had never really gone away. Instead, it had only shifted in form and dimension.

Distracted with texting, Alyssa wandered through the hospital until she found herself at the exit. Three little dots formed on her phone, proof Hunter continued to type something. She lifted her eyes as a woman in her fifties limped to the counter nearest the exit doors.

"Are you checking yourself out?" The receptionist frowned at the woman before her.

The woman's voice wavered. "I don't think my insurance allows an overnight stay."

The receptionist began to type furiously on the keyboard in front of her as the woman shifted her weight.

"You know the doctor has referred you to a specialist here on the island," the receptionist said to the woman.

"Hmm?" The woman tilted her head.

Quickly, the receptionist wrote something down on a pad of paper and ripped the page from the pad. "You need to put these details into your phone," the receptionist explained. "It's essential you attend this appointment, and you cannot forget. Do you have someone at home to help you? Maybe someone you can call?"

To this, the woman took the slip of paper and shook her head. Alyssa averted her eyes, overwhelmed with sorrow.

"You will be getting a bill, both for the ambulance and for your treatment today," the receptionist continued. "I just want to confirm your address."

The receptionist read out the woman's address, and the woman nodded. After that, the woman turned and walked deliriously toward the double-wide glass doors that led out into an inky night.

Alyssa rushed for the woman. "Excuse me?"

The woman paused at the door and blinked at Alyssa vacantly.

"Do you mind if I take a taxi with you?" Alyssa asked. "I'm a little too frightened to take one myself."

The woman's face opened into a soft smile, one that revealed just how gorgeous she really was. "Of course, honey. I know it can be quite strange to take a taxi at night."

Alyssa called a car for them, and together, they waited in silence behind the glass door and watched the car lights approach. Once they got in the car, Alyssa told the driver the same address the receptionist had said aloud, and the woman beside her nodded along and smiled.

“What is your name, honey?” the woman asked.

“I’m Alyssa. And yours?”

“I’m Heidi,” the woman said.

“That’s a beautiful name.”

“Thank you. My father picked it.” Heidi’s smile fell at the memory, and she turned her head to gaze out the window beside her.

Alyssa texted Maggie to say she had to run an errand, but that she would be back at the hospital soon. All the way to Heidi’s home, Alyssa’s heart raced with apprehension. Clearly, there was something very wrong with this woman. Right now, she was serene and sweet, but her memory seemed to come and recede like the tides. It terrified Alyssa to think Heidi was alone in the world.

When they reached her house, Alyssa asked Heidi for the piece of paper the receptionist had given her. She then asked if Heidi would allow her to enter the information into her phone.

“I don’t like these screens,” Heidi explained.

“They’re terrible,” Alyssa agreed as she began to type the date, time, and location of Heidi’s upcoming doctor’s appointment.

“I need to go, honey,” Heidi reminded her.

Alyssa tore her eyes back to Heidi’s and passed the phone through the dark cab. “Thank you again for sharing a car with me,” she said as Heidi stepped into the night.

“Get home safe,” Heidi said right before she closed the door.

“Can we wait until she gets inside?” Alyssa asked the driver.

For the next minute, the driver and Alyssa watched as the woman walked up the little path to the front door, where she opened the door easily and flooded the house with light. She even locked the front door before she entered what looked like a living room.

“And where are you off to?” the driver asked.

“Can you take me back to the hospital?”

The driver laughed. “You forgot something?”

“Yeah,” Alyssa told him. “I did.”

\* \* \*

Baby Georgia was born at twelve-fifteen that night. She was seven pounds, nine ounces, with all ten fingers, ten toes, and a full head of hair. Cody emerged from the delivery room with red-rimmed eyes and an adorable smile. He then shook with emotion as he hugged Elsa, Carmella’s sister.

“She wants to see you,” he told her. “She’s tired of me, I think.”

Eventually, the Remington clan was able to walk down the hallway to take their first look at baby Georgia, who wore the tiniest pink hat and slept in a crib alongside four other babies. Alyssa’s heart swelled with gladness as Maggie sobbed quietly beside her. It had been one heck of a night.

With Carmella safe and baby Georgia out in the world, Maggie and Alyssa decided to drive back to the Remington House to sleep. In the dark shadows of the car, as they weaved toward the southeast corner of the island, Alyssa explained what had happened with Heidi and how frightened she was for the woman.

“Imagine being all alone in the world,” Alyssa said. “And not even being able to trust your memory?”

Maggie’s face fell. “Are you sure she’s alone?”

“There wasn’t anyone she wanted to call.”

“Gosh.” Maggie seemed not to know what to say, and the rest of the way home, the sisters stewed in silence and separate thoughts.

For Alyssa, worry for Heidi soon transitioned to worry for Maggie. She wondered if Maggie had considered what Rex



had said to her earlier that day. *Had she allowed what had happened to float away with the breeze? Or had she buried it within herself?*

At the Remington House, Alyssa and Maggie shared a room with Lucy. Downstairs, other members of the family entered quietly and hugged one another with excitement before wandering upstairs to get some shut-eye. Alyssa tucked herself deeper beneath the sheets and listened to Lucy's soft breathing, which consoled her.

"Georgia is perfect," Maggie whispered.

"Isn't she?" Alyssa asked.

But at that moment, Maggie's breathing changed, and she shifted into a deep sleep, leaving Alyssa all alone.

The next morning, Alyssa fed Lucy in the kitchen as the Remington family buzzed in and out. Grandma Nancy was effervescent and alive, kissing Alyssa and Lucy's cheeks before she fled to the Katama Lodge and Wellness Spa, where she planned to host seven a.m. yoga. Elsa came next, bubbling over with joy for her sister, whom no one had ever thought would become a mother. After that came Mallory and her son, Zachery, whom she planned to drop off at her ex-boyfriend's place before she went to work at the Sheridan law firm in Oak Bluffs.

As usual, it was a vibrant and action-packed morning at the Remington House. Alyssa lapped up the energy, hearing herself laugh and make jokes as she continued to feed little Lucy.

Not long afterward, Maggie returned from a beach run to take over caring for Lucy. Alyssa cleaned Lucy's hands and face as Maggie drank water and stretched, her eyes alight from endorphins.

"It's so good to be back, isn't it?" Maggie said. She then lifted Lucy from the highchair and whirled her around as Lucy squealed.

After Alyssa showered and dressed, she drove toward the harbor to grab a cup of coffee with Cole. His text messages

had ignited her curiosity, and she couldn't wait a moment longer before learning what was up.

Cole was bundled up in a puffy coat and a thick winter hat. At the edge of the harbor, he spoke to a boy of about twelve, who was similarly bundled, and gestured toward the sailboat tied up on the dock beside them. The boy nodded along, his face stony. This, Alyssa knew, was the tail-end of one of Cole's sailing lessons, which he gave as long as he could into the chillier months. The rich families of the island paid exorbitant amounts to ensure their children were skilled sailors, and Cole was just about as good a teacher as the island offered. Last summer, he'd even sailed professionally in the Caribbean, but his career had ended abruptly after a terrible sailing accident. The accident hadn't been his fault, but it had reminded him of how important his family truly was— and he'd come back to the Vineyard immediately.

“Hey!” Cole's smile was electric. As his student hurried back to his mother's waiting car, Cole hugged Alyssa and added, “I can't believe we have a new member of the family today.”

“I know! Baby Georgia! Isn't she perfect?” Alyssa laughed and followed Cole into the little hut next to the harbor, where Cole poured them both mugs of coffee and hunted for baked goods.

With two stale muffins in front of them, Cole and Alyssa sat at a round table and gazed out at the remaining sailboats, which tilted beneath a heavy gray sky. Alyssa chewed her muffin and considered how to probe Cole for secrets. What the heck was going on?

Finally, Cole came out with it.

“Sorry for being so cryptic via text the other day,” he said. “I've been totally overwhelmed and haven't known what to do with myself.”

“I can understand the feeling,” Alyssa admitted.

“I know, which is why I wanted to get your opinion on it,” Cole said, his eyes flashing. “Remember how I told you about

that family who was on the boat when we got into the accident?”

Alyssa nodded.

“And remember the girl who wouldn’t stop flirting with me, even though it clearly made her father really mad?”

Alyssa winced. “She had something to prove, didn’t she?”

Cole shrugged. “Apparently. Because a couple of weeks ago, she came to Martha’s Vineyard to tell me she’s cut all ties with her family, and she wants us to be together.”

Alyssa’s jaw dropped. “You have got to be kidding me.”

Cole sipped his coffee, clearly at a loss.

“Is she still here?” Alyssa demanded.

Cole nodded. “She got a job and an apartment.”

“Oh my gosh.” Alyssa was flabbergasted. “And now you’re just dating?”

“That’s the thing. We don’t really know each other, you know? And she’s clearly going through a very strange transition.”

“Yeah. Everything is upside down for her right now.”

“But she still maintains that she wants to be with me,” Cole breathed. “And every day, our friendship gets stronger.”

Alyssa tilted her head, recognizing the glow in Cole’s eyes as something meaningful and charged with emotion. “You’re falling for her, aren’t you?”

Cole sputtered. “It just feels so crazy.”

“Everything is crazy,” Alyssa reminded him. “But if your heart tells you this is right, you have to listen to it. Right?”

Cole was contemplative. “You know, I thought for sure you’d tell me Aria was crazy. That I should stay as far away from her as I can.”

“You thought that?” Alyssa laughed. “Well, the Vineyard has made me very, very soft. I barely feel like a city girl anymore.”

“Do you like the change?”

“I didn’t think I would,” Alyssa admitted. “But every day, I feel more peaceful than the day before. A few years ago, that would have been laughable, but now, it feels as though I’m settling into myself.”

When Alyssa returned home that afternoon, she found Maggie, Lucy, and Janine around the table on the enclosed porch. Janine’s eyes were rimmed red from crying, and Maggie’s face glowed with the only light that managed to squeeze through November clouds.

“What’s going on?” Alyssa demanded.

On the table was a plastic baggie that protected a pregnancy test. Alyssa inched toward it, at a loss. There, on the test, were two sharp pink lines, clear as anything.

Alyssa locked eyes with Maggie. At that moment, everything felt crystallized. This was why Maggie hadn’t been angry with Rex. This was why she was continually emotional and smiley. Finally, the IVF had pulled through. Finally, she’d been given the gift she’d ached for.

“Maggie!” Alyssa cried as she hurried forward to hug her sister.

Maggie wept into Alyssa’s arm. Beside them, Lucy danced in her highchair, wanting to be in on their joy. Janine, of course, alternated between laughter and tears and soon joined Alyssa and Maggie’s hug.

It was a day for the books. Alyssa knew they would never forget it.

## Chapter Four

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A notification on Heidi's phone told her to attend a doctor's appointment at the Edgartown Memory Clinic at four-thirty in the afternoon, two days before Thanksgiving. Heidi couldn't remember making the appointment, nor could she remember entering the information into her phone. Still, the horrific nightmare of ambulance sirens and loud doctors and very cold hospital rooms remained locked within her, a reminder that there was something seriously wrong with her mind. She needed help.

Two days before Thanksgiving, Heidi closed The Dog-Eared Corner a little bit early and walked to the memory clinic, grateful she remembered the way. Perhaps her memory wasn't so bad after all. Perhaps these memory "blips" were temporary, a result of too little iron in her diet or not enough sleep.

Dr. Memphis was in his mid-fifties, perhaps one or two years younger than Heidi, with a trim figure and sharp blue eyes. He spoke to Heidi in a friendly way, one that reminded Heidi of how little social interaction she'd had over the years, and asked her a number of questions about her mind, her memory, and what had happened before her hospital visit. Heidi did her best to answer the questions, but soon found herself saying, "I'm not sure," and, "I can't remember," too many times to count. Eventually, she did tell him about all the bills in the bottom drawer of the desk and how terrified she felt about them.

“I can’t believe I hid the bills from myself,” Heidi said softly. “It’s like a part of my brain knew how much it would upset me. The bills just kept coming, and I just kept hiding them away.”

Dr. Memphis nodded and asked her a few more questions about her daily habits. As Heidi told him about her middling social life and the fact that she had no family to speak of, not really, Dr. Memphis’s eyes grew dim.

Eventually, he told her his suspicion. “It’s possible you have early-stage dementia,” he explained. “We’ll have to run some tests to confirm.”

The diagnosis hit Heidi like a brick. She was stunned, so much so that she struggled to speak for nearly a minute.

“That’s impossible,” she told Dr. Memphis. “I’m so young.” She wanted to tell him she was just about as young as he was, but she knew it wouldn’t help.

“We’ll bring you back in for more tests,” Dr. Memphis continued. “The best way to handle this is to stay optimistic and keep an open mind. As you say, you’re still young. Plenty of people live with this disease for years.”

Heidi’s mouth felt very dry. She wanted to point out that people “lived with” the disease only until they died from it.

The woman at the front desk of the memory clinic helped Heidi enter the doctor’s appointment into her phone. She then gave her a few pamphlets that offered suggestions on “living with early-onset dementia.” Heidi wanted to stuff the pamphlets in the trash, but she didn’t.

“We’ll see you soon,” the receptionist said. “Happy Thanksgiving.”

Just as ever, Heidi spent Thanksgiving and Christmas all alone. A very small part of her kept tabs on her cell phone all through Christmas and hoped David would pick up the phone and call her, but an even bigger part of her knew he wouldn’t bother. They hadn’t spoken in seven years, when he’d been twenty years old, and she’d been fifty.

Although she hated the internet, Heidi researched early-onset dementia and found that loneliness was often a cause. She'd spent seven years with only herself— and now, she couldn't even rely on herself anymore. It was the cruelest thing she could imagine.

A few days after Christmas, Dr. Memphis solidified his diagnosis. It was definitely early-onset dementia, and it was time they took the necessary steps forward to help Heidi live her life. There was medicine to prescribe, there were nurses to call to come by, just in case, and there was a button installed both at the bookstore and Heidi's home, which she could press when she felt nervous or lost.

Regarding the bookstore, Heidi felt more nervous than ever. Her medical bills mounted by the day, and bills continued to pile into her mailbox. Due to the lateness of the year and the chill in the air, foot traffic was non-existent, and her bookstore's revenue continued to dry up. Sure, there had been a small spike before Christmas, but nothing major. Everyone just ordered online these days.

What's more, Heidi had felt other areas of her life slipping through her fingers. When she entered the bookstore one morning, she'd discovered that several shelves were covered in dust. There were leftover crumbs on the café's counter, and there was even a dead cockroach in the corner, which made her scream.

Always, Heidi had been a clean and organized individual. She didn't have friends, but she had always had peace of mind; she had had order. Now, she had absolutely nothing.

On New Year's Eve, Heidi awoke in the same bed she'd slept in for thirty years and decided to do something with herself. It was clear the bookstore would be empty the entire day, and she wanted nothing less than to sit listlessly, watching the world go on without her.

Instead, Heidi called the Katama Lodge and Wellness Spa on Katama Bay and asked if she could drop in for an end-of-the-year spa day. The receptionist was very kind and

accommodating and told Heidi she could come by any time after one.

Dr. Memphis had told Heidi that driving wasn't recommended after a dementia diagnosis, which terrified Heidi to no end. She'd had nightmares of herself behind the wheel of the car, no longer remembering how to make the car stop. For this reason, she dialed a cab service to take her to the Katama Lodge and Wellness Spa, where she walked into the warmth of that glorious and very large cabin and greeted the receptionist with a smile that hopefully said, "*I'm not losing my mind.*"

In a soft room with purple cushioned chairs and ornate mirrors, Heidi changed into a soft white robe and allowed her gray curls to drop luxuriously over her shoulders. In the mirror, she still looked more youthful than her mind allowed her to feel.

Over the next few hours, Heidi allowed herself all the comforts of a spa. Her muscles were massaged gently and then slightly harder to get the tension out of them. She sat in a sauna with her eyes closed and allowed her soul to become very quiet as sweat dripped down her back.

Multiple times, she thought to herself, "This is the first vacation I've been on in years— and I'm only a couple of miles from home."

When David was a boy, Heidi hadn't had enough money to take them on vacation. At the time, Heidi had hardly thought anything of it. She'd had her son and her bookstore, and they'd had the entire island of beaches, woods, and fields to roam and explore. It was only when David had been a little bit older and spoken about his friends' trips to Italy and Greece that Heidi had gotten the sense the life she'd given David hadn't been enough. *Oh, but she'd loved him, hadn't she?* She'd loved him with everything she was. *Why hadn't that been enough?*

In a large and luxurious room at the Lodge was a stone-lined fireplace, in front of which sat a number of soft chairs and couches. Many women sat in robes, reading or talking quietly as they sipped hot tea or green juices. Heidi entered



and sat nervously at one end of the couch, listening to the soft and nourishing voices of the women around her. A quick glance told her that she wasn't the only woman alone at the Lodge. Then again, she ached with jealousy for those who'd come with friends, mothers, daughters, or sisters.

*If David had been a girl, would he have found a way to forgive her?* She shook the thought from her mind as an employee approached with a mug of tea.

"Thank you," Heidi said as she settled in and watched the flames lick the stones. A clock on the wall said it was only three-thirty, which meant she had another two and a half hours to sit alone in a comfortable and crowded room. This was much better than waiting for the New Year to begin from her house alone.

The couch directly beside her was perpendicular to Heidi's, so that the two women who sat there faced both Heidi and the fireplace. Heidi glanced their way and initially guessed they were sisters as they looked so similar. Very soon after, however, she heard one of them refer to the other as "mom," and her heart lifted. Burning with curiosity, she tilted her head to see that one of them was marginally older than the other. If Heidi had to guess, the mother had had her daughter at a very young age.

"She's three months pregnant today," the daughter breathed excitedly to her mother.

"Oh, Janine. That is such wonderful news," the mother said.

"I know. None of the IVF treatments prior to this worked," Janine said. "And the doctors are confident in this one."

"Is she going to announce it to people?" the mother asked.

"She wants to have a little get-together at the beginning of January so she can tell her friends in person," Janine said.

"Rex must be thrilled," the mother said. "They've been doing IVF for quite a while now. I'm sure it was a strain on their marriage."

“Maggie never said anything like that to me,” Janine breathed, “Although I know you must be right. IVF requires so much expectation and hope, and there’s only so much of that you can muster before you feel depleted and at a loss.”

Suddenly, before Heidi could stop herself, she heard herself speak.

“Excuse me,” she said. “I couldn’t help but overhear.”

Janine and her mother lifted their gaze to Heidi. They smiled curiously and didn’t seem annoyed.

“I had a lot of trouble conceiving, as well,” Heidi explained. “And what you said about expectation and hope really rings true for me.”

Janine smiled wider. “I hope you eventually had the child you prayed for?”

Heidi blinked back tears but maintained her own smile. “I did. David was my dream. After he was born, I held him for hours and watched him sleep, unable to let him go. I’d wanted him so badly, you know? And here he was, ready to change my life.”

Janine and her mother exchanged glances, clearly warmed by Heidi’s story. Heidi wondered if they could tell she’d hardly had a personal interaction like this in years.

“I had Janine when I was sixteen,” the older woman explained. “When I held her in my arms, all I could do was panic.”

Janine laughed gently, but her mother continued to speak. “But your story and my granddaughter Maggie’s story are so wonderful to hear. There are mothers out there who are much more in tune with their mothering instincts than I was. I felt so lost.”

“You were so young,” Heidi reminded her.

The older woman grimaced, then glanced at her daughter. “I was too young to be a mother. I did just about everything wrong, I think, and I don’t know if I’ll ever fully forgive myself. Janine, I hope you don’t mind me saying this...”

Janine nodded. “Go ahead.”

“We didn’t speak for many years,” the older woman said to Heidi. “I thought I’d lost my daughter forever, and it just broke my heart.”

Heidi’s eyes widened with surprise. She hadn’t expected this story, not from these women who seemed the best of friends.

“How did you come back together again?” Heidi asked.

Janine and her mother exchanged another pointed glance.

“It’s a very long story,” Janine affirmed. “But it’s one I’m very glad we lived through.”

A moment of silence passed. Janine and her mother squeezed each other’s hands and seemed prepared to fall back into their own personal conversation. Before they could, Heidi forced herself to speak, if only to keep herself in the world a little bit longer.

“My son hasn’t spoken to me in seven years,” Heidi announced.

At this, she had their attention again. Janine’s eyes widened in shock.

“Oh, no.” The mother shook her head, at a loss. “Don’t be too proud to reach out.”

“That’s right,” Janine urged. “You should call him as soon as possible. Do not waste another moment without telling him how much you love and miss him.”

“Take it from us,” her mother said. “We’re living proof that forgiveness is not only possible but the very best way forward.”

“If you don’t say something, you’ll regret it,” Janine added. “I know we would have.”

That night, Heidi sat in her living room armchair and watched the New Year’s Eve celebration in New York City, where a ball hovered in the sky and prepared to drop into the

new year. Thousands of people filled the streets in celebration, waving their arms for the camera.

Somewhere in that city was David. *Was he at the celebration? Would he have worn one of those silly New Year's Eve hats and buzzed a kazoo?* It didn't sound like David, but he was twenty-seven now. Probably, he'd changed in small yet significant ways. *Would she have recognized him if she'd seen him on the street? Would her failing memory have allowed that?*

In the grand scheme of life, seven years was not very long. Heidi knew this intuitively, even though the space between herself now and the last time she'd seen David in real life seemed insurmountable.

On the screen, the newscaster spoke about the tremendous year behind them and all the "incredible" things that awaited them in the new year. Heidi sipped her hot cocoa and considered what she had to look forward to.

Number one, it was possible The Dog-Eared Corner would have to close.

Number two, her memory would continue to fail her until probably even the smallest things would be difficult for her to engage with.

Number three, she would eventually fade into obscurity—and the worst of it was that nobody would even remember her.

She'd done this to herself, she knew.

Suddenly, she had her cell to her ear, and she listened as the call rang out across New England and then, ultimately, to David's phone somewhere in that colossal city. Each ring entered her ear and then receded, making her feel even more alone. After the seventh ring, it was apparent David wasn't planning on picking up, and she cut the call and turned off the television.

Tomorrow was a new day and a new year. Maybe she would even wake up for it if she remembered to. But right now, it was time to fall asleep and hide away from the heartache that threatened to eat her alive.

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## Chapter Five

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The first Saturday of the new year was cause for celebration. To her dearest girlfriends, Maggie had sent out adorable invitations for what she called a “Sweet New Year Party.” Beneath an illustration of a cake, several cupcakes, and a pie, Maggie had written she wanted to gather her favorite people around to chat about their hopes for the next twelve months and show off her baking skills, which she’d refined over the previous year. Alyssa knew that Maggie’s baking addiction had stemmed from Maggie’s anxiety surrounding IVF— but that was in the past now. Maggie was three months pregnant with a miracle baby. “Joy” was an understatement.

Alyssa awoke on that Saturday and walked into the kitchen to find Rex at the island with a cup of coffee, reading the news on his phone.

“Hey, Daddy-O,” Alyssa said with a sneaky smile.

Rex lifted his eyes and then rolled them. “Morning, Alyssa. I see you’re still my permanent roommate?”

Alyssa wasn’t sure if he was joking, so she just laughed and poured herself a mug of coffee. “When the baby comes, I’ll find a way out of your hair.”

“And leave me with a toddler who isn’t mine to take care of?” Rex demanded.

Alyssa blinked twice at him. Slowly, Rex’s panicked face transformed into one of good humor, and he laughed and

stepped away from the island. “Just kidding, of course. Little Lucy is great.”

Alyssa still remembered what she’d heard Rex say to Maggie back in November. *Had he known Maggie was pregnant at that time? If so, why had he spoken to his pregnant wife like that?*

To Alyssa, Rex was on thin ice. But to Maggie, Rex was the sun, the moon, and the stars put together, so Alyssa had to be careful about what she said.

The front door opened to reveal Maggie, who carried Lucy in her arms and greeted the two of them excitedly. Fluidly, she slid Lucy into her highchair, kissed Rex on the lips, and hugged Alyssa close. “I just have to ice that last cake, and then I’m ready for the big day.”

“When do the girls come by?” Rex asked.

“They should be here around three,” Maggie said.

Rex nodded gravely. “I’ll head out a bit before then.”

“You don’t have to leave, babe! The girls love you,” Maggie said.

But Rex had already traced the path to their bedroom and disappeared behind the door. A moment later came the muffled sound of the television. Alyssa guessed he watched sports.

Maggie seemed unbothered by Rex’s moods. Instead, she clasped her hands together and said, “This is going to be the best day! I can’t believe it’s finally here.”

Over the next few hours, Alyssa allowed Maggie to put her to work. She scrubbed the toilet and the shower, took out the trash, changed Lucy’s clothes, fluffed the pillows on the living room couches, hung streamers, and set out little flowered plates for the cakes, cupcakes, brownies, and tarts, all of which Maggie had slaved over.

An hour or so before the girls were set to arrive, Alyssa took a bite of a brownie and moaned at the gooey, melted chocolate, her eyes closed. “Oh my gosh,” she said.

“Alyssa! I had that plate arranged a certain way. Now, it looks wonky,” Maggie said, leaping to fix it.

“Maggie, your baking skills are insane,” Alyssa said instead. “Seriously. You should quit your work at the gallery and open your own café.”

Maggie gave Alyssa a strange look. “It sounds dreamy, Alyssa.”

“Why not go for it?”

“Because! I’m going to have a baby, silly,” Maggie shot back. “Opening a café like that takes an enormous amount of effort.”

Alyssa nodded, knowing her sister was right. “Well, I still hope I can hire you to bake all of my birthday cakes going forward.”

“That goes without saying,” Maggie said. “Oh! But I forgot to show you this.” Maggie grabbed her phone to reveal a new social media channel she’d started called “Maggie Bakes.” In it, Maggie featured all sorts of cookies, cakes, cupcakes, tarts, and so much more, all beautifully decorated and atop gorgeous china.

“You already have thousands of followers!” Alyssa cried.

Maggie blushed. “I just like showing off what I make. It’s fun. And so many other bakers reach out to me and either offer advice or ask for it. It’s a unique community.”

Alyssa eyed her knowingly. “Oh my gosh. You’re already a super mom.”

“I am not,” Maggie shot back as her cheeks reddened. “Now, next question. Are you going to wear that?”

Alyssa eyed the enormous t-shirt and pair of biking shorts she’d been wearing most of the week. “Um. No?”

Maggie laughed nervously as she gathered Lucy in her arms and headed toward Lucy’s bedroom. This left Alyssa to jump into her room to go through her dresses to find something suitable for Maggie’s big announcement.



If Maggie continued to have parties like this all the way through her pregnancy, Alyssa knew she had to be ready to wear plenty of floral dresses, eat fancy cakes, and dote on her sister all year long. But it was all worth it, as Maggie was her favorite person on earth. There was no question about that.

\* \* \*

Around two that afternoon, Alyssa curled up on the couch in a floral dress and flicked through television stations. It was only an hour till the party, and not a pillow, plate, nor brownie was out of place, which meant Alyssa had to just sit still so she wouldn't mess anything up. As she settled on a reality TV show about baking at a cottage in Maine, Maggie burst from the bathroom, her cheeks pale.

Alyssa tilted her head. "You okay, Mags?"

Maggie's face twitched into a smile. "Why wouldn't I be?" She walked purposefully around the back of the couch and peered out the window at the Brooklyn street below. There, she placed her hands on her hips and remained frozen for a very long time.

"Is there something else I can do before the party?" Alyssa asked, nervous her laziness had disappointed Maggie.

Maggie replied. "No. Not at all." When she turned toward Alyssa, her eyes were glassy.

Alyssa's stomach flipped upside down with nerves. She shot up from the couch. "Is there something wrong with Rex?"

"What? No."

"I mean, why couldn't he stick around for the party?" Alyssa demanded.

Maggie's face was more-or-less back to normal. "Alyssa, Rex doesn't want to hang out with a bunch of women, eating cookies. That's not the man I married."

But something was wrong. Alyssa felt it etched into the angles of Maggie's eyebrows and the downturn of her lips. Before she could ask her another question, Maggie turned and walked back to the counter, where she poured herself a glass of water.

"Do you know where Rex ran off to?" Alyssa couldn't stop herself.

Maggie's face twisted with anger. "He's seeing friends, Alyssa."

In the next room, Lucy squealed into waking. Alyssa rushed down the hallway to lift her from her toddler bed and bring her warm body to her hip. Lucy rubbed the sleep from her eye and babbled to Alyssa as she carried her back into the kitchen. There, Maggie slipped forward to take her away. Alyssa's arms hung at her sides, cold without Lucy in them. Still, she sensed Maggie needed Lucy more than she did.

*What was going on?*

The party guests began to arrive at two-fifty. Maggie's friends from high school and college peppered in, wearing party dresses with flowers and polka-dots, their hair bouncing, and their lipstick immaculate. They carried flowers and bottles of wine, and they squealed at the sight of Maggie with Lucy in her arms, calling her "the portrait of motherhood."

Maggie had invited one of Alyssa's very old friends from their days on the Upper West Side. Scarlet Copperfield was the daughter of Quentin Copperfield, the most acclaimed broadcast journalist of the previous twenty years. Scarlet was two years younger than Alyssa and a senior at NYU. A couple of years back, she'd moved in with her boyfriend, Owen, here in Brooklyn, which meant Alyssa saw her frequently.

Alyssa hurried forward to collect Scarlet in her arms. "Scar! Happy New Year!"

Scarlet smiled weakly. "Oh, you know. It's been a rough go."

Alyssa nodded. "How is your mom?"

“The chemo is really hard on all of us,” Scarlet admitted as she weaved her fingers through her jet-black hair. “But she’s strong. She’s going to fight this.”

On the other side of the kitchen, Maggie slipped Lucy into her highchair, winced audibly, and closed her eyes. Alyssa leaped toward the sound.

“Mags? Are you all right?” Alyssa kept her voice low.

“What? Of course. I’m always all right.” Maggie forced her eyes open and smiled at Scarlet, who peered at her curiously. “Scarlet! Good to see you. How is that filmmaker boyfriend of yours?”

“Off to LA for work again,” Scarlet explained, her eyes slits. “Can I help you with anything, Maggie?”

Sweat bubbled along Maggie’s hairline. Alyssa stepped closer to her and breathed in her ear. “Do you want to sit down for a little while?” It was clear the stress of the party had gotten to her.

Maggie bustled away from her. “Does everyone have enough punch? Coffee? Wine, if they want it?”

Maggie’s guests affirmed they were fine and continued to compliment her baked goods. From the kitchen, Alyssa, Scarlet, and Lucy watched Maggie as, again, she paused on the other side of the room and winced. This time, she placed her hand on her stomach.

Alyssa found herself awash with a sinking realization. Something was very wrong— and Maggie wasn’t prepared to admit it to herself, least of all anyone else.

“Your sister always goes above and beyond,” Scarlet said as she nibbled on a cupcake. “I saw her social media channel. She has so many followers!”

“She’s very impressive,” Alyssa agreed, distracted.

“Maggie, this was such a good idea,” Maggie’s roommate from college called out. “We should always start the new year with dessert.”

“Yes. Who has time for New Year’s resolutions?” another friend joined in.

Maggie nodded and made a small joke, then whisked through her friends and disappeared down the hallway and into her bedroom. A moment later came the muffled sound of her personal bathroom door closing.

“I’ll be right back,” Alyssa said to Scarlet. “Can you make sure Lucy’s all right?”

Alyssa hurried after her sister, entering Rex and Maggie’s private space, and then hovering outside the bathroom like a ghost. Inside, Maggie’s cries echoed sharply. This was a nightmare.

“Maggie?” Alyssa knocked gently on the door. “Maggie, it’s Alyssa.”

Maggie’s cries grew louder. “I’ll be out in a minute.”

Alyssa closed her eyes. “Maggie, let me in, okay?”

“I said I’ll be out in a minute.”

But Alyssa knew this wasn’t something Maggie could get through by herself. The very worst thing had happened at a very bad time. Alyssa had to be the one to pull her through.

“Maggie, I can get them out of here,” Alyssa murmured. “You say the word, and I’ll make an excuse. I’ll make it all about me if I have to.”

Maggie’s cries subsided slightly.

“They don’t have to know,” Alyssa continued.

A moment later came the click from Maggie unlocking the door. Her bloodshot eyes hovered in the crack.

“I was three months, Alyssa,” Maggie rasped.

Alyssa nodded. “I know, Maggie. I know.”

“I thought we were safe. I thought we were finally going to be happy.”

Alyssa told herself not to cry. “You’re going to be safe, Maggie. You’re going to be happy.”

Maggie's face crumpled up, and Alyssa opened the door wider to catch her in a hug. Maggie's sobs echoed through the bathroom.

"We need to get you to the hospital, Mags," Alyssa breathed. "Just let me get these people out of here, okay?"

"Tell them to take desserts with them." Maggie managed to cry. "I can't have all that here! I'll eat it."

Alyssa laughed gently and stepped back from her sister. All she'd wanted in the world was for this baby to be real.

"Get ready to go, okay?" Alyssa whispered as she headed back toward the throng of well-dressed New York women.

"What are you going to tell them?" Maggie asked.

"I'll think of something."

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## Chapter Six

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Heidi had begun to cultivate a system to deal with memory loss. She wrote lists in a little book she kept with her constantly, which she placed in a purse that wrapped over her shoulder and around the opposite waist. Still, no matter how often she wrote lists or kept track of bills or ensured she made it to her doctor appointments, her bank account was never fat enough to pay the ever-rising costs of Martha's Vineyard. She felt doomed.

On top of that, it had been two weeks since Heidi had reached out to David for the first time in seven years, and she hadn't heard a word from him. It was possible he'd changed his number over the years, of course, but Heidi didn't think so. *Why couldn't she forget she'd reached out to him if only to save herself the misery of knowing he truly didn't love her anymore?*

Nancy and Janine at the Katama Lodge were lucky. They'd been able to overcome so many years of separation. Clearly, they were outliers.

Around noon two weeks after the new year, Heidi unwrapped a turkey sandwich at the counter of The Dog-Eared Corner and ate slowly, watching a fluffy snow fall outside. So far that morning, only one person had entered, an older man who'd asked if she sold literary magazines. She did, but not the one he was after. When she'd tried to suggest a few other similar options, magazines she'd chosen because they were very well-written and inventive, he'd said he wasn't interested and walked out the door. This left Heidi feeling very cold.

Now, as Heidi ate her turkey sandwich, another man entered. He was smartly dressed in a suit and tie, and his face was oddly frozen, as though someone had injected too much botox in the wrong places and given him a permanent, scary smile.

“Good afternoon!” The man walked directly to the counter to speak to her. It was so aggressive that Heidi nearly dropped her sandwich.

“Welcome to The Dog-Eared Corner.” Heidi tried to sound as friendly as possible. “Can I help you find something specific?”

The man continued to look at her curiously, as though he could peer directly through her eyes and into her soul. Heidi didn’t like this feeling. She stared at his nose instead.

“This is quite a lovely place,” the man continued. “This colonial home, I mean.”

“It’s been in my family for years,” Heidi told him. “My father started this bookstore when I was a little girl.”

The man seemed uninterested in such stories, but he still said a quick, “Isn’t that nice?” which sounded empty. “Do you get many customers in here?”

Heidi was deflated. “Not as many this time of year, unfortunately. People just aren’t out and about the way they are in the summer. And everyone needs a beach read to get them through a vacation.”

The man laughed, and Heidi wished he would stop it. His laughter was horrific to listen to.

“I like reading self-help books,” the man continued. “Do you sell anything like that?”

Heidi stepped around the counter and gestured toward a small shelf upon which she’d placed a few self-help books. To her, “self-help” could be found in literature, in fiction, which made actual “self-help” books useless. Through nuanced characters, you could learn everything there was to know about empathy, sensitivity, and about the human experience.

“Nothing about investing?” The man read the titles of the self-help books and shook his head. “Nothing about real estate?”

Heidi shook her head. “Nobody wants to read about investment when they’re on the beach.”

“I do,” the man told her. “As a kid, that was all I wanted to learn about. I pored over textbooks about it when my parents went to sleep.”

Heidi remembered her own childhood, when she’d read endless stories of dragons, witches, fairies, and unicorns. “I must have missed out on the texts about investments. Are there any good ones?”

The man stepped back from the shelf and eyed the café on the other side of the space. “Do you have anything to eat?”

“Not today,” Heidi explained. “Too many things went to waste, so I stopped baking and buying. I’ll start again when the sun comes out.”

The man’s smile widened. He looked at Heidi as though she was fresh meat. “You know, I’m scouting around Edgartown today for a very specific reason. And I think it’s our lucky day.”

“Our lucky day?” Heidi’s patience was beginning to run thin. She made a mental note to write about this man and this terrible experience in her book as soon as he left. She didn’t want to forget his horrible face, if only so she could protect herself from him next time.

“What if I told you I could offer you a very pretty penny for this old colonial home?” the man said. “It would be enough to pay off your debts, buy yourself a nice cottage by the sea, and live out the rest of your days in peace. You wouldn’t have to stand behind that counter, eating a sad-looking turkey sandwich. Never again.”

Heidi bristled. “I wouldn’t be able to accept the offer.”

“You haven’t even heard the offer yet!”



“I told you. My father opened the bookstore. I wouldn’t dream of selling it,” she explained. “Now, if you aren’t interested in purchasing a book today— not even a self-help book— then I’d kindly ask you to leave.”

Heidi gave him her brightest and most friendly smile. For a moment, the man regarded her icily before that plastic smile returned to his face. “Good afternoon, then, Miss Withers. I hope to see you again soon.”

Before he left, he slid a business card on the counter, upon which was printed: JEFFERSON CONRAD. A shiver raced up and down Heidi’s spine. “Get in touch when you feel ready,” he said.

After Jefferson Conrad (what a name!) had gone, Heidi wrapped up the rest of her sandwich and performed as many rituals as she could to get herself out of her funk. She cleaned the counters, scrubbed the tables, swept the corners, and dragged the end of a broom through cobwebs. Throughout, she felt more and more alienated and frightened. It seemed clear that Jefferson Conrad had details regarding her current financial status. He knew she was fresh meat.

At three-thirty, Heidi was surprised to see four pre-teens enter the shop. To her, they looked like babies with chunky cheeks and bright eyes, but to themselves, she knew they were tortured and awash with hormones they didn’t understand. Heidi asked them what sorts of books they were looking for, and one of them said, “fantasy,” and Heidi quickly showed them her impressive collection.

For a little while, the fantasy fan looked at the books, even bringing a few out to read the backs of. Unfortunately, her other three friends seemed less than impressed with the bookstore and asked to leave.

“Just let me buy this,” the fantasy fan muttered as she stepped toward the counter. She then dropped several crumpled-up bills in front of Heidi and muttered she was sorry.

*This was it! Her first sale of the day!* Heidi smiled as brightly as she could at the pre-teen girl. But as she gathered

her change, one of the other pre-teens behind the girl reached his hand toward the fantasy books and shoved them all to the ground. Heidi's smile fell immediately.

The fantasy fan turned around and shrieked, "What are you doing?"

But the other three pre-teens cackled at the mess.

"What do you mean? We're having fun, Stephanie. Did you forget what that was?" This came from the pre-teen boy who'd pushed the books to the ground.

Stephanie turned and winced toward Heidi. Heidi felt wordless. She handed her the change and watched as the four pre-teens hurried back outside, leaving fifteen books strewn across the floor.

*What had possessed that boy to do something like this?  
What had told him to destroy a piece of Heidi's shop?*

Slowly, Heidi walked around the counter and dropped to her knees to gather the books. Several of them had been bruised and bent in the corners. A very dark part of herself reminded her that nobody would want to buy them anyway; it didn't matter they were damaged.

Suddenly, the bell jangled over the door, and two young women entered the shop. The women could have been twins, with their long legs and stylish clothing and long, flowing hair.

"Oh my goodness! What happened?" One of them sprung forward and dropped to her knees to help gather the books.

The other came forward slower; her eyes were soft and far away.

Heidi fell back on her haunches, feeling defeated. "A few kids came in and wanted to make a mess of things," she tried to explain.

"Is this the right order?" The women who'd gathered the books already had them back on the shelf and inspected the alphabetization. "Maggie, does it look all right?"

The other woman, whose name was Maggie, crossed her arms and assessed the order of books. "I think you got it."

Heidi slowly rose from her knees, and they creaked angrily beneath her.

"Did they do anything else?" Maggie asked softly.

Heidi shook her head. "Luckily, no. They got out of here before they did any more damage." After a pause, she added, "I know they just want to impress their friends. They act out."

The other sister peered at Heidi curiously. If Heidi wasn't mistaken, she looked at her as though she'd seen her before.

"Silly me. You're here for books," Heidi said. "Can I help you find something in particular?"

"Oh!" The other sister laughed and nodded. "Yes. We want to buy something for our mother. Women's fiction, maybe?"

"It's my favorite," Heidi breathed as she led them to the relevant shelf. "I just love reading about big families."

"Do you have a big family?" Maggie asked.

Heidi shook her head. "I have a sister, but I haven't seen her in years." After a pause, she asked, "I take it you two are sisters?"

Maggie nodded.

"I'm Alyssa," the other sister said. She reached out to shake Heidi's hand, and her skin was soft.

"It's lovely to meet you, Alyssa and Maggie," Heidi said. She then turned back toward the shelf and recommended a range of women's fiction novels, many of which dealt with sister relationships.

"Our mother never had sisters until a couple of years ago," Alyssa explained. "Now, she has two stepsisters who she adores."

Heidi's heart lifted at the idea you could suddenly have new sisters so late in life.

“Where is your sister now?” Alyssa asked as Maggie continued to scan the shelves. Maggie was clearly the quieter of the two, and her face seemed to stew with sorrow.

“I’m not sure. Maybe she’s still out in Los Angeles,” Heidi answered. “She was always such an adventurer, while it was always my dream to take on our father’s bookstore.”

“This place?” Maggie piped up.

Heidi nodded with a smile.

“It’s so cute in here,” Alyssa said. “I can’t believe we’ve never been.”

Maggie paused on the other side of the shop and assessed the café counter and the many empty tables. “I didn’t know you had a coffee shop area.”

Heidi blushed. “It’s hardly used.”

Maggie turned to lock eyes with her. “You should use it. I mean, so many people work from home these days and need nice places to come to during the day. Places like this.”

Alyssa nodded excitedly. “If they hung around all day, they’d eventually be tempted to buy a book. I know I would be.”

Maggie’s smile lifted. “If you want, I could help you a little bit. I’ve gotten into baking the past year or so, and I have tons of time on my hands right now.”

“She’s really good,” Alyssa affirmed.

Heidi palmed her neck. “That’s really nice of you, Maggie. But I’m afraid I just don’t have the money right now to invest in something like that.”

Maggie furrowed her brow. “I don’t want money,” she explained. “I genuinely just want to spend some time baking every day. It’s the way I deal with stress.”

“And all those baked goods have to go somewhere,” Alyssa said. “I tried eating all of them myself, and even I couldn’t manage it.”

Heidi's heart lifted, even though she still didn't fully trust this. *Who were these women? Why had they stumbled into her bookstore like this, offering to help? What was their motive?*

"It's just an experiment," Maggie said finally. "If any part of the arrangement doesn't work for you, we'll stop immediately. Okay?"

Maggie placed her hand between them, and Heidi watched herself as she slid her own hand into Maggie's and shook it. "Let's try it," Heidi breathed. "What do I have to lose?"

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## Chapter Seven

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The comforts of the Remington House were nourishing and soul-affirming. That night, Alyssa found herself on her back on the floor of the living room as Lucy and Mallory's son, Zachery, played quietly in front of the fireplace. Mallory was hunched over a law textbook for university while Elsa and Carmella doted on baby Georgia. Alyssa's mother, Janine, sipped tea and gazed at the fire while Maggie was curled up on the couch, wrapped up in a blanket. Grandma Nancy's footfalls could be heard in the kitchen as she prepared them a small dessert, a necessity on a chilly January night on Martha's Vineyard.

Alyssa and Maggie had returned to Martha's Vineyard only three days before. It had now been a week since Maggie's miscarriage, and Maggie was nowhere close to normal. Her eyes were unfocused, she frequently mumbled incoherently to herself, and she spent many nights awake, staring ahead, unable to cry. Alyssa understood that this past miscarriage felt like the final one— a nail in the coffin on Maggie's dreams.

Of course, Maggie still pulled more than her fair share of the weight of mothering Lucy. That was just her way. Even now, Lucy walked over to Maggie, and Maggie lifted her onto the couch to cuddle against her. Lucy played with her hair and giggled, and Maggie managed a very soft smile. It was the magic of Lucy— the only person who could draw Maggie from her funk.

“What time do you want to start baking tomorrow?” Alyssa asked Maggie.

Maggie didn't lift her eyes from Lucy's. "Early. Like maybe four? I want to deliver stuff to The Dog-Eared Corner by eleven or so."

Alyssa scowled. Four was an insane time to get up. "You know, I don't think that area of downtown gets much foot traffic. Other coffee shops are bursting at the seams during the day, but that one?"

"It's a ghost town," Maggie agreed.

"We should do something about that," Alyssa said. "Otherwise, your baked goods will go to waste."

Alyssa went upstairs to grab her laptop, then returned to design simple flyers to advertise The Dog-Eared Corner and its "gorgeous array of baked goods and sublime literary selection." Alyssa showed the flyer to Maggie, and Maggie nodded to show appreciation.

"You know, she didn't seem as confused as she did back in November," Alyssa reported.

"She had just been at the hospital," Maggie pointed out. "Maybe she's on some kind of medicine to stabilize her?"

Alyssa nodded. "That stuff about her sister sounded really sad."

"Who are you talking about?" Janine turned to look at her daughters curiously.

"I think I told you about that woman I met at the hospital when Georgia was born," Alyssa returned. "Maggie and I tracked her down at the bookstore she owns downtown. The Dog-Eared Corner."

Janine furrowed her brow curiously. "Wait. Are you talking about Heidi Withers?"

Alyssa nodded. "The taxi had taken me to where she lived, and it wasn't too hard to figure out where she worked, as well."

Janine puffed out her cheeks. "Your grandmother and I just met her at the Lodge on New Year's Eve."

“No way! How did she seem?” Alyssa asked.

“Very sad,” Janine admitted. “She told us she hasn’t spoken to her son in seven years, and we urged her to call him.”

Grandma Nancy overheard this from the kitchen and hurried in to add, “We told her not to be stubborn. That she would regret it.”

“She didn’t mention anything about her sister,” Janine continued.

Alyssa’s heart felt very dark. “She just said she hasn’t seen her in many years, either. I wonder what happened?”

Janine and Nancy eyed one another, their eyes heavy with sorrow. There was only so much you could do for the lonely people in the world.

\* \* \*

The next morning, Maggie nudged Alyssa awake at three-thirty and told her she was about to start baking prep. Alyssa rubbed her temples and her eyes and then suggested Maggie was the craziest person in the world. But even in the dark, there was a focus and energy in Maggie’s eyes, one Alyssa hadn’t seen in many months. It dragged Alyssa out of bed in no time flat. Lucy remained asleep in her toddler bed.

Apparently, Maggie hadn’t been able to sleep and had studied numerous online tutorials to ensure her baking output was perfect. In the kitchen, over coffee, she announced the plan to make twenty-four cupcakes with icing, two full platters of brownies, and four dozen cookies, as a start. The ingredients were already situated on the kitchen table.

“If we get a good influx of customers this afternoon, I see no reason we can’t double our output the next time we do something like this,” Maggie explained.

Alyssa soon found herself up to her elbows in flour and sugar, stirring, sifting, and cracking eggs. Maggie selected



music for her Bluetooth speaker, mostly tunes that pumped the girls up and opened their eyes wider.

Around six-thirty that morning, as cupcakes rose confidently beneath the orange glow of the oven, Rex called Maggie. Maggie stepped into the dining room to answer, which still allowed Alyssa to eavesdrop.

“Yeah. I’m okay.” Maggie sounded sullen but solid. “But no, I’m not sleeping well. I don’t know how to fix that.”

There was another gap of silence, during which, presumably, Rex spoke. Alyssa tried to imagine what Rex said, but her creativity didn’t stretch that far. She was beginning to really dislike him.

Yes, Rex was supposedly in the midst of a “huge business transition,” but Alyssa didn’t care at all. He should have been there with his wife. On the afternoon of Maggie’s miscarriage, Rex hadn’t shown up at the hospital until three hours after the fact. *Where had he been?*

Maggie returned to the kitchen and placed her phone on the counter.

“How is Rex?” Alyssa tried to make her voice bright.

“Oh. He’s busy.” Maggie turned to wash her hands in the sink.

“He’s always busy,” Alyssa pointed out.

“Yeah. They really lean on him at work,” Maggie said as the water rushed over her hands.

“It’s like he sold his soul to them,” Alyssa said.

Maggie made a face and turned off the water.

“Did he say anything about coming to Martha’s Vineyard?” Alyssa asked.

“He said he’s going to try,” Maggie said.

Alyssa wanted to snort, to say something menacing, or to point out that Rex had been a source of negativity in Maggie’s life for what seemed like over a year at that point. Instead, she

paraded over to the bowl of cookie dough to add the butterscotch chips, just as Maggie expected her to.

All she could do was help out. *Don't fan the flame.*

Alyssa and Maggie pulled up outside The Dog-Eared Corner at ten in the morning. Already, the open sign was turned on, and Heidi pattered around behind the window, dusting shelves and arranging decorations. The sight pulled at Alyssa's heartstrings.

"Nobody ever goes in there," Alyssa muttered to Maggie. "And yet she still cares for it like it's this prized possession."

"It is to her," Maggie reminded her.

When they entered the bookstore, Heidi lifted her head and looked at them with genuine shock.

"Morning, Heidi!" Alyssa greeted her. "How was your night?"

Heidi placed her dust rag on the counter and spoke very quietly. "Did you actually bake for me?"

"We did," Alyssa said. "Well, Maggie mostly did. I was the sous chef or whatever. The sous baker? Does that exist?"

Maggie placed the large box of cupcakes on the coffee shop counter and explained there was another box of goodies in the car. When she disappeared to retrieve it, Heidi approached the box of cupcakes and inspected them.

"They look divine," she said.

"They are divine," Alyssa corrected.

Heidi blushed and scanned the empty tables. "I don't know if anyone will ever taste them."

"Let us take care of that," Alyssa said. "We have a few ideas to bring people in."

Heidi eyed her curiously. "I can't pay you," she said again, rather sadly. "I wish I could."

But Alyssa waved her hand. "That's not a big deal."

"Why not?" Heidi looked aghast.

But Alyssa knew it was too complicated to explain her past, her father's oil money, and her father's death. Maggie hustled back into the bookstore to save Alyssa from the story of herself and soon stood behind the counter to arrange her sweet treats with an artist's precision. Heidi crossed and uncrossed her arms, then removed a small book from her shoulder bag, into which she now wrote.

"Is that a journal?" Alyssa asked.

"Sort of," Heidi said.

With the baked goods set up behind the glass counter, Maggie and Alyssa returned to the car to print flyers at the downtown print shop, which they then passed out wherever they could think of. They placed them in mailboxes, hung them on bulletin boards, taped them on telephone poles and even gave them to hotel concierges to recommend to their guests. The entire operation took about two hours, after which they decided to head over to The Dog-Eared Corner to see how Heidi made out.

To Alyssa's surprise, there were three guests in The Dog-Eared Corner already. Two of them scanned bookshelves and asked Heidi questions about recent authors, while a third drank a cappuccino and ate a brownie in the corner of the coffee shop area. He frowned over his book and scribbled notes to himself in the margin.

Heidi hurried toward them as they entered, her eyes alight. "I had to run out to buy milk for the cappuccinos!" she whispered. "I was panicked that he wouldn't wait, but he said he had all the time in the world."

Alyssa smiled and squeezed Heidi's arm. "Let us know how we can help."

"I'm sure it won't get much busier than this," Heidi said. "But selling a few books and a cappuccino here and there will certainly help."

Maggie lifted her cell phone and waved it timidly. "I just posted about the baked goods on my social media channel,"

she explained. “And I have quite a few followers who live here on the Vineyard.”

“Heidi? I think a storm is coming,” Alyssa joked.

Alyssa was only partially wrong. Over the following few hours, guests streamed steadily in and out of the bookstore. Almost everyone bought a baked good, several opted for americanos or cappuccinos or lattes, and some even purchased books. Heidi commented midway through the afternoon that she would have to make a book order soon.

“I haven’t had to order new books since September,” she said softly. Directly afterward, she removed her journal from her shoulder bag and wrote something else. Alyssa had a hunch the journal helped Heidi deal with her memory problems.

It was a clever trick, Alyssa thought.

By five p.m., all of Maggie’s baked goods had been sold, and several readers and writers remained at the tables of the coffee shop. Around them, a healthy snow continued to fall, lining the windows of the cozy colonial in white. Alyssa and Maggie sat at the last remaining table and sipped tea, watching the snow.

“I’ve missed Lucy today,” Maggie admitted softly. “I don’t know how real mothers spend so much time away from their children! This is hard.”

Alyssa placed her hand on Maggie’s. “You are a real mother, Maggie.”

But to this, Maggie dropped her gaze and pulled her hand away. It was too soon, Alyssa knew. The pain of the miscarriage would linger for a long time.

Heidi appeared at their table, blushing and speaking slightly incoherently. “I can’t thank you enough,” she said.

“Don’t thank us at all,” Maggie said. “Tell me I can come back in a few days and do it all over again.”

Heidi’s eyes widened. “You don’t have to do that.”

Maggie was resolute. “I do, actually. It’s the only thing I really know how to do right now. Please, let me.”

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## Chapter Eight

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To Heidi's complete surprise, Maggie and Alyssa Potter returned in a few days to bring magic back to The Dog-Eared Corner. This time, Maggie prepared different kinds of cupcakes, pear tarts, a cheesecake, and oatmeal raisin cookies, and she posted photographs of the goodies on her social media, along with a photograph of Heidi next to a bookshelf. In the text beneath the photo, Maggie spoke about Heidi's commitment to the bookstore and that she'd inherited the bookstore from her father and had "loved and cared for it ever since."

Seeing herself on the internet like that, upheld as some kind of patron saint of literary artistry, thrilled Heidi to no end. She felt as though her father would be proud of her for pushing the bookstore to new heights.

Of course, it hadn't been her doing at all. Alyssa and Maggie had seemingly dropped out of the heavens above to rejuvenate her gorgeous little bookstore. She couldn't have been happier.

This time, the baked goods at the coffee shop ran out by four in the afternoon, leaving Maggie to mutter that she would bake much more next time. A new order of books arrived, and Heidi spent the last hours of the day shelving them and recommending titles to customers. Readers and writers collected themselves across the coffee shop, nibbling sweet treats and ordering second coffees. Heidi felt the revenue of the old place rising. Frequently, she wrote "things to remember" in her journal, yet also felt this increase in her

social activity had reactivated parts of her mind. Perhaps it was all an illusion, but right now, she didn't care.

Heidi closed the coffee shop at six that evening and watched from the door as the final reader wandered back to where he came from. Behind her, Alyssa and Maggie high-fived and began to clean up the coffee shop counter. When Heidi turned to assess her bookshelves, she realized she needed to make even more book orders that evening, and she wrote out a list in her journal of genres she needed to restock.

Never would she buy a book on investing, she promised herself. Never would she give up on her belief in beautiful things.

Alyssa fetched the broom from the back closet and began to sweep the coffee shop. Maggie sprayed glass cleaner across the coffee shop counter and scrubbed, her face focused. Heidi watched them for a moment and then heard herself speak.

“Someone wants to buy the bookstore.”

Alyssa and Maggie lifted their heads to look at her.

Heidi fidgeted with the end of her sweater. “Do you think I'm stupid not to want to sell?”

“Absolutely not,” Alyssa said. “Your father passed this place on to you. How could you part with it?”

Maggie nodded. “You love this bookstore, Heidi.”

Heidi sighed. “I do. I really do. But the thing is, I'm fifty-seven years old. My body is failing me in numerous ways, and I don't know how much longer I'll be able to work.”

At this, Alyssa and Maggie exchanged glances, and Heidi realized that, somehow, they'd already sensed her mind was off. She shoved away the embarrassment.

“I had always hoped to pass on the bookstore to my son,” Heidi continued. “My dream was to keep it in the family another generation longer. But...” She paused before pushing herself to go on. “But my son and I no longer speak.”

Alyssa stepped forward timidly. Her eyes were big and glowing with emotion. “Heidi, that's terrible.”

Maggie nodded beside her, her gaze on the ground.

“You haven’t reached out to him lately?” Alyssa asked.

Heidi’s voice broke. “I called him on New Year’s Eve, but he didn’t answer.”

“Gosh.” Alyssa looked at a loss. She leaned on the handle of the broom and considered the weight of Heidi’s loss. “Do you mind if I ask you what happened?”

Heidi’s voice was becoming hoarse. This was far more speaking than she’d done in years. “Okay. But keep in mind that I haven’t told this story to anyone in many, many years.”

“It’s an intimate story,” Alyssa said softly. “We understand.”

Heidi leaned against the front counter and began. “A long time ago, I really wanted a baby. It was the only thing I ever thought about. I was in my twenties, inching toward my thirties, and I was panicked that it would never happen for me. I’d had a number of boyfriends, but they’d all found things wrong with me or left the island for greener pastures. By then, my father had died and left me the bookstore, and I fell deeper into my own fantasies.

“Meanwhile, my sister, Dee, was my dearest and only friend. She wanted nothing to do with the bookstore, but she still stopped by now and again to have a coffee and chat. One afternoon, she came into the store and sobbed to me that she was pregnant, and she didn’t know what to do. She wanted nothing to do with the guy who’d gotten her pregnant, and she’d just been accepted to university in the fall.

“I saw my opportunity,” Heidi explained. “I told Dee I would raise her baby for as long as she wanted me to, until she was ready to take over. To this, Dee said she would never be ready to take over—that she wasn’t even sure she wanted children at all. She even decided to set up a legal adoption to ensure the baby was wholly mine.”

Heidi paused and swallowed. Her throat felt thick. “Dee had her baby, a boy. I was in the room during the delivery, and I was the very first person to hold him. Dee said she didn’t



want to. In fact, I don't think she held him until he was about a month old, at which point she looked at him like he was a stranger. It was a remarkable thing. I couldn't understand how she carried this baby in her body for nine months only to completely wash her hands of him afterward.

“Dee went to university while I stayed here to raise David and mind the bookstore. Dee visited the island less and less. I worried she didn't want to come because seeing David was too painful, so I arranged for a babysitter and went to see her by myself. When I arrived, she was so cold to me. She hardly introduced me to her friends, and when she did, she insinuated that I was an island bumpkin who would never amount to anything. Oh, it hurt me so badly.”

Alyssa and Maggie's eyes glistened with tears that miraculously didn't fall.

“Dee graduated from university when David was four years old,” Heidi explained. “We went to her graduation and then out to eat to celebrate. By then, she'd met her boyfriend, whom she later married and moved with to Los Angeles. There, they became business partners and made millions of dollars. Their lives skyrocketed, while mine remained just the same.

“Of course, I was still very happy. David was my pride and joy. Like my father and I, he was a voracious reader, and we spent hours in this very bookstore when it was closed, reading side-by-side.

“Over the years, I struggled with the truth of David's birth. He asked me about his father, and I made up a story about an old boyfriend who'd left the island forever. But over the years, his curiosity mounted. He even decided to research some of my old boyfriends to see which one was his father. I knew I had to stop that in its tracks, so I sat him down and explained the truth—that his Aunt Dee was his real mother and that her ex-boyfriend was his father. That she'd wanted to go to college, and I'd taken over as his mother.

“I hadn't expected David to take the news so hard. He'd always known his Aunt Dee to be 'distant' with him and

sometimes cruel, but this put all that cruelty into context and nearly destroyed him. He approached me one afternoon when he was nineteen or twenty and said he wanted to go visit his Aunt Dee, and I told him he could do what he wanted. He was an adult, after all. Frankly, I'm surprised she allowed his visit, as she'd never been so keen on having any kind of relationship, even one as his aunt.

"I don't know what happened when he went to Los Angeles," Heidi continued. "All I know is, I never heard from David nor Dee again after that. I read that David moved to New York City, where his career skyrocketed. And Dee is still with her businessman husband on the Golden Coast, swimming in money."

Heidi placed her hand over her bursting heart. The story had taken a lot out of her.

"Oh my gosh," Alyssa breathed. She hurried toward Heidi and wrapped her arms around her, with Maggie following her lead. For a moment, the two young women held onto Heidi as though Heidi was on the verge of floating into outer space.

The girls led Heidi to a coffee shop table, where she collapsed with a cookie Maggie had saved just for her. Heidi nibbled at the edges as she regained clarity.

"David was so lucky to have a mother like you," Maggie said softly. "You know that, right?"

"Dee was not worthy of him," Alyssa affirmed. "She wasn't worthy of you, either."

Heidi chewed her cookie slowly. *How could she translate to these young women just how lonely she'd been?* She'd lost her sister, then her son in one fell swoop.

"I've struggled knowing if it was the right move," Heidi said. "I probably should have just told him Dee was his mother early on to avoid confusion. I don't know."

"That might have confused him even more," Alyssa pointed out.

"You're his mother," Maggie said sternly. "You did what you had to do to keep you both happy."

“Yeah.” Heidi smiled sadly. “But for the past seven years, I’ve hardly had a day of happiness. I hate to say that. I hate that it sounds so doom and gloom. But it’s true.”

Alyssa and Maggie were very quiet, and Heidi panicked, thinking if she was too “doom and gloom” with them, they might never come back. They would smell the loneliness on her and think it was contagious. Maybe it was.

“Then again, the past few days with you at The Dog-Eared Corner have brought me real joy,” she countered, surprised at how true it was. “I don’t think I deserve it, but I’ve loved every minute.”

“You deserve it,” Maggie shot back.

“I know you girls spend most of your time in New York,” Heidi said. “And I don’t want my little bookstore to keep you on the island any longer than you need to be.”

“We told you. Our family is here,” Alyssa said.

“We love it here,” Maggie agreed.

“But Maggie, you have to get back to your husband,” Heidi breathed. “You’re twenty-six, right? I’m sure you’re on the brink of starting a family. I’m sure you have so many plans.”

Maggie blinked several times, then smiled at Heidi. Heidi couldn’t read Maggie’s expression, although she sensed it was edged with pain.

“Just let us help you when we can,” Maggie urged. “It makes us very happy to be here with you.”

And although Heidi should have known better, she allowed herself to feel a bit of hope.

## Chapter Nine

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In the two and a half weeks that Alyssa and Maggie remained on Martha's Vineyard, they hosted five "bakery days" at The Dog-Eared Corner and boosted Heidi's revenue to exponential heights. During the days they couldn't make it in, Maggie dropped off goodies that didn't go stale immediately so that customers could still sit with books and indulge their sweet tooth.

Now that the girls had to head back to the city for a little while, Maggie and Alyssa had made many pounds of cookie dough, brownie batter, and cake batter and frozen everything with necessary instructions. All Heidi had to do was put things in the oven, stir up a bit of icing when necessary, and set goodies out beneath the counter. "Since we mixed everything up already, you won't have to get up early," Maggie explained on the morning they planned to leave the island. "You can even use the oven in the back of the bookstore to bake everything as you work up front."

"That comes with the added bonus that the shop will smell amazing," Alyssa pointed out.

Heidi hugged the girls close and urged them to come back soon. She then pressed a book each into their hands and winked at them. "I thought long and hard about what kind of gift I should give you for all you've done for me."

To Alyssa, she gave a book of poems by Sylvia Plath, and to Maggie, she gave *The Nightingale* by Kristin Hannah. Both girls hugged her again and thanked her profusely. Alyssa couldn't remember the last time someone had given her a

book, and she couldn't wait to underline sections that excited her so she could read them back to Heidi when she saw her next time.

“Goodbye, Lucy!” Heidi waved at the toddler as Maggie lifted her from her carrier and placed her on her hip.

“Bye-bye!” Lucy called as they stepped from the bookstore and into the February chill. Their car engine was on, its heater blazing, and when they entered, it was like cozying up in a sauna.

Once on the ferry to Woods Hole, Alyssa, Maggie, and Lucy got out and went to the top deck of the boat to watch the island recede into the horizon. The edges of Alyssa's heart were cracked.

“I hope Heidi can handle this,” Maggie whispered.

“She's come alive the past couple of weeks,” Alyssa reminded her. What she didn't add, but wanted to, was that Maggie had come alive, as well. The miscarriage had torn her apart. It had shattered her ego and reminded her that life was a series of mistakes and sorrows. But helping Heidi at the bookstore had been a necessary balm, a reminder that life was worth living as long as you helped one another along.

Back in the car, Maggie drove them back toward the city, her sunglasses glinting. Lucy babbled to herself in the back and gazed out the window. “What do you think Lucy sees when she looks outside? I mean, she doesn't really know what a barn is, or what a cow is, or what a gas station is,” Alyssa pointed out.

Maggie laughed, and the laughter was so nourishing in Alyssa's ears. “Lucy probably has a whole explanation for everything she sees. Maybe her explanation is better than ours.”

“You think that once we teach her how the world works, she'll be like, ‘Actually, guys, you have it all wrong?’” Alyssa asked.

“I hope so,” Maggie said.

Alyssa considered reminding Maggie that Lucy probably would not live with them throughout the rest of her childhood — one day, perhaps soon, Hunter would come for her. But this was not the time.

After a pause, Maggie continued. “I am thinking about telling Rex I want to open my own bakery in the city.”

Alyssa’s eyes widened. “No way!”

“Yes, way,” Maggie countered. “I loved baking for the bookstore, but I want to do more. I visualize it like a Parisian bakery.”

“It sounds wonderful,” Alyssa admitted.

“Yeah. I mean, now that I know for sure I can’t have children, I think it’ll be good to throw myself into something completely,” Maggie continued. “Especially because...” Maggie trailed off and flinched.

It was clear Maggie was thinking about Lucy’s future, as well— about the fact that Lucy wasn’t her own.

“I mean, Hunter can take Lucy away from me over my dead body,” Maggie joked. “But in the meantime, I have to prepare for all conceivable futures. That doesn’t mean I can’t continue to help Heidi out, of course. Maybe I can somehow operate out of both establishments.”

“Heck, you can even start a chain,” Alyssa told her. “Your social media is growing by the day, so the audience is built in.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Maggie said, although it was clear already that she was.

They continued to drive for a little while, past red flashes of barns, over rolling hills, southwestward toward their other home. It was somewhere in the middle of nowhere that Alyssa heard herself burst with her idea.

“I think I should carry your baby for you.”

Immediately, the car slowed, and a semi-truck driver slammed on his horn and went around them. Maggie gasped and said, “Alyssa! Don’t freak me out like that!”

But Alyssa had thought about it endlessly since Heidi had shared her story. She clapped her hands and said, “Tell me you haven’t thought about it!”

“It’s ridiculous,” Maggie shot back. “I wouldn’t ask you to do something like that.”

“But I’m offering!” Alyssa cried.

Sweat pooled on Maggie’s forehead and around her neck. Before Alyssa could say anything else, Maggie drove the car onto the highway exit, drove two miles more, and parked outside a Denny’s. She got out and slammed the door behind her, clearly emotional and unsure how to handle it. Alyssa’s motions were delicate. She got out, then removed Lucy from her car seat and followed Maggie into the Denny’s. Maggie was already studying a menu in the corner, her face beet-red.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” Maggie’s hands shook over the menu. “I don’t know why I’m freaking out.”

Alyssa took Maggie’s hand over the table. “I don’t know why, either.”

Maggie and Alyssa locked eyes and giggled with nervous energy like little girls. A moment later, the server arrived with a highchair for Lucy, and both Maggie and Alyssa ordered coffee and water.

“Listen,” Alyssa said as the server disappeared. “I can do this.”

Maggie groaned. “Alyssa, it’s ten months of your life.”

“I know! It’s only ten months of my life!”

“You’ll hate it,” Maggie shot back.

“So, you’re saying I’ll hate eating all the time in support of your baby’s growth? I sincerely doubt it,” Alyssa said.

“It’s a crazy idea,” Maggie stuttered.

“No, it’s not. People do it all the time. Come on, Maggie. You have all those fertilized embryos just sitting there. Give me one!”

“I have to talk to Rex,” Maggie offered.

Alyssa's smile opened. "So, you'll think about it."

"I don't know. I just have to talk to Rex!" Maggie's voice was tinged with panic, yet her eyes danced with light. "We're not like Heidi and her sister."

"I know we're not," Alyssa affirmed. "We're best friends."

In fact, the way Dee had treated Heidi was beyond Alyssa's wildest dreams. *Hadn't Heidi and Dee loved one another? Hadn't they grown up together?*

"I would never be able to pay you back," Maggie said. "It's too big."

"Lucky for you, I don't need payment," Alyssa returned.

Maggie's eyes were glowing pools. Beside them, Lucy giggled and bobbed her head around. Maggie and Alyssa turned to look at her, as though Lucy had all the answers, but she just waved her hands in the air.

"You shouldn't live in fear of Hunter taking Lucy away," Alyssa reminded her. "You should have a baby of your own."

Maggie nodded slowly. "I can't get my hopes up."

"Why not?"

"Because we still don't know if it will work," Maggie said. "We have to make doctor appointments. We have to make sure your body accepts the embryo. We have to..."

"Yeah. We'll deal with all that when it comes," Alyssa assured her. "In the meantime, let's order some food, huh? I'm hungry."

The menu of Denny's was a masterclass in fat, grease, cheese, and love. Alyssa wanted to scrape her plate clean and ask for more.

"If you do get pregnant, none of this stuff is going in your body," Maggie said.

Alyssa laughed. "Then I guess I'd better get it in while I still can."



Maggie shook her head as her smile fell. “I can’t believe we’re going to do this.”

“And I can’t believe we’re only just thinking about it. What are we waiting for? Let’s have a baby!”

Over the table, Maggie and Alyssa shook hands as Lucy fluttered hers in the air in agreement. Lucy then told them a small story about a horse and a cloud in the sky as a February sunbeam struck the table and warmed their afternoon.

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## Chapter Ten

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Alyssa was able to meet with Maggie's fertility specialist only a few days later. Throughout the appointment, Maggie beamed and held Lucy, listening intently and asking numerous questions. Alyssa felt sort of like a specimen, a body rather than the person within it, but she told herself she didn't mind and soon found that she really didn't. She'd offered up her womb to her sister, and Maggie had gladly accepted it. It was going to be fine.

After a series of tests and an analysis of Alyssa's cycle, the doctor called to set up an appointment to implant the embryo the second week of February. On the day before the implantation, Alyssa took the day to wander the streets of Brooklyn by herself, to sit at her favorite coffee shops with the book of Sylvia Plath poetry, and to talk to old friends, including Scarlet Copperfield, who had recently been robbed and was now suspicious of her boyfriend, Owen. Alyssa did her best to say all the right things to fight against the sorrow and confusion in Scarlet's eyes.

Alyssa kept news of the implantation to herself, as she already felt it was more Maggie's baby news than anyone else's. She was just along for the ride.

On the night before the implantation, Maggie cooked her an elaborate and healthy meal and chatted excitedly about her plans for her own bakery and what she'd heard from Heidi about the bookstore since they'd left.

"Business is booming," she said of Heidi's place. "And she says she still has enough cookie dough and brownie batter for

another couple of weeks.”

“That’s fantastic. And what did Rex say about opening your own bakery?”

Maggie paused for the briefest of moments. She scooped more salad onto her plate and said, “He says he’s open to the idea.”

Alyssa’s ears rang. “He’s open to it?”

Maggie shrugged. “I mean, hearing about the surrogacy was already big news for him. I think it took him off-guard.”

“Off-guard?” Alyssa could only repeat the nonsense her sister said.

“Yeah. He’d made peace with not having children together,” Maggie explained. “And you have to remember after the miscarriage happened, I left town for over two weeks. He had to deal with the miscarriage all by himself, which wasn’t easy for him. I don’t know if I can forgive myself for that.”

Alyssa wanted to shrug about Rex’s “emotions,” but she managed to keep her shoulders down.

“Is he okay now?” Alyssa asked.

“He’s still processing it,” Maggie said. “But now that we’re going to have a baby with your help, he’s learning how to be excited again.”

“Shouldn’t he be excited immediately?”

Maggie scoffed. “You’re too hard on him. You know that?”

“I just want him to love you and support you in all things,” Alyssa countered. “Is that too much for a sister to want?”

“You’re very sweet,” Maggie said.

“I’m not sweet,” Alyssa shot back. “I just love you a little too much, and the result of that is frightening sometimes.”

Maggie laughed gently, taking this opportunity to laden Alyssa’s plate with more salad. Alyssa wrinkled her nose but allowed it.

“Where is Rex, anyway?” Alyssa asked.

“He’s got another business dinner tonight,” Maggie said. “He wants to get these promotions out of the way before the baby comes so that he can take some serious time off to get to know him or her.” Maggie’s face was serene.

“And you think he actually will take that time off?” Alyssa asked.

Maggie’s face soured for a moment. “Why wouldn’t he?”

Alyssa wanted to remind Maggie that very often, Rex used work as an excuse to get out of nearly everything.

But instead, she said, “You’re right. Why wouldn’t he?”

\* \* \*

Later that night, Alyssa curled up on the couch and watched television as Maggie spoke on the phone to their mother. Maggie paced the living room, entered the kitchen, then circled back around, as though she had unlimited energy and wasn’t sure where to put it.

“She’s resting,” Maggie said of Alyssa, “and can’t wait for tomorrow. Neither of us can. Oh, gosh, Mom. I know my hopes are too high, but I just can’t help but think this is really it. My body is clearly not up to the task, but...” She trailed off as Janine said something. “Yes. She’s such a blessing to me.”

At this, Alyssa turned to find Maggie gazing at her adoringly. Alyssa smiled back, both nervous and grateful for the next months together. Their already-intense friendship would reach new heights.

Alyssa brushed her teeth at ten that night and drowned herself with face creams and other lotions, suddenly frightened that pregnancy would age her more than she’d thought. She’d read somewhere that pregnancy and childbirth were like trauma to your body, and she’d struggled since then not to allow it to bother her.

When she stepped into the dark hallway, Rex's voice filled the apartment. It seemed to come from their bedroom, and it was edged with anger. Alyssa froze.

"You're wasting your time and money on that bookstore," he said. "Why don't you just let the old woman sell it? She should take the money and run. Didn't you say she has memory problems or something?"

Maggie responded, but it was too quiet for Alyssa to hear.

"Yeah? So doesn't that mean she'll have to close the place down in a few years, anyway?"

Maggie again responded. Alyssa tiptoed into her bedroom and closed the door quickly, uninterested in hearing anything else. Here she was, only hours from having their fertilized egg implanted, and listening to the baby's father ridicule her sister. It wasn't something she wanted to engage in. It took every bit of strength she had not to storm into their bedroom and demand Rex to either stop or just leave.

But the following morning, Maggie was right as rain. She bubbled around the coffee maker, fed Lucy her breakfast, prepared a slice of toast with avocado and egg for Alyssa, and even kissed Rex goodbye when he emerged from the bedroom to go to work. Alyssa burned to ask Maggie what Rex's deal was, but she knew today wasn't the day for it.

"It's implantation day!" Maggie said to Lucy, who tried to say the word back to her and failed. "That's okay, honey. It's a hard word."

Maggie hired a car to take them to the fertility clinic in Manhattan, which was only a few blocks from the apartment where Maggie and Alyssa had been raised. Because of the delicate nature of the day, they'd hired a babysitter for Lucy, which felt odd to Alyssa, as she was now accustomed to being a trio rather than a duo. Maggie mentioned she felt the same. "She's not even my child, and I'm already freaked out about her going to college or something," she admitted.

The entire procedure was very quick. Alyssa found herself back in the lobby with Maggie in no time, blinking with

confusion as she comprehended the weight of what she'd done. Rex and Maggie's embryo was now in her body. Now, they just had to patiently wait and hope the procedure took.

"Do you feel weird?" Maggie asked as they walked back into the February sunlight.

"I feel like I need more food," Alyssa tried.

Maggie laughed and led them to a corner lunch spot, where they ordered sandwiches and talked about the past, about how much their mother had changed over the years, and how little they missed the "ritziness" of the Upper West Side.

"Mom's an islander now," Alyssa affirmed.

"I cannot wait till she marries Henry," Maggie said. "It's the perfect happy ending after everything Dad put her through."

Alyssa grimaced, never sure if she wanted to speak of Jack Potter. During their childhood, she'd adored him and feared him almost equally. He'd been confident and arrogant, just as quick with a joke as he'd been with an insult. Never had Alyssa anticipated her father would cheat on her mother, least of all with her mother's best friend. Then again, those you loved knew how to hurt you the most, she knew.

Alyssa took another bite of her sandwich and eyed her sister, who gazed out the window and watched a woman a few years older who pushed a stroller down the sidewalk. Beside the woman was a tall and broad-shouldered man in a peacoat, presumably the baby's father.

"I can't wait to see Rex as a father," Maggie breathed.

Alyssa bristled, remembering how Rex had been last night. "He hasn't been that great with Lucy," she pointed out before she could stop herself.

Maggie turned her eyes to meet Alyssa's. Her smile waned just the smallest bit. "It's been a very difficult time for him," she explained again. "And he loves Lucy. He really does. You aren't always around, you know. Sometimes, when it's Rex, Lucy, and I, it feels like we're the coziest little family."

“Yeah.” Alyssa smiled back at her sister, even as her heart darkened with fear. *Was Maggie delusional about Rex? Or did Alyssa just not understand their dynamic?*

\* \* \*

By the following week, Alyssa and Maggie were back on the Vineyard to visit The Dog-Eared Corner and reunite with their family. Just as she had since the implantation of the embryo, Maggie handled Alyssa like a breakable egg, insisting on making a nutritional salad to eat on the drive there, asking her to drink plenty of water, and talking at length about the importance of sleep. Alyssa put a hip-hop song on the speakers of the car and tried to loosen Maggie up, but Maggie switched the song to a classical tune, saying it was up to them to hone the minds of both Lucy and the potential baby in Alyssa’s belly.

“If the embryo even took, it’s just a collection of cells right now,” Alyssa said to Maggie with a laugh.

“Precious cells!” Maggie corrected. “The most precious cells of my life!”

There was no arguing with that. Alyssa groaned, ate another cherry tomato, and turned back to smile at Lucy. “Maggie is watching out for us, Lucy. We’ll never have a moment of freedom again.”

The Remington House was in full swing. Maggie parked in the driveway as Janine, Elsa, Carmella, and Grandma Nancy hurried from the house to hug them and take their suitcases. Janine wrapped her arms around Alyssa first and whispered, “What you did for your sister is beyond words.”

Alyssa’s cheeks burned with embarrassment. She didn’t want people to think of her as this great woman who’d sacrificed her body for her sister. To her, the act of carrying Maggie’s baby was as natural as loving Maggie to pieces. It was unquestioned.

Inside, Mallory and Zachery played with blocks in the living room as Mallory spoke to Elsa’s fiancé, Bruce, about

the goings-on at the Sheridan Law Office in Oak Bluffs. Cody's daughter, Gretchen, sat next to Zachery and watched him, a bit too old for his games.

"Where is the baby?" Maggie asked Carmella with a smile.

"Georgia is upstairs, asleep," Carmella explained. "She's a good baby. Very chill."

"I hope Rex and I get lucky like you," Maggie said.

At this, both Carmella and Maggie glanced at Alyssa, who winced.

"I know. I'm not very chill," Alyssa shot back. "But I'll try not to influence the baby if I can."

Cousin Cole arrived not long after that. His cheeks were bright red from an afternoon of frigid sailing, and he carried a twelve-pack of beer in a gloved hand and greeted Alyssa and Maggie with hugs.

"I heard a rumor you're taking a break from the sailing bar," he told Alyssa with a wink. "Who is going to play the jukebox and sing all the songs with me?"

"I'll be back," Alyssa warned. "Don't let them forget about me."

That afternoon, the entire Remington clan sat around the long dining room table for a roasted chicken, sweet potatoes, green beans, salads, wine, and desserts. Alyssa found herself caught up in the chaos of her family's conversations, listening as everyone spoke over each other, competing for their chance to have their opinions heard. Normally, Alyssa was one of the more vocal of the family, but this time, she found herself feeling softer, quieter, as though the idea of carrying the embryo to term had matured her.

Across the table, Maggie caught her eye and smiled. Alyssa smiled back. It felt as though they shared a secret between them, one nobody else could understand.

That night, Alyssa and Cole sat near the fire as the rest of the Remingtons returned to their separate rooms or separate



homes to huddle close to loved ones as the Vineyard winter winds howled outside. Maggie was upstairs, on the phone to Rex, and Janine had gone to her fiancé, Henry's place. Grandma Nancy had gone to bed to get some "shut eye" before her six a.m. yoga class at the Katama Lodge and Wellness Spa.

"Sort of rare for you to stick around the Remington House so long after dark," Alyssa teased her cousin.

Cole palmed the back of his neck.

"Uh oh," Alyssa said. "Something's up."

"It's not up," Cole tried. "I guess I'm just a bit frustrated."

"Is it Aria?"

Cole gave Alyssa a look filled with incomprehensible meaning. Before Alyssa could ask another question, Cole sidestepped the question and asked one of his own.

"Are you nervous about being pregnant?"

"I don't even know if I am yet."

"When do you find out?"

Alyssa stretched her arms over her head. "I guess I'll know by the end of the month."

"Dang."

Alyssa nodded. "It's so weird, isn't it?" After another pause, she added, "I think there's something wrong with my sister's husband."

"Rex?"

"Yeah. He's short with her. Almost cruel. It reminds me of the way my dad was with my mom toward the end. And gosh, Cole, it bothers me. It really, really bothers me. But Maggie always brushes my worries aside."

Cole sighed. "And now, you have some of his DNA inside of you."

"Ew." Alyssa laughed, despite how sad she felt. "Maggie's sure he'll become a great father when the baby comes. If the

baby ever comes.”

“The baby,” Cole repeated and studied the fire. The blacks of his eyes reflected the light. “You know what? I wouldn’t be surprised if you already were pregnant.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“It’s just a hunch, I guess,” Cole told her. “But I think I’d bet on it if I were a betting man.”

“Should we put some money down? Make things interesting?” Alyssa asked.

“I don’t bet when it comes to life or death,” Cole affirmed. “Just cards and basketball.”

Alyssa chuckled as a warmth flowed over her. Not long afterward, Maggie appeared in the living room in a fuzzy robe and reminded Alyssa of the importance of sleep, to which Cole agreed, rose, and headed out. That night, as Alyssa burrowed herself beneath the Remington House sheets, she allowed herself to imagine her and Maggie’s baby many years from now. She pictured the baby as a little boy, five or six years old, on a sailboat with Maggie, Cole, Janine, Henry, and Alyssa as the Vineyard Sound glittered with heavenly promise around them. Perhaps Alyssa would always feel this incredible connection to him, as she’d grown him within her womb for ten months. Perhaps it would be a unique sort of love, one she would be privileged to experience.

And just a week later, days after Alyssa’s period had passed her by, Alyssa took a pregnancy test. Two pink lines appeared, bright and clear as anything. Before she went into the kitchen to share the news with Maggie, she lifted her eyes to the bathroom mirror to consider the news alone. In the reflection, her eyes glinted with tears.

## Chapter Eleven

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A book shipment arrived toward the end of February. Heidi hovered over several cardboard boxes and studied the titles within to ensure they matched the order list she'd been careful to keep on hand. Although she couldn't remember writing the list, she'd clearly made the list for a reason, and she had to trust herself, both past and present versions. This was her new life with early-onset dementia.

From the back kitchen of The Dog-Eared Corner came the sound of the timer. Heidi hurried back to remove a baking tray of chocolate chip cookies with sea salt, which had been a big hit the past week. According to customers, Maggie's chocolate chip cookies were different than others for reasons they couldn't fully understand. "What does she put in these?" several people had asked. "They're completely addictive!"

To this, Heidi always said, "My baker doesn't reveal her secrets, unfortunately. Not even to me!"

Heidi lined up several packages of espresso under the glass case in the front of the coffee shop, knowing that, these days, she went through a package and a half per day. Previously, she'd purchased one package per month. When she rose from under the glass case, three tourists entered wearing bright smiles, and Heidi heard herself say, "Good morning! Welcome to The Dog-Eared Corner." She'd begun to sort-of like the sound of her own voice, which was strange for her. She'd hardly spoken for years.

The tourists worked their way around the bookshelves, frequently inspecting book covers and reading their backs.

Throughout, they spoke of Martha's Vineyard in the winter, how gorgeous and sleepy it was, and Heidi's heart warmed.

"I love the smell of chocolate chip cookies in here!" One of the tourists turned to look at Heidi; in her arms, she carried a stack of books.

"They just came out of the oven," Heidi explained.

"Uh oh." The woman with the books eyed her companions. "What time is it? Probably not cookie time?"

"There are no food rules on Martha's Vineyard on a cold day like this," Heidi told her.

The three tourists purchased a book each and then wandered to the coffee shop area to buy coffee and cookies. Together, they sat around the corner in the window and cracked open their novels, sitting together quietly as the wind roared against the bookstore. Heidi wondered what it was like to have people you loved so much that you could be quiet while with them.

But still, she couldn't complain— not about her loneliness, not anymore. So many of her problems had receded since Maggie and Alyssa Potter had entered her life. The real estate developer, Jefferson Conrad, who'd wanted to buy The Dog-Eared Corner had come in last week to find the bookstore vibrant with life. Because Heidi had been behind the counter, fighting to get through the coffee and book orders, she hadn't had time to tell him to get the heck out. He'd eventually left, his head down with defeat.

That said, Heidi still hadn't managed to pay off any of her debts. Rent would come easier in March, which was a blessing, and she was setting herself up for a healthier financial future. But it was difficult to know how she would find her way out of the dark hole she'd dug herself.

She shoved this thought as deep into the back of her mind as she could.

As the three tourists sipped coffee and read, several others entered, looked around, purchased books, bought cookies, complimented the shop, and kept Heidi busy till after lunch.

At one-thirty, when the bell over the door jangled, Heidi lifted her eyes to find two gorgeous humans bundled up in pretty winter coats, their hair whipping around their faces until they managed to get the door closed.

“Maggie! Alyssa!” Heidi hurried across the bookstore to hug the girls close. She hadn’t seen much of them since the week before, when Maggie had come by with a large number of baked goods, cookie dough, and brownie dough. At the time, Maggie had referenced something “enormous” happening in their family and explained that she and Alyssa would come by soon.

Alyssa and Maggie sat in the coffee shop with hot cocoa for about ten minutes as Heidi managed the cash register for a few customers. Throughout, Heidi glanced at the girls, noticing that Alyssa made Maggie double over with laughter, and Maggie’s eyes danced with excitement. As usual, Heidi was reminded of her long-lost relationship with Dee, who’d understood everything on Heidi’s mind with just a glance. It had been remarkable to be known so well.

When the shop finally cleared for a few moments, Heidi poured herself a glass of water, then sat with Maggie and Alyssa for a bit to catch up.

“Would you like a cookie or anything?” Heidi asked, prepared to jump back up to fetch the snack.

Alyssa’s eyes widened, but Maggie shook her head firmly.

“Just one?” Alyssa suggested.

“You just drank an entire hot chocolate,” Maggie pointed out.

“Come on. I ate, like, four types of vegetables today,” Alyssa told her.

Heidi sipped her water, suddenly nervous. *Why was Maggie policing Alyssa’s nutrition like this? It wasn’t like her.*

“Ugh. Fine.” Maggie stood and headed behind the counter to grab a chocolate chip cookie for Alyssa, who clapped her hands excitedly.

Alyssa lifted the cookie as she surveyed the bookstore and said, "It looks different in here."

"I've had to restock books left and right," Heidi admitted. "Just last week, the bookstore was listed on a few tourist websites, and people have come in droves. All thanks to you."

"It's all thanks to you," Maggie insisted. "This place was great from the start. People just needed to be reminded."

"Thank you for saying that." Heidi's smile waned. She was nervous. "Tell me. How was New York City?"

"It was more exciting than normal," Alyssa admitted, then took a bite of cookie.

Maggie laughed. "That goes without saying."

"What happened?" Heidi asked.

Maggie and Alyssa locked eyes. First, Maggie shrugged, then Alyssa, as though they'd decided to say, "*what the heck?*" and include Heidi in on their secret.

"I'm pregnant with Maggie's baby," Alyssa said with a sly smile.

Heidi's eyes widened. "What?"

Maggie cackled. "Why do you always have to say it like that? It sounds so weird."

"Because I think it's funny," Alyssa responded.

"Explain!" Heidi cried. "I can't keep up."

Alyssa placed her half-eaten cookie on her napkin and licked melted chocolate from her fingers. "I had Maggie's embryo implanted, and it took. I'm carrying her baby."

"I struggled with pregnancy," Maggie explained timidly. "It just never worked for me."

Heidi's eyes widened in surprise. For a long time, she was incapable of speaking. She knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Alyssa and Maggie had gotten this idea from Heidi's own story. Heidi wasn't sure how to feel about that.

"This is news!" Heidi said finally.

“I know,” Alyssa said. “And as you can see, Maggie is watching me like a hawk. This is probably the last cookie she’ll let me eat for a week.”

Maggie rolled her eyes. “She’s so dramatic,” she said to Heidi.

“How are you feeling?” Heidi asked.

“Fine so far,” Alyssa explained. “But it’s really, really early.”

“We shouldn’t even be telling people yet,” Maggie admitted. “But you’re different, Heidi.”

Heidi blushed, unsure of what to say. She hadn’t been important enough for anyone’s big news in a very long time.

“If this one doesn’t take, we’ll just do it again,” Alyssa said confidently. “My womb is your womb for as long as you need it.”

“That sounds really weird,” Maggie told her.

Alyssa laughed and took another bite. “Enough about us,” she said then. “Heidi, we want to know everything about you. What has happened since we left the island? And what should Maggie bake next for your customers? Maggie is nothing but anxious energy right now—and she needs to put it elsewhere, or else.”

About an hour later, Heidi got busy with customers again and said goodbye to Maggie and Alyssa. From behind the counter, she waved and smiled, watching as the girls disappeared into the late-afternoon light.

“Are they your daughters?” a woman at the counter asked Heidi with a smile.

Heidi’s heart lifted. For a moment, she considered lying about that, if only to imagine something so wonderful for a moment. Instead, she said, “No. They’re dear friends of mine. One of them is my head baker.”

“Goodness!” The woman’s eyes widened. “The brownies are to die for. I need to take several home to my husband and son. Do you have to-go boxes?”

That night, as Heidi swept the corners of the bookstore and made notes to herself in her book to ensure she didn't forget anything, her mind returned to Maggie and Alyssa and the new baby. She stopped what she was doing and stared into space for a long time, remembering the moment when she and her sister, Dee, had agreed that Heidi would raise Dee's baby as her own. It had been beyond Heidi's wildest nightmares to consider that one day, she wouldn't have Dee or David in her life.

Maggie and Alyssa were thick as thieves— there was no question about that. But Heidi knew there were enormous complexities around pregnancy, childbirth, and childrearing, so much so that probably, neither girl knew what they were getting into. Heidi prayed that the horrors of her own past with Dee and David would not find Maggie and Alyssa in the future. She prayed their love and commitment to one another would only strengthen and grow as time went on.

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## Chapter Twelve

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**A**pple tarts, creme brûlée, oat muffins, and chocolate-filled croissants lined the kitchen counters at the Remington House. Alyssa sat in rapt attention at the table and watched Maggie finish the icing on a sublime-looking cake. Maggie's concentration was very deep, and her tongue poked from between her lips. She'd been on a baking frenzy for hours.

"Ta-da!" Maggie stepped back from the cake and analyzed it from several different angles.

"It looks crazy, Mags."

"Do you think?" Maggie winced with fear, although she clearly knew it was a masterpiece.

"Ta-da!" Lucy sat in her highchair and smiled excitedly at Maggie, who hurried over to the little girl and covered her with kisses.

"You like it, Lucy?" Maggie said. "Yours is the only feedback I ever need!"

Maggie took several photographs of the cake and other baked goods for her social media channel, then began to load everything up in containers, which she planned to take immediately to The Dog-Eared Corner. Lucy would go with her, after which they would go to the doctor, as Lucy had a small cough.

"I'll make us smoothies before I go," Maggie said, her voice melodic.

“Ugh.” Alyssa laughed and crossed her arms over her chest. “I hate to admit it, but I think all this healthy food has done wonders for my skin.”

Maggie nodded as she heaved spinach and strawberries into a blender. “You’re glowing already.”

After Maggie left that morning, Alyssa wandered around the empty Remington House like a ghost. She was rarely alone, and the sensation was strange. If she wasn’t careful, fears around the pregnancy were apt to jump up and bite her, to remind her of how difficult childbirth was and how long it would take for her body to look like hers again.

Still, the look in Maggie’s eyes ever since Alyssa had told her about the pregnancy had been invigorating. Every morning, Maggie looked as though she floated through her tasks for the coffee shop, and every evening, she spoke to Alyssa and Janine ecstatically. These were very happy days.

It was early March now. Strangely enough, after more than two weeks on the Vineyard, neither Maggie nor Alyssa had brought up the idea of returning to the city. *Didn’t Maggie want to see Rex? Didn’t Rex want to see Maggie?* Then again, Alyssa knew the baby’s health came first— no matter how many cells big he or she was at this point— and the island’s air was sublime for the health. Perhaps a part of Maggie blamed the city for her recent miscarriage. Perhaps fear was the reason for their stay, rather than Maggie’s feelings around Rex.

Maggie returned home not long afterward. In one arm, she carried a brown paper bag filled with fruits and vegetables, and in her opposite hand, she held Lucy’s carrier. Maggie chatted about the bookstore, which she’d taken to calling “the cutest place on earth.” She then sliced through an apple and told Alyssa something both extraordinary and insane all at once.

“I’ve been researching Heidi’s son.”

Alyssa’s mouth fell open. Maggie handed her a slice of apple and tilted her head. “What?” Maggie asked.

“You’ve been doing what?”

Maggie shrugged. “It wasn’t that hard,” she said. “She mentioned his name was David and that he’s a writer in New York. Voila.”

Alyssa burned with curiosity, although she suspected Maggie had trodden paths she shouldn’t have. This was Heidi’s personal business.

“What did you find?” Alyssa asked.

Maggie sat at the kitchen table and pulled up David Withers’ website. “He’s a pretty well-known author in some circles. Mostly crime and thriller.”

Alyssa studied the face of the man who’d broken Heidi’s heart. In the photograph, he was in his late twenties, quite handsome, with glasses and a thick black sweater.

“He looks like he was raised in a bookstore,” Alyssa pointed out.

“And he was!” Maggie laughed, and her eyes danced.

Alyssa nodded, her smile waning. “What else did you find out about him?”

“I did some light digging,” Maggie explained. “He was engaged once a couple of years ago, but it looks like the wedding didn’t happen. I see no evidence that he kept up correspondence with his real mom, Heidi’s sister.”

“Hmm.” Alyssa shook her head, intrigued. “He must not be a very good person, right? I mean, he abandoned Heidi after she raised him.”

Maggie considered this. There was an energy to everything she did, as though she was apt to float through the air and into the sky. “I don’t know. He was young. People do stupid things when they’re young.”

“We wouldn’t have abandoned Mom when we were twenty,” Alyssa countered.

Maggie’s eyes flashed. “But Grandma abandoned Mom. I don’t think Grandma’s a bad person, do you?”

“I think she’s done a lot of work on herself,” Alyssa pointed out.

“Maybe David has, too.”

Alyssa couldn’t fight this. “Okay. Yeah. Maybe.” She paused, then said, “So? What now?”

“I want to go see him,” Maggie said.

Alyssa’s eyes widened. “Are you serious?”

“Yes! I mean, why not? Heidi is doing better than ever, but the bookstore still needs some TLC, and we both know she’s buried up to her ears in debt. It seems like David made a killing in crime fiction, so maybe he can help out. He owes her.”

“I don’t know if he’ll see it that way.” Alyssa chewed on her lower lip, at a loss. Maggie’s plan sounded more like something Alyssa might have concocted a few years ago when she was particularly reckless. It seemed Alyssa’s pregnancy had gone to Maggie’s head.

“What don’t you know?” Maggie asked.

“I just don’t know if we should get involved in Heidi’s business,” Alyssa tried. “David stopped talking to Heidi for a reason, you know? What if there’s something to the story we don’t understand.”

“What if we have the power to bring Heidi’s family back to the island? What if we help fight her loneliness?” Maggie countered. “Nobody should be alone, Alyssa. And Heidi’s just about the sweetest woman ever.”

Alyssa sighed and nodded, unable to say no to Maggie’s adrenaline. “Okay.”

Maggie squealed and hugged Alyssa gently.

“I’m sure you want to get back to the city to see Rex, anyway,” Alyssa said as the hug broke.

Maggie’s eyes glittered strangely. “I miss him a lot. The three of us have to celebrate the baby together.” She squeezed Alyssa’s hand and then stood up from the kitchen chair. “Let’s

leave in a few days. I just want to make enough cookie dough to get Heidi through a couple of weeks.”

Maggie then disappeared with Lucy, who needed a diaper change. All the way up the staircase, Maggie whistled, confident and joyous. Lucy’s giggles filled the house.

Alyssa sat in the silence of the kitchen and stared out the window ponderously. Although she was usually optimistic, this time, she was very fearful about what would happen in New York City. It felt as though something sinister awaited them.

Perhaps David Withers would prove himself to be very cruel. Perhaps Rex’s unhappiness with their marriage would taint Maggie’s happiness about the pregnancy. Or perhaps Alyssa would find herself back in the city, becoming more and more pregnant by the day, and feel as though she’d made a huge mistake.

But no matter what, she had to follow Maggie’s lead on this. Only time would tell how the story would unfold, and Alyssa had to prepare her heart for every conceivable path.

## Chapter Thirteen

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The morning the girls planned to head back to the city, Janine set the table for Grandma Nancy, Janine, Lucy, Maggie, and Alyssa. Eggs were shiny on their plates, their over-easy bellies fat with orange yolk, and veggie sausages offered “appropriate” nutrition, at least in Maggie’s eyes. Fruit cups were assembled for everyone who wanted one, and the coffee maker gurgled with another pot of coffee, none of which Alyssa could drink. *Oh, how she missed coffee!*

“It’s been so lovely to have you here!” Janine squeezed Alyssa’s shoulder and sat next to her, smiling gently.

Grandma Nancy blew the steam from the top of her coffee. “It’s been such an exciting time! Alyssa, I hope you’re still feeling all right?”

“When the nausea hits, you’ll hear about it,” Alyssa said. “And once Maggie’s baby is born, I won’t let him or her forget the pain they put me through.”

“I was very sick when I was pregnant with Janine,” Grandma Nancy remembered. “I was always running out of study hall to hit the bathroom.” After a laugh, she added, “Gosh, it wasn’t easy to be pregnant at sixteen.”

“It’s never easy to be pregnant,” Janine affirmed.

In the chair beside Alyssa, Maggie winced slightly, as though talk of pregnancy as this thing her grandmother, mother, and sister were all allowed to do pained her. Maggie then turned to feed Lucy some strawberries, as Alyssa quickly changed the subject.

“Tonight, we have big plans,” Alyssa said.

“Oh?” Janine asked.

“Yeah. We’re going to a local bookstore,” Alyssa explained. “A crime writer is doing a reading of his latest book.”

“That’s interesting,” Grandma Nancy said. “I didn’t know you liked crime thrillers.”

“Love them,” Maggie lied with a smile.

“The writer is Heidi’s son,” Alyssa added quietly, her eyes widening.

Grandma Nancy and Janine exchanged curious glances.

“Does Heidi know you’re meeting her son?” Nancy asked with a small gasp.

“Nope,” Maggie said.

Janine looked both impressed and frightened at once. “What are you going to tell him?”

“That his mom needs him,” Maggie said as she stabbed her fork through a veggie sausage. “That she can’t handle the bookstore all by herself. That she’s sick.”

Alyssa wrinkled her nose. “I’m terrified of what he’ll say.”

“Have you read any of his books to get a sense of who he is?” Grandma Nancy asked.

“I skimmed through one over the past few days,” Alyssa admitted. “It took place in Chicago and was sort of intense. I think David might be slightly damaged.”

“He’s a good writer,” Maggie said. “Like Alyssa said a few days ago, he seems like he was raised in a bookstore. I just can’t figure out why he would turn his back on that bookstore and leave his mother all alone like that.”

Nancy shrugged. “Sometimes, people need a bit of prodding. I would never have reached out to your mother if I hadn’t seen her face in that magazine.”

“Never?” Janine paused with her spoon filled with blueberries.

Nancy blushed. “I thought about reaching out to you every single day. But sometimes, people need nudges from the universe, you know? And that came in the form of that magazine for me. Maybe this crime thriller writer needs a nudge from the universe in the form of my beautiful granddaughters. Lucky him.”

\* \* \*

By eleven that morning, Maggie buckled Lucy into her car seat as Alyssa hovered outside the vehicle and hugged her mother and her grandmother, asking that they pass on their love to all the other members of the family. They promised they would.

“Good luck tonight,” Grandma Nancy said.

“Don’t be too forceful,” Janine urged her daughters. “There’s only so much you can know about David and his mother’s relationship.”

“That’s what I said,” Alyssa breathed, eyeing Maggie nervously.

Maggie popped out of the back of the car and hugged their grandmother and mother, then jumped into the driver’s seat joyously and started the engine. Alyssa hurried around to the other side and then spent the next thirty seconds waving out the window. “Wave to Grandma and Mom, Lucy! Wave and say bye!” Lucy did, filling their car with her adorable voice.

On the way to the ferry, Maggie called Rex and put him on speaker.

“Hi, babe.” Rex’s voice was flat and tired.

“Hi! Just wanted to let you know we’re on the road,” Maggie said.

“Great.”



Maggie blinked several times but didn't allow her smile to fall. "Do you think you could watch Lucy tonight? Alyssa and I have a thing we can't miss."

"Naw, Maggie. I can't. I have a big work event tonight."

"Ah. Of course." Maggie didn't skip a beat. "Okay. I'll ask someone else. Not a problem."

"Cool. What time will you be back?" Rex asked.

"We're just leaving now," Maggie explained. "So not till early evening or so. Maybe later."

"Drive safe," Rex said.

On the ferry, Maggie and Alyssa got out to stretch their legs and watch the water. It was a particularly sunny day, one that demanded hope for an approaching spring, and Alyssa and Maggie bought tea and played with Lucy, who couldn't get enough of running around.

"She could hardly walk when we first got her, remember?" Alyssa laughed as she collapsed on a plastic chair on the lower level of the ferry.

"It's good for us," Maggie heaved. "And if Lucy sticks around a bit longer, she'll have a sibling to play with. Won't that be fun, Lucy?"

"Yes!" Lucy cried, although she had no idea what they talked about.

"Who will babysit tonight?" Alyssa asked.

"I texted my friend Monica," Maggie said. "She's up for it."

Alyssa nodded. "Cool."

"I'll probably take Lucy to her place when we get to the city," Maggie explained.

"Oh. Okay." Alyssa considered this, remembering how Maggie and Monica normally talked for two-plus hours whenever they saw one another. The last thing she wanted was to get trapped at Monica's place, silently waiting in the corner for their conversation to finish.

Maggie sensed something was wrong. “I can drop you off on the way there if you want.”

“Really?”

Maggie laughed. “You don’t like Monica.”

“I do like Monica,” Alyssa corrected. “But you two need to catch up without me. You can even tell her all the stuff I do that annoys you. Won’t that be nice?”

“Nothing annoys me about you, Alyssa,” Maggie said sweetly.

“That was the lie of the year,” Alyssa shot back.

Maggie laughed, her eyes in slits as she dropped down to collect Lucy in her arms. “Let’s get back to the car, huh? We’re about to get to Woods Hole.”

The drive back to the city was uneventful. Throughout, Alyssa and Maggie sang songs they liked, talked about celebrity gossip, and discussed which other friends they wanted to reach out to while they were in the city. Alyssa explained that Scarlet Copperfield had moved to Nantucket to be with her grandparents and extended family, and Maggie laughed and said, “Everyone’s leaving the city. I wonder if I could get Rex to move to the island full-time?”

“Would he ever do that?” Alyssa asked.

Maggie considered this, adjusting her hands on the steering wheel. “We were both such city kids. It’s one of the reasons we bonded in the first place. But I don’t see why we can’t grow and change now that we’re a bit older. I mean, we’re about to have this baby, and if Lucy stays with us, I want them both to have the rolling hills and beautiful beaches of Martha’s Vineyard. I want our mother and Grandma Nancy to be in their lives.”

“Rex is obsessed with work,” Alyssa said.

“I wish I could tell him there’s so much more to life,” Maggie breathed. “But all of our university friends are moving quickly up the corporate ladder, and I think he feels a lot of pressure to be as good as them.”

“You should tell him you want him to keep his soul,” Alyssa pointed out.

Maggie shot Alyssa a look. “Rex has a beautiful soul. I’m in love with him, you know.”

Alyssa decided not to mention Rex for the rest of the drive. She knew better than to stick herself where she didn’t belong. Maggie’s marriage was off-limits.

The city skyline arose from the horizon and filled Alyssa with hope and nostalgia. Almost immediately, memories of her father flooded her, and she closed her eyes to try to blot them out.

“We have a big night ahead of us,” Maggie said, perhaps as a way to get Alyssa’s mind away from Jack Potter. “Are you up for this?”

“I don’t know,” Alyssa said. “I just hope he doesn’t start screaming at us to stay out of his business.”

“He is a crime writer,” Maggie said. “His emotions are probably all over the place.”

“Oh gosh.” Alyssa gave Maggie a nervous smile. “We’re doomed.”

Maggie did her best through city traffic, stopping and jostling them from lane to lane until they finally reached the Brooklyn street where she lived. Alyssa reached across the car and hugged Maggie, then squeezed Lucy’s hand in the back seat.

“I’ll see you later, baby,” Alyssa said to Lucy. “And I’ll meet you at the bookstore later?”

“Yep,” Maggie said. “Monica and I will probably talk right up until I have to leave.”

“Just don’t be late,” Alyssa insisted. “I’m nervous.”

“I won’t,” Maggie promised.

Alyssa wheeled her suitcase into the lobby of the Brooklyn apartment building and then into the elevator, which was miraculously on the ground floor, waiting for her. Inside, her

thoughts became very slow, and her eyes were half-opened, prepared for a nap. She'd heard that pregnancy made you a little more sluggish. Perhaps she'd already begun to experience this symptom. This wasn't like her. Normally, she was wide-eyed and ready for anything.

Alyssa used her key to enter Maggie and Rex's apartment, dropped her suitcase in her bedroom, then walked back to the kitchen to get a glass of water and a snack. Her thoughts were incredibly loud, bouncing around her head, and it took a moment for her to orient herself and calm down.

It was only when she stilled her mind that she realized she wasn't the only person in the apartment.

At first, the sound was like a cat's meow. Alyssa furrowed her brow, wondering if a cat lurked in the hallway of the apartment building. But when she stepped toward the front door, another sound came from down toward Rex and Maggie's bedroom.

Suddenly, Rex's voice boomed from beneath the bedroom door. "I mean, that presentation today. It was pure art, wasn't it? Didn't you see the way I had them eating out of my hand?"

*Was Rex on the phone?* Alyssa took a tentative step toward the bedroom, careful not to make a sound. Again came a soft and high-pitched sound, what she'd initially assumed was a meow. It wasn't Rex—it couldn't have been. *But who was he talking to?*

A shiver of fear raced down her spine.

"I saw you smiling the minute I cinched the deal," Rex continued, his voice louder. "You couldn't hide how happy you were."

Alyssa found herself on the other side of Rex and Maggie's bedroom door. There, she was able to make out the soft rhythm of a woman's voice—a woman who was definitely not Maggie. Alyssa couldn't breathe.

"I always knew you would get it," the woman told Rex. "But I was so panicked before your presentation. I couldn't eat all morning."

Rex laughed happily. Beneath them, the bed creaked, as though they rolled around it together, neither bothered with the fact that that bed was supposed to be Maggie and Rex's bed.

"We'd better get out of here soon," Rex told her. "I made dinner reservations at seven."

The woman cooed, then said something else Alyssa couldn't understand. Panicked, she turned and walked gingerly back to the kitchen, where she hid any evidence she'd been there, then retreated to her bedroom. There, she cowered on the floor by the door and listened intently as Rex and his mystery mistress gathered themselves and eventually left the apartment. Throughout, quiet tears fell from Alyssa's eyes.

Alyssa got into bed after that and stared at the ceiling, at a loss. For months, she'd felt something was off with Rex. His tone had been sharper, and he'd been needlessly cruel. Each time she'd asked Maggie about it, Maggie had asked Alyssa to stay out of her business. Now, Alyssa was up to her ears in Maggie's business, and she had absolutely no idea how to tell her the truth.

The truth would destroy her.

Alyssa couldn't help but feel heartbroken, as well. Only two years ago, at Maggie and Rex's engagement party, news of Jack Potter's affair with Maxine had come out. That night had altered the course of her once-happy family's life forever.

Now, Rex had shoved aside all consideration for Maggie's feelings, just as Jack once had with their mother, Janine. It was almost too heavy to carry, yet Alyssa knew, somehow, she had to. She had to tell Maggie the truth and prepare for the worst possible outcome. Whatever happened, Alyssa would be there to pick up the pieces of Maggie's life and help her move forward. She had to.

## Chapter Fourteen

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Alyssa took the subway to the Manhattan bookstore. On the train, she clasped her fingers together nervously and stared at the ground, practicing how she might explain the circumstances of Rex's affair to Maggie. Once, when the doors opened onto a subway platform near Wall Street, a massive rat rushed past the train, and Alyssa placed her hand over her mouth with surprise, telling herself not to scream. None of the other subway passengers cared about the rat at all.

Alyssa exited the subway and walked through the streets to find the bookstore. Already, a number of David Withers' fans assembled in the front of the store, chatting to one another about favorite books of his and purchasing copies of his newest novel. Alyssa weaved through the crowd, hunting for Maggie. Suddenly, a finger tapped on her shoulder, and Alyssa turned, panicked, to find Maggie laughing at her.

"You look nervous," Maggie said as she collected Alyssa into a hug. "But there's nothing to be scared about! We're just going to tell this guy what we know, and he can do what he wants with that. You know? There's no pressure on either side."

Alyssa gazed into her beautiful sister's eyes and nodded. She felt that she carried with her a ticking time bomb that would ultimately explode and destroy everything in its wake.

"Let's get some punch," Maggie said, taking Alyssa's hand.

Alyssa forced herself to speak, knowing she was acting strangely. “How was Monica?”

“Chatty as usual,” Maggie told her. “But Lucy seems happy to be there. I said we’d pick her up around eleven-thirty or so.”

“Great.” Alyssa took a plastic cup of punch and sipped it as she scanned the crowd.

“And how was your nap?” Maggie asked.

“Oh.” Alyssa hadn’t been able to sleep at all. “I felt a little sick, I guess. I couldn’t calm myself down.”

Maggie rubbed Alyssa’s shoulder. “We can go home a little bit earlier if you want.”

“No. Tonight is important,” Alyssa told her, although she wasn’t sure she believed it. Ultimately, she wanted the night to last forever, if only so she wouldn’t have to tell Maggie the truth about Rex.

A woman who worked at the bookstore soon stepped behind the punch table to announce that David Withers had just arrived, and the reading would begin shortly. “I’m a super-fan,” she went on, “And I know many of you are, as well. Remember that David has promised he will sign one book for every person here. After the reading, we will form one line—so don’t get impatient, and remember, you’ll get your turn.”

Alyssa and Maggie grabbed seats toward the back of the reading area. Around them, David’s fans whispered excitedly and clutched their newly purchased books. On the back cover was an unsmiling photograph of David, one that offered a small resemblance to Heidi.

A back door opened, and David Withers stepped into the front of the bookstore. He walked quickly, and he ruffled his dark hair just before he sat at the table they’d set up for the reading.

“Good evening, everyone,” David said as the crowd quieted. “Thank you for coming out tonight. It means a lot.”

Several people in the crowd murmured their thanks to him. Maggie then reached over to squeeze Alyssa's hand with excitement. This was it.

David began his reading afterward. The new book was about a crime in the wilderness of Maine, one that required detective work from a young man who'd originally promised himself he would never return to Maine for reasons that were ultimately teased out in the book. His prose was sharp, and his style was alluring. Alyssa found herself wrapped up in the story, grateful it distracted her from her own miseries.

The reading lasted approximately twenty-five minutes. At no time did anyone speak, not until the very end, when several of the fans stood and roared, "Yes!" or "Thank you!" or "That was fantastic!" Alyssa and Maggie stood as well, both caught up in the moment.

"Heidi would be so proud of him if she was here," Maggie breathed.

After the crowd quieted, David took several questions from fans regarding his writing process, previous books, and his next novel, which would be published in a year. David was gracious with his information and frequently added interesting, personal details, such as his favorite crime writers, what brand of coffee he liked to drink, and how he felt about New York-style pizza. It was common knowledge through his fanbase that he'd grown up on Martha's Vineyard, and one woman in the crowd asked him whether or not he ever considered setting one of his books on the island.

"I don't know," David answered. "I haven't been back to Martha's Vineyard in over seven years. When I write a book, I like to spend time in the setting and really dig into it. For the most recent novel, for example, I spent three months in the wilderness of Maine, trying to imagine what it's like to be raised there."

At this, Maggie and Alyssa exchanged glances. He'd side-stepped the question of Martha's Vineyard easily by giving his fans something else they wanted. It had been a clever move.



David answered the last of his questions forty minutes later. “He’s very generous,” Maggie muttered as they applauded a final time.

“Should we wait in line to get an autograph?” Alyssa asked.

Maggie shook her head. “No. I think we should wait until he’s signed all the copies. Then we can approach him and...” She trailed off.

“Tell him the big news? That his mother misses him?” Alyssa sighed, still unsure if this was a good idea at all.

“Let’s grab a cup of tea and wait it out.” Maggie shot over to the other side of the bookstore, where one of the employees sold snacks and hot drinks. Maggie then ordered them two cups of tea and a piece of banana bread to share. They sat in the warm glow of the window and watched as the line inched toward David Withers, who seemed, in every way, very kind and open-hearted with each of the people who approached him. He laughed at their jokes and signed his name with a flourish.

“It must be cool to be a famous writer,” Alyssa breathed. “I bet he just stays in his pajamas all day and makes up stories.”

“You stay in your pajamas most days,” Maggie pointed out.

“True.”

“You could write stories if you wanted to.”

Alyssa wrinkled her nose, unsure about that. As far as she could tell, true life was far stranger than fiction— and she was still in the midst of dealing with true life. Maybe if she ever got bored with it, she would move on to fiction.

As they waited, Alyssa found that she was unable to avoid the topic that burned in her mind. “Have you talked to Rex tonight?”

“I texted him a little while ago to say we got back to the city,” Maggie said simply. “Why?”

Alyssa shrugged. “What did he say he was doing tonight?”

“Something business-related,” Maggie affirmed easily.

“Does he ever give you specifics about what he’s up to?” Alyssa heard herself ask. “I mean, does he tell you who is there, what they talk about, and what it’s for?”

“He doesn’t want to bore me,” Maggie said with a laugh. “And for that, I’m grateful.”

Alyssa bristled. After another pause, she said, “You must be happy to see him soon?”

“Yeah. A lot. I mean, I haven’t seen him since before we learned the embryo took,” she said.

“How does he feel about you working so closely with Heidi?” Alyssa asked, remembering how Rex had ridiculed Maggie and asked her to let Heidi deal with her problems alone.

“He knows how passionate I am about it,” Maggie said simply, side-stepping the issue. “He knows better than to get between me and a passion project.”

Alyssa laughed sadly. A part of her urged her to run out of the bookstore, to get as far away from Maggie, Rex, and David Withers as she could. Another part of her remembered she was pregnant with Maggie’s baby, that she could not avoid the problems around her. She wasn’t as young as she once was and had to face her fears.

“Look! The line is pretty short now,” Maggie muttered. “Let’s go wait at the end.”

Alyssa followed after her sister, frightened. When she reached her, she heard herself mutter, “Maggie, I really don’t think we should do this.”

Maggie flashed Alyssa a dark look.

“I mean, I just don’t think we should meddle in other people’s problems,” Alyssa continued as they stepped closer to the table. “You’ve told me over and over again not to ask you

questions about your marriage. Isn't this sort of the same thing?

Alyssa said it before she could stop herself, then dropped her gaze to the ground and prepared for Maggie's anger.

"Are you serious right now?" Maggie whispered harshly.

Alyssa couldn't lift her eyes up to her sister's.

"This is completely different than that," Maggie insisted. "Heidi is all alone in Martha's Vineyard. Would you rather that she spends the rest of her life alone in The Dog-Eared Corner, waiting for her son to come home? As her memory fades and the world goes on without her. Is that really what you want?"

"Of course not!" Alyssa shot back.

Maggie and Alyssa's argument had gotten louder. A few of David's fans turned to look at them, frowning. Apparently, family drama wasn't meant to be a part of their nice, literary evening.

Suddenly, David stood from the table. An unsigned book remained in front of him, spread open, and its owner looked at him with wide, nervous eyes.

"Excuse me?" David called over the heads of the fans in front of them. "Did you just say The Dog-Eared Corner?"

Alyssa's mouth was very dry. Maggie looked initially stricken, then seemed to pull a smile out of nowhere as she said, "We did."

David's face became very pale. Around them, his fans muttered curiously, sensing a shift in their favorite writer's mood.

"Hold on a few minutes," David told Maggie and Alyssa. "I'm almost finished here."

"Take your time," Maggie urged him with a smile. She then transformed her face quickly, flashed Alyssa a dark look, and walked back to the seats by the window.

Alyssa finally dragged herself back to the window to sit with Maggie and wait for David. "I just don't want him to feel

like we're invading his privacy," Alyssa said quietly.

"He looked very interested in what we have to say," Maggie said stoically.

Finally, David's fans left the bookstore, clutching their new novels and chatting about which subway lines they planned to take home. The bookstore employees began to clean up, putting chairs away and thanking David for his reading. David again weaved his fingers through his hair, then directed himself toward Maggie and Alyssa. Immediately, Maggie stood, and Alyssa followed suit. She was filled with dread.

"Hello." David did not smile, and he stopped walking a few feet away from the girls. He did not say anything else.

"You were excellent tonight," Maggie began.

Alyssa murmured her agreement, at a loss.

"We're here because of your mother," Maggie said after another pause. "Not your biological mother, of course, but your adoptive mother, Heidi."

David's eyes glistened. "What about my mother?"

Alyssa's heart dropped into her stomach. *Had Maggie been right? Was this a good thing to do?*

"Do you have any time right now?" Maggie asked. "We'd love to explain everything, but it might take time."

David heaved a sigh, as though the weight of the world had suddenly fallen onto his shoulders.

"What are your names?" he asked finally.

"Oh! Right." Maggie laughed and extended her hand. "My name is Maggie, and this is my sister, Alyssa. We're friends with Heidi."

"Friends," David repeated, shaking his head. "Yeah. I guess I'll need an explanation about that. There's a bar down the street. Should we head there?"

## Chapter Fifteen

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The bar down the street was an old literary haunt. On the brisk walk there, David explained that many Manhattan writers from the twentieth century had hung out there, swapping stories and ideas. Maggie spoke easily with him, asking questions as Alyssa walked sullenly on the other side of Maggie. The reality of what they planned to say to him hung over them like a cloud, but Maggie seemed content to ignore it until they got a table and a few drinks.

Alyssa hadn't been to any bars since the pregnancy. Once in the booth, she studied the menu nervously and finally ordered tonic water with lime. Maggie got a glass of wine while David ordered a beer. His eyes were nervous, scanning the crowd as though he expected Heidi to appear out of nowhere.

The server returned with their drinks, and Alyssa sipped the bitter tonic as her stomach did somersaults. David closed his eyes as he drank, then opened them and said, "I'm ready when you are."

Maggie seemed overly confident, as though news of Alyssa's pregnancy had instilled in her a level of understanding about the universe that other people weren't allowed.

"Well. As we said, we're friends with your mother," Maggie began. "But she doesn't know we're here."

David breathed a sigh of relief. "Is she okay?"

“No.” Alyssa heard herself answer quickly before Maggie could. Maggie blinked at her curiously, but Alyssa went on. “I first met your mother at the hospital on the island. It was November, and she was checking herself out after a horrible memory episode.”

“Memory episode?” David looked incredulous.

“She seemed very confused,” Alyssa continued. “She couldn’t remember what had happened or why she was there. Now, we know she was diagnosed with early-onset dementia not long after that, which has made everything an enormous struggle for her, both at the bookstore and in her everyday life.”

Alyssa spoke quickly, frightened of how angry she suddenly felt at this man for not knowing how awful things were for Heidi. The emotion had come out of nowhere. Maybe this was her “mothering” instinct. She took a long drink of her tonic water, which allowed Maggie to take over.

“We started working here and there at the bookstore,” Maggie explained. “Which is how we found out about you and her sister, Dee.”

David closed his eyes, then sipped his beer. “And you decided to come find me.”

“We figured you didn’t know how bad things had gotten,” Maggie explained. “If Heidi was my mother, I would want to know.”

David sighed, then began. “You’re right. I’m glad to know this.” He then palmed his neck and added, “But it’s not very comfortable to hear.”

“I imagine it’s not,” Maggie said.

David was quiet for a moment, collecting his thoughts.

“I was twenty when I learned she wasn’t my real mother,” he said, speaking mostly to the table. “Around that time, Heidi also informed me she didn’t have any more money to contribute to my college fund. I took out loans, had two jobs, and still barely scraped by. When I learned that Dee was my

real mother, I decided to go out and visit her, which, in retrospect, was probably a huge mistake.”

“What happened out there?” Maggie asked.

“Dee let me stay at her place in Los Angeles,” David continued. “We went out to dinner that first night, and the mood was frigid. I tried to hug her, but she shook my hand instead. I knew she’d basically ‘dropped’ Heidi from her life, and I couldn’t understand what Heidi had ever seen in this horrible woman. Heidi had cried for years about Dee because she’d missed her so much.

“But I was young,” David continued, “and I wanted Dee to acknowledge me as her son. I tried my best to perform for her, speaking eloquently about literature and writing, and she hardly smiled. That night, she took me back to her house, which she shared with her husband, and I realized the depth of their wealth. You have to understand—growing up, Mom and I hardly had anything.”

It bothered Alyssa that David called his mother “Heidi” rather than “Mom.” She sipped her tonic water and alternated between anger and curiosity.

“When I saw what Dee had, I was so confused and resentful. I couldn’t understand why Dee hadn’t wanted to raise me as her own, and I couldn’t understand why Heidi had wanted to keep the truth from me for so long. I left Los Angeles as soon as I could and returned to college, where I fell deep into my coursework, my two jobs, and my writing. I needed space from Heidi, and I didn’t call home, not once. I thought, eventually, that I would find a way to call her back—that I would apologize and make everything all right again. But soon, three months without contact became a year, and after that, one year became three.”

“It’s been seven now,” Alyssa pointed out, crossing her arms over her chest.

David winced and stared into his beer. “Early-onset dementia,” he repeated. “I can’t believe it.”

“She really needs help, David,” Maggie told him quietly. “She needs her family, and you’re all she has.”

David rubbed his eyes. “I know. I know. Gosh, my life has gotten so messy over the years.”

“Your career has skyrocketed,” Maggie pointed out.

“Yeah. And I’m grateful, of course. But in the midst of all that success, I got married, and then, out of nowhere, my wife left me for another man,” David explained.

Alyssa glanced at Maggie, who’d said David had been engaged, but that she hadn’t been able to find any photographs of a wedding. Apparently, all evidence of the wedding had disappeared from the internet.

“That sounds really hard,” Maggie said.

“I’ve been reeling ever since,” David continued. “On New Year’s Eve, I was holed up at my apartment, eating peanut butter and marshmallow sandwiches, watching bad TV. That’s when my mom called for the first time in seven years. I couldn’t answer her, not like that.”

“Why not?” Maggie asked softly.

David closed his eyes. “What I did to her was absolutely terrible. I don’t know if I can face her.”

“You have to,” Maggie urged him. “She’s ready to forgive you, David. She’s ready to move forward.”

Suddenly, Alyssa’s stomach twisted with nausea. She bolted to her feet, stuttered an excuse, and then hurried to the bathroom. *Was it the pregnancy? Was it fear about Rex? Was it just anxiety about the horrible things people did to one another?*

In the bathroom, Alyssa hovered next to the toilet as tears streamed down her cheeks. David’s eyes remained in her vision, filled with sorrow about what he’d done. *He’d been twenty when he’d “abandoned” his mother, so why hadn’t he known better? Then again, did anyone ever know better?* Alyssa was twenty-four years old and still just as stupid as ever.



Suddenly, Maggie's sweet voice echoed through the bathroom. "Alyssa? Are you okay?"

Alyssa nearly crumpled to the floor. She sobbed, first softly, but then louder and louder, until she felt herself on the verge of breaking apart. Maggie was outside the bathroom stall, telling her that everything would be all right.

"David is thinking about going to the Vineyard," Maggie continued. "Isn't that great? We did something good here today, Alyssa. I really think he wants to help Heidi."

Alyssa could hardly speak. "That's so great," she finally managed.

Maggie tapped gently on the door. "Will you let me in? I can help you."

Alyssa bit her knuckles, terrified. The secret of Rex's affair was already eating her alive. She couldn't take it, not a moment longer.

And what kind of sister would she be if she allowed Maggie to remain in that loveless marriage? She knew the truth. All she could do now was reveal it, for better or for worse.

"Maggie? I have something to tell you." Alyssa's voice was very quiet.

"You can tell me anything," Maggie assured her.

"This isn't just anything," Alyssa breathed. "It's something really, really bad."

Maggie was quiet for a moment. Her voice became very small. "Did you have a miscarriage? If you did, Alyssa, it's okay. Really. We can try again when and if you're up for it."

"No! No." Alyssa shook her head almost violently. "No. I'm still pregnant."

Maggie's voice brightened. "Oh. That's great." She laughed gently. "I was really scared there for a minute."

Alyssa's heart shattered. *It was better to just bite the bullet, wasn't it? Say it, Alyssa. Just say it.*

“Maggie, Rex is cheating on you.”

“What?” Maggie’s happiness waned quickly. “What did you say?”

Alyssa’s throat was very tight. She wasn’t sure if she could say it again.

“What did you say, Alyssa?” Maggie demanded, her voice filled with anger.

“I know you don’t want to hear this,” Alyssa told her. “And trust me, I don’t want to tell it to you.”

“It’s not true,” Maggie shot out. “You have it all wrong.”

“I don’t, Maggie.” Alyssa dropped her chin to her chest and shook it. “I think it’s someone from work.”

Maggie’s laughter was very cruel. Alyssa had never heard her sound like that.

“You’ve been after my marriage for months,” Maggie shot out. “I don’t know why you’re suddenly so jealous about what Rex and I have.”

“I’m not jealous,” Alyssa snapped. “I know what I heard.”

“Absolutely unbelievable.” Maggie suddenly turned on her heel and stomped from the bathroom and back into the bar.

This left Alyssa alone in the bathroom stall, lost in the chaos of herself and what she’d done. Quickly, she unlocked the bathroom door and followed after Maggie, racing through the tables and booths to return to theirs.

At the table, David stood to draw his arms through the sleeves of his coat. He smiled at Maggie and said something Alyssa couldn’t hear. When she got close enough, she heard Maggie say, “Oh, that’s too bad, but I understand. Here. Have my number.” Maggie then took David’s phone and typed her phone number into it. When she passed it back, her smile was strained, proof of her inner turmoil.

David noticed Alyssa after that. He raised a hand and said, “It was really nice to meet you, Alyssa. I have a lot to think about.”

“I hope we’ll see you soon,” Alyssa said, her voice wavering.

David didn’t respond to that. Instead, he zipped his coat and said, “The drinks are paid for. Have a lovely night.” He then walked toward the front door and disappeared into the black night, leaving two sisters who very much did not want to be alone with each other.

Suddenly, Maggie grabbed her coat, tore out of the bar, and stomped down the sidewalk. Alyssa watched her, aghast, as she disappeared around the corner. She then reached for her own coat, fumbling with the sleeves as tears drifted down her cheek.

The pregnancy was supposed to bring her and Maggie even closer. Yet now, Rex’s affair had ripped them apart.

For a little while, Alyssa sat in the booth and stared down at her shoes, waiting for her stomach to calm. Over and over again, she played the scene from the apartment in her mind. It was clear that Rex had been there with someone; it was clear he couldn’t be trusted. Then again, Alyssa wished, more than anything, that she hadn’t come home early to find them. She wished Maggie had found out some other way.

Or maybe, she thought now, Maggie already knew about the affair. Maybe she’d decided to ignore it. Now that Alyssa knew about it, Maggie wouldn’t be able to pretend it wasn’t happening. She would be forced to live in the truth.

Alyssa finally left the bar a few minutes later, considering which of her friends to reach out to. Perhaps she could sleep on a couch. But when she stepped out onto the sidewalk, Maggie pulled her car up to the curb and unlocked the door, gesturing for Alyssa to get in. Maggie’s face remained stony, and Alyssa understood why she’d come back. Alyssa was carrying Maggie’s child, and Maggie needed to make sure Alyssa was safe— no matter how angry she felt.

All the way back to Monica’s to pick up Lucy, Maggie did not say a word. Lucy woke up briefly when Maggie buckled her in and squealed both Alyssa and Maggie’s names, and

Alyssa and Maggie engaged with her but not with one another.

Once inside the apartment, Alyssa drifted into her bedroom and curled into a tight ball on her bedspread. Maggie did not bother to say goodnight.

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## Chapter Sixteen

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Alyssa tried twice the following morning to explain to Maggie what she'd seen, but Maggie would not hear of it. Scattered and heartbroken, Alyssa made immediate arrangements to go to Martha's Vineyard to stay with her mother, praying the time away from Maggie would help Maggie understand just how serious this was.

The driver who took Alyssa to Martha's Vineyard was someone who'd known Alyssa's father well. For the first twenty minutes or so, the driver recounted old stories of Jack Potter and the many adventures they'd gone on together until Alyssa asked him, her voice heavy, to stop.

"It's too painful. I should have known better. I'm sorry," the driver said.

Alyssa curled up in a ball in the backseat and listened to a podcast and then several music albums, alternating between songs quickly to try to make herself think about something else. About two hours into the journey, she texted Maggie again to say she was really sorry and that she hoped Maggie would bring Lucy to Martha's Vineyard soon so they could discuss this more. Maggie wrote back almost immediately, just to say:

MAGGIE: Remember to eat healthy. No junk.

Alyssa rolled her eyes and shoved her phone back into her pocket. All she wanted in the world right then was to indulge in a huge greasy burger and French fries, but she wouldn't give in. She loved Maggie and the baby too much.

The driver dropped Alyssa off at Woods Hole and waited until she boarded the ferry before he drove back to New York. Alyssa wheeled her suitcase to the belly of the ferry, where she sat listlessly at the window and watched the Vineyard Sound glisten beneath a springtime sun. Around her, tourists spoke excitedly about their upcoming trip to Martha's Vineyard, which only soured Alyssa more. She remembered her first trip to Martha's Vineyard as though it was yesterday—back when she and Maggie had met their grandmother and first experienced the wonderful warmth of the Remington House. All that seemed so long ago.

The ferry eased into the harbor and dropped its ramp to allow passengers to disembark. Janine's car sat at the ferry port, and Janine stood in a spring jacket directly beside it, waving her hand. Alyssa's heart jumped into her throat. By the time she reached her mother, she was on the verge of gut-busting tears, which her mother panicked over.

“Oh no, honey. What's wrong?” Janine cupped Alyssa's head as Alyssa sobbed into Janine's shoulder.

“It's nothing!” Alyssa wailed.

Janine took Alyssa's shoulders and looked her in the eye. “You're pregnant, honey. These things happen when you're pregnant.”

Alyssa's chin wiggled with sorrow. “Okay. I think I just want to go home,” she said, because she wasn't willing to tell Janine anything about Rex. If Janine found out, she would immediately call Maggie, which would enrage Maggie even more.

Back at the Remington House, Janine made Alyssa a sandwich and a bowl of soup and chatted to her about her work at the Katama Lodge, about Elsa's newly-built home, which would be finished by summer, and about her upcoming wedding to Henry. All Alyssa wanted was to talk to Maggie about their mother's wedding! Then again, once Maggie faced the news of Rex's infidelity, weddings would be the furthest thing from Maggie's mind.

Gosh. Never in her wildest dreams had Alyssa imagined her sister divorcing Rex. “Divorce” could be such a horrible thing, a monstrous event that cratered people’s souls and sidelined them into years of depressive episodes. Even David Withers, who hadn’t been married long, seemed lost in the wake of his divorce. Alyssa did not want that for Maggie.

Then again, Alyssa didn’t want Maggie to just “forgive” Rex for what he’d done.

A couple of days after Alyssa’s return, she borrowed her mother’s car to visit Cole at the harbor. He was at the tail end of a sailing lesson for a little girl with yellow hair, and as they tied up the sailboat, the girl gave Cole three high-fives and then scampered toward her waiting parents. Cole swaggered toward Alyssa with a confident smile, then said, “I didn’t expect you home so quickly.”

“Neither did I,” Alyssa affirmed.

Cole lifted his eyes to the blue sky above, then said, “We have a bit more sunlight left. You want to go out for a sail?”

Alyssa had never been one to turn down a sail. She stepped gingerly back onto Cole’s boat and watched as he untied the ropes and lifted the sails, ripping them away from the other boats and out into the open water. The sharp breeze was not warm, but the sun cut through it just enough to keep the weather bearable. And around them was the smell of salt water and something else, the smell of growth, which reminded Alyssa that in only a few months, it would be summertime.

“You’re looking a little glum,” Cole told her as the boat stalled on the western side of the island.

Alyssa laughed and swung her legs over the side of the boat, gripping the metal railing to ensure she stayed in place. “That’s an understatement.”

“Where are Maggie and Lucy?” Cole asked.

“Back in New York.”

“Huh.”

Alyssa turned and eyed him. “Huh, what?”

“It’s rare that the three of you separate like this,” Cole said.

Alyssa sighed and returned her gaze to the water. “Maggie hates me right now.”

“I don’t think that’s true. Aren’t you carrying her baby?”

“She loves the baby, but she hates the person carrying the baby.”

Cole laughed and sat down near her, keeping an eye on the sails. “Tell me. What’s wrong?”

Alyssa grimaced, then proceeded to explain the situation, including what she’d heard between Rex and his secret mistress. Cole listened in silence, then nodded stoically. “I think a part of her knows you’re right.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Alyssa said.

“Right now, as she fights with you, she’s actually fighting with herself,” Cole said. “She doesn’t want to believe her marriage is over so soon.”

“So soon! I know. They just got married,” Alyssa said sadly. “I hate that he did this.”

Cole shook his head and adjusted the sails. “She’ll come around, you know. Marriages come and go, but siblings are forever.”

Alyssa considered Heidi and Dee, who hadn’t spoken to one another in years, and shivered with sorrow. *She didn’t want that to be her and Maggie’s future. But how could she get them back on track?* Nobody had ever called Alyssa a patient person; even the previous fifteen hours without Maggie had been too much for her.

After Cole tied up the boat in the harbor, Alyssa said she wanted to walk past The Dog-Eared Corner to see how Heidi was doing. Cole said he couldn’t come with her, that he had a few things to do. To this, Alyssa said, “All we did was talk about me and my problems! What is going on with you? And with Aria?”

Cole shook his head. “I’ll tell you another time, Al.”



“You’re killing me, Cole!” Alyssa laughed as she hugged her cousin, one of the truest friends she’d ever had. “All right. See you when I see you.”

Alyssa left the harbor and wandered through downtown Edgartown, down vibrant streets, past old colonial homes, and then, finally, to The Dog-Eared Corner. When she saw the little place, she was overwhelmed and happy to see Heidi soon, so much so that she had a little skip to her step.

When Alyssa began to walk up the path to the porch, the front door burst open to reveal a man who seemed very unlikely to enter a bookstore. He wore a well-tailored suit and had gelled hair and a gait that suggested he had money and knew how to use that money to make more of it. Being Jack Potter’s daughter had attuned Alyssa to such things.

The man sauntered past Alyssa, who stared at him, annoyed. Nerves stirred in her gut. She then hurried up the porch steps and entered the bookstore to find it in a state of disarray. Boxes were strewn across the floor, filled with books. There were no baked goods behind the counter, and all of the tables and chairs in the coffee shop had been cleared.

It had only been a few days since Alyssa and Maggie had been at the bookstore. *What had happened?*

“Heidi?” Alyssa called. “Are you here?”

Suddenly, the man with the suit appeared behind Alyssa and gave her a menacing smile. “Can I help you with something?”

Alyssa stuttered with disbelief. “I’m looking for Heidi. She owns this bookstore.”

“Not for long, she doesn’t,” the man said.

Alyssa cocked her head. “What are you talking about? I was just here a few days ago.”

The man shrugged and gestured around the space, at the boxes and the empty shelves. “I’m doing Miss Withers a favor and taking the place off her hands. Can’t wait to transform it into something truly worthwhile.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Alyssa shot back. “Heidi never would have sold this place, not in a million years.”

“Well, she’s about to,” the man said with a shrug. “She finally listened to reason.”

“What did you say to her?” Alyssa demanded, her heart in her throat.

“I didn’t say anything that wasn’t the truth,” the man told her. “I reminded her of her numerous debts and the fact that she would never get out from under them unless she sold the place to me. It took her a day or two to come around after that, but, as you can see…” He laughed unkindly and then hurried into the back, where he disappeared into the office.

Alyssa felt very cold and exhausted. A part of her wanted to remain in the bookstore if only to watch over it for Heidi and make sure this horrible man treated it right. Then again, another part of Alyssa knew the man was probably telling the truth. *Why else would the books be in boxes? Why else would the tables and chairs be cleared?*

Obviously, Maggie and Alyssa had been helping Heidi fight a losing battle. Heidi had been able to cling to the bookstore for a few weeks longer than she’d thought— but with Maggie and Alyssa off the island, Heidi had taken the opportunity to handle her own debts.

Alyssa walked back outside, where she built up the courage to call Maggie. The phone rang out across the Vineyard Sound, westward and south toward the city she’d once loved so much. Maggie didn’t bother to answer it. Alyssa’s heart felt bruised.

She sent a text instead.

ALYSSA: Hey. I’m sorry to bother you.

ALYSSA: I’m at The Dog-Eared Corner, and some guy is here, saying he’s in the process of buying the place from Heidi. He said her debts are so enormous that there’s no way she can pay them off— and that selling the place is the only way she’ll keep herself afloat.

ALYSSA: I feel so lost. I don't know what to do.

Alyssa stared at the screen of her phone for the next few minutes, waiting. Eventually, the screen indicated that Maggie had read the messages, and Alyssa's heart skipped a beat. She shoved the phone in her coat pocket and picked up speed, heading back to where she'd parked by the harbor. When she reached it, she tugged her phone from her pocket to learn that although Maggie had read her messages— many minutes ago, in fact— she hadn't bothered to respond to them.

Maybe their friendship really was over. Maybe there was no way to come back from this.

Alyssa drove back to the Remington House with a very hard pressure against her chest. It was only when she raced up to the bedroom she so often shared with Maggie that she allowed herself to cry. Everything she'd once cared for seemed lost— and even the baby growing in her womb wouldn't save her.

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## Chapter Seventeen

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**I**t was an afternoon in mid-March, and Heidi sat in the armchair at her house and read from her memory journal to ensure she didn't forget anything. The writing was her own, a sort of cursive that she'd perfected as a younger woman. Unfortunately, what she'd written was so foreign that she struggled to make sense of it.

She read:

*Another four bills came today. Every single one of them is written in bold, red ink and says I owe so much more money than I can possibly understand. I closed the shop to go through my paperwork and taxes and soon became so disheartened that I didn't bother to open the place back up again.*

*A man knocked on the bookstore door after that and introduced himself as a real estate developer. He said he'd been here before— maybe I forgot about him? I feel so scattered these days, so that's possible. Anyway, he asked me about my debts, and I couldn't help but break down and cry right there in front of him. How embarrassing!*

*He consoled me as kindly as a moneyed man like him possibly could, and then, he told me he wanted to buy the bookstore outright. I told him that wasn't possible— that my father had passed down the bookstore to me and that I planned to pass it on to my own son. He laughed at that and asked, "What son?" This made me cry even harder.*

*Eventually, the man told me to think about it— to consider that he could pay me even more than what I owed and set me*

*up for a very comfortable next phase of my life. I was so bleary-eyed and broken-hearted that I told him I would think about it.*

*All night, I've been so chaotic in my head. At some moments, I thought I was a young woman on the brink of the rest of my life. At other moments, I thought David was in the next room. Most moments, however, involved me thinking only of the bank notices and bills— all of which indicate that probably, that man was right.*

*And just now, I got off the phone with him. I told him we should start the process of the sale. And now, I sit in the armchair in my little living room, all alone, having given over the final thing I cared about in this world.*

Heidi re-read what she'd written in the little book and shook her head. *How was this possible?* Over and over again, she'd promised herself she would never sell The Dog-Eared Corner, no matter what. Clearly, this man had gotten into her head and frightened her.

Heidi stood from the armchair and wandered around her house until she ultimately found twelve boxes of books in the foyer. She stopped short, having forgotten that the man she was in the process of selling the bookstore to had begun to drop off boxes of inventory. She opened several boxes to peer down at the titles she'd carefully selected for customers, excited to share these fictional worlds with so many of the island's readers.

Now, those books might never find a home.

Heidi wandered back into the living room, muttering to herself. The clock on the wall told her it was after seven in the evening, but she'd again forgotten the date. *Had she been at the bookstore that day?* No— she was pretty sure she hadn't, because her memory journal had just told her she was in the process of selling the bookstore. *Sell the bookstore? She couldn't sell the bookstore! The bookstore was her life! It was her love! It was the final piece of her father she had left!*

Heidi's thoughts circled nonsensically. Sometimes, she found herself back in the armchair and other times, she re-

discovered the boxes of books in the foyer. Then she appeared in the kitchen to search through her refrigerator, at a loss for what to do with herself. Perhaps the bookstore had been her final link not just to her father, but to the rest of the world. Perhaps now, she would find herself officially lost and alone.

Back in the armchair, Heidi flipped through her memory journal to read recent passages. This reminded her of Alyssa and Maggie, the young women who'd done so much to boost sales in the previous few weeks. *Where were they? Did they know Heidi had sold the bookstore?* Oh, they would be so disappointed. Perhaps they'd be angry with Heidi, just like David was. *Was there something so wrong with Heidi that made everyone so mad at her all the time? If there wasn't something wrong, then why had so many people abandoned her? Why hadn't she spoken to her sister in so long?*

Out of nowhere, the doorbell rang. Heidi froze, frowning her brow. *Who could that be?* Her first instinct was to ignore it, as she hadn't had anyone over to her house in ages. Maybe it was a children's prank. Maybe they already regarded her as a little old lady they could pick on.

But a moment later, the doorbell rang again. Clearly, whoever it was really needed to see Heidi. Heidi walked to the foyer and around the enormous book boxes, wondering again what she would do with all of those unread books.

When Heidi opened the door, she shrieked with surprise. There on her front stoop was Maggie Potter, clear as anything. A part of her heart told her she would never forget Maggie's face, even if she forgot everything else.

"Maggie! Hi!" Heidi hadn't smiled in what felt like a long time, and it strained her face.

Maggie hardly smiled. Her gaze dropped to the boxes of books as she said, "Oh, no. Is it true?"

Heidi sighed and stepped back. "I'm afraid so."

"I just walked past the bookstore," Maggie explained. "It looks completely empty on the inside, and that horrible man was walking around like he owned the place."

Heidi stepped back and gestured into her little house. “Do you want to come in?”

Maggie’s eyes glistened as she stepped into the foyer and followed Heidi around the boxes of books. In the living room, she sat gingerly at the edge of the couch and peered around Heidi’s little space, which nobody had seen since David had left her. Maggie’s cheeks were hollow, and her voice sounded strained. *Was she really this upset about Heidi’s little bookstore? Or was there something else wrong?*

“Have you already signed the bookstore over to him?” Maggie asked.

Heidi shook her head. “According to my memory book, we’re going to meet at the bookstore in the next few days to go over everything.” Heidi paused, then added, “My debts are terrible, Maggie. I was very irresponsible for many years.”

“I don’t think you were irresponsible,” Maggie corrected. “You’ve been sick.”

“It doesn’t matter how the debts got so big,” Heidi explained. “They’re there, and there’s no avoiding them. Besides. The sale could set me up for the next few years.”

“Just a few years?” Maggie breathed.

Heidi dropped her gaze, understanding what Maggie meant. Heidi was only fifty-seven years old— and she’d hoped for another twenty to thirty years of good health left. *How could she keep herself afloat that long?* She was too old to work many kinds of jobs. On top of that, her early-onset dementia made everything else difficult.

It was difficult to know how to go forward in life. Heidi only knew time would pass by regardless of what happened to her— and she couldn’t keep the bookstore afloat with her current debts.

“I’m so sorry this happened,” Maggie said. “I thought all the new customers would rejuvenate the business. I thought we were helping.”

“You did help,” Heidi assured her, hating how broken-hearted the girl looked. “You gave me some really happy final

days at the bookstore. The past few months had been abysmal. I'd spent almost every single day in the bookstore by myself, waiting for something to happen. And then, one day, you and Alyssa walked through the door and changed my life."

"We didn't change your life," Maggie insisted. "It didn't help."

Heidi opened her lips to speak yet found there was nothing to say, not really. In many ways, Maggie was correct. They hadn't saved the business; The Dog-Eared Corner would close its doors forever soon.

Maggie's face crumpled, and she placed her hands over it to hide away. Heidi walked toward the couch and sat next to her, rubbing her back, just the way she had for David when he'd cried as a young boy. Being a mother had been the most rewarding and lovely experience of her life. With Maggie and Alyssa, she was able to remember how it had been, which was a blessing and a curse.

"Heidi?" Maggie sniffed and removed her hands from her face. "Would you like to go somewhere with me for a little while?"

Heidi frowned. "Where would you like to go, honey?"

"I think we both need a break," Maggie explained. "And I know the perfect place for something like that."

"Take me there," Heidi said softly. "Whatever it is, I think I need it."



## Chapter Eighteen

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Heidi allowed Maggie to help her pack a suitcase of clothes and toiletries. Throughout, she felt at peace, grateful that someone else had decided to take over the responsibilities of her life for a change.

“Anything else?” Maggie asked as she slipped Heidi’s medication into the top of the suitcase and zipped it up.

“I think that’s everything,” Heidi said.

“All right. Let’s get out of here,” Maggie said. She then wheeled the suitcase to the foyer and out onto the front porch while Heidi put on her coat and followed after her. From a small distance, she watched Maggie place her suitcase in the back of her car, directly beside the one she’d brought from the city.

As far as Heidi remembered, she hadn’t asked Maggie where they were off to. A part of her shimmered with excitement for the surprise.

“Did you just get in from the city?” Heidi asked as she slid into the passenger seat of Maggie’s car, which was normally where Alyssa sat.

“Yeah,” Maggie said simply.

Heidi glanced in the backseat to see that Lucy’s car seat was gone. “Are Alyssa and Lucy off somewhere?”

“They’re at my mom’s place,” Maggie said simply.

“Are we going to pick them up?” Heidi asked, feeling like a little girl with too many questions.

“No,” Maggie said. She then started the engine and eased them down the driveway.

On the drive to wherever they were off to, Heidi remained quiet and contemplative. In the pocket of her coat, she clung hard to her memory book and told herself she would write all of this down as soon as she had a moment alone. She practiced the story in her mind: *Maggie came by and seemed very upset that I sold the bookstore. She then packed my suitcase for a “secret adventure.”*

Not long afterward, Maggie turned the car down the long driveway that led to the Katama Lodge and Wellness Spa. Heidi could just make out the cabin through the thick limbs of the trees that surrounded it.

“Oh! I came here on New Year’s Eve,” Heidi breathed. She thought hard for a moment, then remembered. “I suppose that’s when I met your grandmother and mother.”

Maggie smiled at Heidi for the first time that day. “They loved talking to you.” She then stopped the engine outside the front door, stepped out of the car, and removed the suitcases from the back trunk. Heidi joined her behind the car and wheeled her own suitcase through the door, her nerves skyrocketing. Maggie had packed her a suitcase, which meant that she wanted to check Heidi into the Lodge. But, from what Heidi knew about the Katama Lodge and Wellness Spa, there was no way on earth she could afford to stay a single night. Even just the spa treatments she’d gotten on New Year’s Eve had cost an arm and a leg.

A woman behind the front desk greeted Maggie excitedly and hurried around to hug her. “Maggie! It’s been ages.”

Maggie smiled and hugged her back. “Thanks for accommodating us on such short notice.”

“It’s rare that we have two rooms available at once,” the woman said as she turned her attention to Heidi. “You must be Heidi Withers. Welcome to the Lodge.”

“Happy to be here,” Heidi said, her voice wavering.

Just then, another woman in her mid-forties appeared in the lobby and smiled warmly. “Heidi? Hello. My name is Elsa. Welcome.”

“This is my Aunt Elsa,” Maggie explained softly.

“My father married Maggie’s grandmother,” Elsa explained. “Nancy works around here, too.”

“Oh, yes. I’ve met Nancy,” Heidi remembered, grateful that her memory had kicked in. “And Janine.”

Elsa’s smile widened. “My sister, Carmella, works here, as well, but she’s still on maternity leave.”

“The Lodge offers really wonderful maternity leave,” Maggie chimed in. “Carmella had her baby back in November, and she doesn’t plan to come back to work until June.”

“Wow.” Heidi was impressed.

“It’s a family business,” Elsa explained as she led them down the hallway. There, she placed their suitcases on a little trolley, which she then pushed onto an elevator. “And Carmella’s baby is a part of the family now. We just want mother and baby to have as much bonding and recovery time as possible.”

As Elsa spoke, Heidi found her mind awash with images of David as a baby. How she’d adored his little feet! How she’d loved his chubby cheeks! What she wouldn’t do to go back in time to snuggle him as a baby again...

“I think all mothers should have as much time with their babies as they can,” Heidi said softly. “That time is so fleeting.”

“So true!” Elsa smiled in a way that made Heidi think Elsa knew all about Heidi’s situation, about David, and about how broken she now was.

Elsa led Heidi to the second floor, where she opened the door to reveal a gorgeous room filled with light. The bedspread was white, and the dresser was antique, with little round knobs painted with flowers. The bathroom had a bathtub

and a stand-up shower, complete with a wide array of bathing salts, creams, and lotions.

“Our visitors love to take long, relaxing baths at the end of the day,” Elsa explained. “So much of our days are spent together in communion, but many women also like their alone time to process their time at the Katama Lodge and Wellness Spa.”

Heidi looked at Maggie, trying to suppress her tears. “It was so nice of you to bring me here.” She paused, her heartbeat racing, then added, “It’s really lovely! But I don’t think I can afford it.”

Maggie and Elsa both waved a hand.

“We had a spontaneous cancellation,” Elsa explained. “We don’t expect any payment from you whatsoever.”

“Just enjoy yourself, Heidi. You’ve had a really hard few days,” Maggie said.

Then, Heidi whispered, “But who will watch the bookstore?” But the moment she said it, she realized, with a jolt, that the bookstore was no longer open. It was no longer her responsibility. That’s why she could go with Maggie so casually to the Katama Lodge. She had nothing else to do.

“There’s a small yoga class in a half-hour,” Elsa explained as she handed Heidi a schedule of events. “Nancy is our yoga teacher, and she’s sublime.”

Heidi nodded and took the pamphlet to read about yoga, acupuncture, naturopathy, and all other healings recommended at the Katama Lodge and Wellness Spa. A cynical part of her said nothing in the world could possibly help her, but another part of her asked— *what was the harm in trying?*

“I’ll see you later, Heidi,” Maggie said as she headed for the door.

Heidi furrowed her brow. Something didn’t add up for her. “Are you staying here at the Lodge?”

Maggie nodded and smiled. “Yes. I’ve never stayed here before. I thought it could be fun.”

Heidi burned with questions. *Was there something wrong? Had Alyssa lost the baby? Was Maggie falling apart at the seams the way Heidi was?* But before she could get any of them out, Maggie and Elsa waved a final time and closed the door behind them.

This left Heidi alone in the soft room, so far from the bookstore and so far from her little home. She sat at the edge of the bed and looked out the window at a little bird that bounced on a tree limb with joyous, springtime energy. Never in Heidi's life had she experienced such a grand hotel room. Never in her life had she been gifted something so "ritzy." It was disorienting.

Heidi decided to skip the yoga session, as she'd never done yoga and wasn't sure her bones could bend that way. Instead, she spent that time writing in her memory book, making sure to include every sensation she felt, everything Elsa had said, and her suspicions about Maggie's distress. Just after she finished, there was a knock at the door, and Heidi hurried to answer it. Maggie stood there in a white robe and smiled serenely.

"You didn't make it to yoga?" Maggie asked.

"I don't think I know how to do yoga," Heidi explained.

Maggie laughed gently. "Neither do I. Would you like to go to the sauna with me?"

Heidi agreed and retreated into her bathroom to change into the Katama Lodge's robe and slippers. The robe was impossibly soft, and it made her anxious heartbeat slow. She then followed Maggie down the hallway.

"Where is your room?" Heidi asked.

"On the third floor," Maggie explained. "I have a beautiful view of Katama Bay. It's dreamy."

"I always wondered what it would be like to live directly by the water," Heidi explained. "I suppose this is my chance to find out."

As they walked to the sauna, other guests of the Lodge passed by in the same white robes and slippers. Their faces

were kind and without makeup, and their hair, a range of black, brown, blonde, and gray, was glossy and bouncing, as though after only a few days at the Lodge, everyone became a portrait of health. Heidi felt her limp hair and prayed for a bit of revitalization. She so needed it.

Maggie and Heidi sat in a sauna for ten minutes with their eyes closed as the dry heat calmed them. Heidi focused on her breathing—in and out, in and out—and tried not to allow the memory of the bookstore and all she'd lost to creep into her mind. It seemed to always find a way.

Maggie stood abruptly and stepped out of the sauna, and Heidi hurried after her, strangely frightened to be left alone. As she closed the sauna door behind her, Heidi said, “Oh, that is so calming, isn't it?”

But before her, Maggie's face was scrunched into a tight ball. Heidi's heart seized. *What was going on?* She reached out and touched Maggie's arm gently, and Maggie clapped her hand over her mouth to try to suppress her sobs. She then turned on a heel and scurried to a cushioned chair in the corner, where she collapsed and cried into her hands. In front of her, a fire licked at the stones of the fireplace and seemed a comfort to everyone before it, who sat quietly with tea and green juices.

Heidi followed after Maggie slowly, scanning her memory for some reason for Maggie's sorrow. She prayed Maggie hadn't told her something she'd already forgotten. She sat beside Maggie and waited, not wanting to interrupt. Sometimes, people just had to cry things out. Heidi understood that.

“I'm so sorry,” Maggie breathed finally, sniffing. “I don't mean to act like this. Not here.”

Off to the right, another woman who sat in front of the fire said, “Don't be silly, honey. We all came here for a reason. We've all cried in front of this fireplace at one point.”

Around her, the other women in robes nodded in agreement. Heidi's heart went out to each of them as they

carried their separate struggles. It was so terrifically hard to be a woman in the world, she knew.

“Maggie?” Heidi whispered. “I want you to know I’m here for you, whatever it is.”

Maggie winced and tried to smile. “Thank you for saying that.” She sniffled several times, then added, “I just feel like I can’t do anything right.”

“Welcome to the club,” Heidi said.

“No. Heidi...” Maggie reached for Heidi’s hand and squeezed it. “You’re a remarkable person. You’ve done so much good in the world!”

Heidi shook her head. “I don’t know about that. My life is mostly empty these days. I’m sure I’m to blame.”

“I think you’ve had very bad luck,” Maggie told her firmly.

Heidi lifted an eyebrow. “And who’s to say you haven’t had bad luck, as well?”

Maggie grumbled and rubbed her eyes.

“You know everything about me,” Heidi offered. “You’ve helped me carry the weight of my life. Now, let me carry yours.”

Maggie hesitated, then seemed to make a decision. “I wanted to do so much with my life. I wanted to become esteemed in the art world, to fall in love and get married and have babies with the love of my life.”

“And as far as I remember, you’ve done all of that!” Heidi reminded her. “And your wonderful sister is helping you with that last part.”

Maggie shook her head harshly. “I don’t have any of it. I quit my job in the art world because I couldn’t stand how fake everyone was. I started raising a little girl who isn’t even mine, and in the process, I pushed away the love of my life. And now...” She squeezed her eyes shut. “Now, I’ve pushed Alyssa away, too.”

Heidi's heart stopped beating for a moment. She remembered the fear she'd had for Alyssa and Maggie when she'd learned of their plan, as it had resembled hers and Dee's. They'd thought it was foolproof. They'd been horribly wrong. It seemed Alyssa and Maggie had been wrong, too.

*But maybe they were different. They had to be.*

"Oh, honey. Your sister loves you to pieces," Heidi breathed.

"I haven't talked to her in over a week," Maggie wept. "I hate when we're not speaking. It makes me feel so hollow."

Heidi rubbed Maggie's shoulder, wondering what had gone wrong. *Maggie had said she'd pushed away the love of her life. What did that mean?*

"I think you should give Alyssa a chance," Heidi said. "I'm sure she misses you just as much as you miss her."

"I'm just so embarrassed," Maggie said as she placed her face in her hands again. "I don't know if I can even face myself, let alone her."

As Maggie continued to cry quietly beside her, Heidi gazed at the fire and remembered the horrific first few months of her life after David had visited Dee in California. She'd never felt emptier. Very soon afterward, however, the emptiness had become so standard, so expected, that she'd hardly noticed it at all.

She wouldn't wish that on anyone, not her worst enemy and certainly not Maggie.

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## Chapter Nineteen

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When Alyssa returned to the Remington House that evening, she was surprised to find Lucy in a highchair at the kitchen table, so much so that she stood and stared at the little girl for a full five seconds. Lucy squealed Alyssa's name, which snapped her out of it, and she hurried over to lift Lucy into her and kiss her nose and her cheeks.

Janine was at the stovetop and smiled at her daughter warmly. "How was your day?"

"Um. It was fine," Alyssa said, her voice edged with confusion. "What is Lucy doing here?"

Janine stirred a pot of mashed potatoes. "We're going to look after her for a little while if that's okay."

"Of course," Alyssa said, frowning her brow. Her mind burned with questions. *Where was Maggie? Had Maggie come to drop Lucy off and then leave the island again? Why hadn't she answered any of her twenty-seven phone calls or thirty text messages?*

Instead, she asked her mother, "Is Maggie all right?"

Janine nodded. "She's just fine."

This wasn't a good enough answer for Alyssa. She groaned and slid Lucy back into her highchair, then filled up a glass with water and collapsed at the kitchen table. "Maggie told you not to tell me anything, I guess."

Janine sighed. "I already told you that I won't get involved."

“She’s breaking my heart, Mom,” Alyssa shot back.

Janine’s shoulders slumped, and Alyssa was immediately heavy with guilt. “I’m sorry,” Alyssa whispered. “Really. I am.”

“It’s okay, honey,” Janine assured her, although Alyssa was pretty sure it was not fine.

That evening, Janine, Alyssa, Nancy, Elsa, Carmella, and Mallory gathered around the dinner table to eat salmon, mashed potatoes, and green beans. Zachery was with his father, Georgia napped upstairs, and Lucy smashed her wooden blocks around on the carpet in the room directly next door, where Alyssa could keep her eye on her.

“How is Gretchen handling her big sister duties?” Janine asked Carmella as she lifted a bite of fish to her lips.

“She’s such a great helper,” Carmella explained, her eyes alight. “I was worried, since she’s been an only child for so long. But she’s really taken to it.”

Elsa eyed Alyssa with a smile and asked, “And you, Alyssa? Any nausea today?”

“Just in the morning,” Alyssa answered. “Beyond that, I’ve just felt really tired.”

Carmella nodded. “I was exhausted the first four months or so. After that, I had a ton of energy until the third trimester. That’s when I took every opportunity to watch television, eat snacks, and have Cody rub my feet.”

Everyone laughed, even Alyssa, although she wasn’t sure who would be around to rub her feet.

\* \* \*

Three days later, March sunlight glittered through Alyssa’s bedroom window, and Lucy babbled from her toddler bed. It was seven in the morning, and Alyssa’s stomach circled with nausea. Very gingerly, she stood to drink water, assess if she could walk or not, and then attended to all of Lucy’s needs.

She was a single mother, save for the fact that neither of the children she currently cared for were technically her own.

At no point did she hope that Hunter would come to take Lucy back soon, though. Alyssa's love for Lucy was the brightest thing she currently knew.

Later that morning, Alyssa bundled Lucy up, buckled her into her car seat, and drove downtown for a walk. The plan was to meet Cole for tea before he taught a sailing lesson, at which point Alyssa would wander through downtown, maybe grab another snack, and eventually check on Heidi.

About a week ago, after spontaneously meeting the real estate developer who planned to purchase the bookstore, Alyssa had called Heidi and spoken to her for twenty minutes, during which time Heidi had assured Alyssa this was the right course of action. Alyssa wasn't so sure— but she also wasn't sure how being in debt worked. The concept terrified her.

Eventually, she'd allowed Heidi to get off the phone, and Alyssa had stewed in silence, wondering at the complexities of being human. Heidi had done a pretty good job of telling Alyssa just how “okay” she was. *But could Alyssa actually believe her?*

Since the phone call, however, Alyssa hadn't found the courage to go see Heidi. Heidi was definitely heartbroken, and Alyssa wasn't sure how to build her up when she, too, nursed a broken heart. On top of that, Alyssa had a hunch David Withers hadn't bothered to come to the Vineyard to see his mother, which bothered her greatly.

It seemed, more and more, that people were willing to drop each other at the slightest moment of discomfort. Alyssa wasn't willing to drop Heidi. And one day soon, she told herself repeatedly, she would fight back into Maggie's life.

“Boats!” Lucy pointed at the sailboats that creaked next to their docks with their masts pointed toward the glittering sky above.

“That's right,” Alyssa said as she pushed Lucy's stroller. “Those are sailboats, Lucy.”

Cole was up ahead with a cup of coffee and a cup of tea in his hands. He wore a thick winter hat and a sailing sweatshirt, and he bent low to greet Lucy with a big smile. “Hi, Lucy!”

“Cole!” Lucy cried, and Cole laughed joyously.

“She always knows how to brighten your mood,” Cole said. “It seems so easy.”

“So easy,” Alyssa agreed. “How are you doing?”

Cole walked with Alyssa for a while, sipping his coffee and discussing the recent goings-on between him and Aria, the young woman who’d followed him from the Caribbean. The brightness in his eyes told Alyssa that Cole had fallen deeper into the story than he’d initially planned.

“Are you dating?” Alyssa asked.

“No! I mean. No?” Cole stuttered and then laughed at himself. “I sound insane, don’t I?”

“Sort of,” Alyssa joked. “But I understand insanity more than most.”

Cole sipped his coffee, his gaze focused on the horizon. “No word from Maggie yet?”

“Nope. She dropped Lucy off without a word,” Alyssa explained. “I think my mom knows more than I do, but she won’t give Maggie away.”

“Does your mom know about Rex?” Cole asked.

“I don’t think so,” Alyssa admitted.

“It’s complicated,” Cole said.

“That’s the nature of our family.”

“Every dang year,” Cole affirmed.

After Cole left to teach his sailing lesson, Alyssa wheeled the stroller away from the harbor and back into town. The Dog-Eared Corner was just around the corner, and she decided to walk past it to see what had happened since last week. Perhaps Heidi would be there again, wearing that bright smile as she explained she’d decided not to sell after all. *“I told that*

*guy to go back where he came from,”* Alyssa imagined Heidi saying.

As Alyssa rounded the corner, she saw a man on the front porch of the little bookstore. Upon first glance, Alyssa assumed the man was the real estate developer, and she prepared a speech in her mind to tell him to leave Heidi alone. When she got closer, however, she realized that the man on the porch wasn't the developer at all.

It was David Withers, Heidi's son.

Alyssa stopped at the gate and gaped up at him. There he stood in a black peacoat with his hands shoved in his pockets as he stared at the locked front door. Just as he had back in New York, he ruffled his hair with his fingers, then turned around to reveal a panicked expression.

Alyssa flinched when he saw her. Lucy waved up at him, always eager to say hello to strangers.

David hurried off the porch and walked toward her. The tails of his peacoat flew out behind him. “Hi! Alyssa! It's me, David!”

Alyssa tried to smile as David approached. Shock at seeing him there was the only thing she knew. As he came toward her, she realized that the front sign for the bookstore had been removed, which was more proof that the developer had truly won.

“I'm surprised to see you here,” Alyssa admitted when David was close enough to talk.

“I'm surprised to be here,” David said softly. He then lifted his thumb to point at the bookstore. “You and your sister didn't mention the bookstore was about to close.”

“We didn't know,” Alyssa said. “When I got back a week ago, a real estate developer told me he was about to buy it from her. He was clearing all the books out.” Alyssa paused, then added, “It broke my heart to see.”

David adjusted his glasses, at a loss. “I basically grew up in that bookstore.”

“I was thinking of walking to Heidi’s house to check on her.”

“I was just there,” David admitted. “Nobody is home.”

Alyssa furrowed her brow. “Maybe she’s at the grocery store? A doctor’s appointment?”

David shrugged. “I waited for two hours.”

Alyssa’s eyes widened. As far as she knew, Heidi had no friends to speak of and nowhere else on the island to go. *What could have happened to her?*

“I don’t like that look,” David said, fear growing in his eyes.

Alyssa gripped the handles on the stroller and tilted her head back toward the harbor, where the car was parked. “Listen. Maybe I’m overreacting; maybe I’m not. But I think we should go back to my car and drive to as many places as we can think of to look for her. There’s no way she left the island, right? As far as I knew, she hadn’t left the island in years.”

David set his jaw and nodded. Together, they walked back toward the harbor as a friendly March sunlight warmed their cheeks. Tourists sat outside restaurants and sipped chardonnays with their jackets zipped to their chins and sunglasses perched on their noses. Their cheerfulness seemed monstrous in the face of what Alyssa now knew: that Heidi was missing.

“I knew the bookstore was closing,” Alyssa muttered, mostly to herself. “But I let Heidi convince me she was okay.”

David was quiet beside her, his eyes on the ground as they hurried.

“I was so worried about my own problems and my own life,” Alyssa continued. “And now...”

To this, David grunted, “Don’t beat yourself up. I’m the one who left her behind. I’m the one who should be self-hating.”

Alyssa stalled for a moment at a downtown corner and lifted her eyes to David's. Behind his glasses, his eyes were heavy with tears. "But you came back, David," she reminded him. "That has to count for something."

For the next hour, Alyssa and David were quiet as they drove through the island, looking for Heidi. David spat out potential locations easily—the Aquinnah Cliffside, where she liked to hike, or the shopping street where she used to like to buy clothes, or the beaches where she used to take David for picnics. Every place swarmed with tourists, nameless faces that had no relation to Heidi. Alyssa felt her hope dissipating.

After another failed attempt to find her at the local diner, David pressed his hands over his eyes and muttered, "Should we go to the police?"

Alyssa sighed. This wasn't her area of expertise, not in the slightest. "Let's go back to my place and ask my mom."

Alyssa drove back to the Remington House carefully, often checking four-way stops numerous times before pressing the gas. Her brain was elsewhere, and she didn't fully trust her own instincts.

"This is quite a place," David said as she pulled into the driveway, his eyes scanning the rolling hills along the beaches and the beautiful and very large home, one that had housed so many members of the Remington, Potter, and Grimson families over the previous two years.

"My grandma married Neal Remington," Alyssa explained.

"Ah. The Katama Lodge guy," David remembered. As an islander, he'd grown up knowing that name.

"He died before I ever made it to the island," Alyssa admitted. "But that's a long story."

Alyssa carried Lucy on her hip and led David through the front door of the Remington House, calling out hello to anyone home. The living room was empty, save for Zachery's toys, which were strewn every which way. The kitchen, too, was empty, with minor proof that someone was home — glasses of

water and a half of an avocado on the counter, waiting for their owner to return.

“Can I get you something?” Alyssa asked as she placed Lucy in her highchair. “Lucy needs a snack, and I need something to calm my nerves.”

David laughed unhappily and said he’d take anything. Alyssa eventually found a package of salt and vinegar chips, which David began to crunch through timidly as Lucy painted her cheeks and lips with yogurt.

“I just don’t know what to do,” David said, mostly to the bag of chips. “Since I met you and Maggie, I’ve felt so aimless, like every decision in my life up until now was the wrong one.”

Alyssa understood the feeling but didn’t say so. Instead, she searched for optimism and said, “When we find Heidi, she will be over the moon to have you back. All that pain will be washed away.”

Suddenly, the back door of the Remington House creaked open, and Janine and Elsa’s voices filled the house.

“Such a nice evening for a walk!” Elsa said. “Thank you for convincing me.”

“Winter really got to me this year,” Janine returned. “As far as I’m concerned, I’ll be out in the sun as much as I can this year. Wrinkles, come as they may!”

Elsa laughed good-naturedly, then entered the kitchen, her smile widening. “Look what we have here!”

Janine followed after Elsa, her face glowing from their walk. “Hi, honey! I see Lucy has decided to paint her face again.”

David eyed Janine and Elsa with dull curiosity.

“Mom, this is David,” Alyssa said, her voice wavering.

“I’m Janine,” she said. “And this is my sister, Elsa.”

“How do you do?” Elsa turned to pour herself a glass of water and remove the core from the remaining half of the



avocado.

“We’ve been looking for his mother for the past hour or so,” Alyssa explained.

“She never came home,” David said quietly. “I don’t know what to make of it.”

Janine’s smile waned. For a long moment, she seemed unsure of what to say.

“Do you know my mother?” David asked. “Heidi Withers?”

Janine sighed and leaned against the counter. She seemed to be weighing up her options, attempting to make a decision.

“Mom?” Alyssa frowned. “What’s going on?”

Janine stuttered. “I’m not supposed to tell you this.”

“Mom, if you know where Heidi is, you have to tell us,” Alyssa said, her voice stricken.

“Heidi’s safe. She’s at the Lodge,” Janine explained.

“What?” Alyssa’s eyes widened.

“Maggie checked her in a few days ago,” Janine continued.

“And where did Maggie go after that?” Alyssa demanded.

Janine’s eyes glistened. “She needs a break, honey. I don’t know what happened to her, and I don’t know why her heart is broken, but she needs a break. The Lodge has given her time and space to heal.”

## Chapter Twenty

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Heidi had been at the Katama Lodge and Wellness Spa for a luxurious five days. She'd taken yoga classes, met with Janine, the naturopathic doctor, tried acupuncture, sat in saunas, had numerous massages, drunk green juices, meditated, and spent more time in the cozy embrace of that white robe than she had in any real clothes. More than that, because there were very few responsibilities to speak of, Heidi's memory issues seemed to drift away. Someone was always there to remind her where to go next, to offer her nourishing food or another massage.

For the first time in Heidi's life, she was allowed to feel truly calm. It was miraculous.

Throughout those five days, Maggie, too, seemed to become lighter, more assured. She stopped crying about her marriage and her inability to have children and began to speak tenderly about her sister, about Lucy, and about all the goodness she'd experienced in her life. She began to structure her conversations with Heidi around gratefulness, explaining that she'd gotten to a point recently wherein she blamed everyone else for her problems except herself. "I don't want to live like that," she said over breakfast one morning. "I want to approach everything with a good heart, with forgiveness."

After a mid-morning yoga class, Heidi returned to her room to shower and change for lunch. Out the window, she watched as a V of birds streamed over Katama Bay, tweeting out the optimism of spring. Her own heart lifted. Like Heidi, she'd begun to stop blaming other people for her problems and

live in the here and now. The facts were that David no longer wanted to be in her life, and the bookstore no longer belonged to her. Beyond that, Heidi was more-or-less safe. She had a home, and she had doctors who were sure, with enough tweaks to her medication, she could live with early-onset dementia for several years before she required any real physical assistance. Yes—the thought of that future often terrified her. But Heidi had begun to make peace with it. After all, she'd never assumed she would live forever.

As Heidi walked toward the beautiful cafeteria with its large windows and its long, glowing tables, she smiled at other women who spent time at the lodge, addressing some of them by name. Many of them had told Heidi their reasons for coming. Some had said their husbands had left them, that their children were sick, or that their career had chewed them up and spat them out. In turn, Heidi had told them she'd lost her career, her son, and her sister, and that her memory dwindled by the day. Each time she told the story, it was as though the woman who listened helped Heidi carry it.

This, Heidi felt, was the magic of the Katama Lodge, which was a community of women who wanted to heal, overcome, and grow while helping others get better alongside them.

When Heidi reached the cafeteria, Maggie turned the corner and nearly walked directly into her. Her face opened with laughter.

“Heidi! There you are.” Maggie hugged her and stepped back. “My Aunt Elsa was looking for you.”

“Oh?” Heidi tilted her head.

“I think she went back to her office,” Maggie said, pointing down the hallway.

“Thanks,” Heidi said. “Want to eat lunch after?”

Maggie's smile waned the slightest bit. “Let's talk when you're done.”

Heidi wasn't sure what that meant. *Why would Maggie want to skip lunch?* The Katama Lodge cafeteria was a

smorgasbord of delightful, mostly vegetarian, very nutritional, and super tasty food. Without pressing the issue, Heidi turned and walked toward Elsa's office, wondering what Elsa would want with her. *Perhaps Heidi had reached the limit on her free room? Perhaps they'd decided it was time for her to go?* Heidi would have to understand that. After all, five days at the Lodge probably equated to fifteen hundred dollars, if not more.

Heidi knocked on Elsa's door, and Elsa called out, "Come in!"

Heidi opened it to find Elsa standing at her desk, her smile nervous. "Heidi! Thanks for coming by." She then swallowed and shifted her eyes toward the corner of the office, where a man sat on a couch.

Heidi half-glanced at him, then said, "Hi, Elsa. Thank you again for everything this week. It's been truly life-changing."

Elsa stepped around the desk. "Please. Come in, Heidi."

Heidi wanted to tell Elsa that it wasn't a problem if she needed to leave the Lodge immediately and return to her cozy little home in Edgartown. She truly didn't mind. But before she could, her gaze returned to the man on the couch, who looked at her with enormous eyes. His black hair cascaded wildly along his ears, and his glasses caught the light from the small fire in Elsa's office fireplace.

Heidi's eyes were wide like saucers. "David?"

Heidi took two quick strides into the office and closed the door behind her. She suddenly felt out of breath. Her son was there before her. Although she hadn't seen David in seven years, she'd googled him endlessly and knew exactly how his face had changed, what sort of glasses he now wore, and how he styled his hair. *She wasn't mistaken, was she? This had to be him?*

David stood and whipped his fingers through his hair, just as he always had when he'd been younger. Heidi took a delicate step forward.

“I’ll leave you two alone for a while,” Elsa said softly as she hurried for the door. In a flash, she was out of the room, and only Heidi and David remained in a sort of face-off.

Heidi had no idea what to say. *How had he found her at the Lodge? How was this possible?*

All at once, David hurried toward her, brought his arms around her, and placed his chin on her shoulder. Their hug was the warmest thing Heidi had experienced in seven years. Tears welled in her eyes as David shivered against her.

“David...” Heidi murmured his name again as their hug broke.

“Let’s sit down,” David said, guiding her to the couch next to the fireplace.

Heidi continued to stare at her son, genuinely shocked. *Was it possible she was dreaming?* At the Katama Lodge, her nights had been blissful and dreamless, and she’d slept like a baby— but even that couldn’t last forever.

“What are you doing here?” Heidi finally managed to ask.

David adjusted his glasses, clearly nervous. Heidi sensed he was even more nervous than she was, which was odd.

“Mom, I don’t know how to say any of this, so I’m just going to come out with it,” David began. “I have been so selfish. There’s no excuse for what I did and how I treated you.”

Heidi blinked several times, not wanting to sob and ruin this moment.

“After I visited Aunt Dee in LA, I knew why you’d kept the truth from me,” David explained. “I didn’t want to admit it, but I knew. And I guess I was hurt by that, you know. It’s strange to learn that your real mother never wanted you, but I fixated on the wrong information. The truth was, I had a loving mother the entire time. You gave me everything: your love, your laughter, your time, your appreciation for books...” David trailed off. “I never needed anything else except you. And in my foolishness and selfishness, I turned my back on that. I don’t know if I’ll ever forgive myself.”

Heidi reached across the couch and took David's hand in hers. *This was her son! Her son was sitting so close to her that she could actually touch him!*

"I haven't known how to come back from what I did," David explained, "So I just continued to allow time to pass. And as I got further and further away from you, my heart broke more and more." He swallowed, his eyes to the ground. "I was married, Mom. The marriage only lasted a little while, but its failure was another nail in the coffin. I've felt so unwanted, unloved, and also not deserving of any of it. If you tell me today you can't forgive me for what I did, I understand. But more than anything, I want you to tell me we can find a way through this— together."

Heidi squeezed David's hand and shook her head as tears ran down her cheeks. "David, you're already forgiven! Isn't that obvious?"

David's lips curled into a small smile. "You shouldn't forgive me."

"But I am. I do. I've loved you just as much every single day we've been apart as I loved you before," she continued. "You're my son, and that kind of love is difficult to fight. It consumes you."

David seemed unsure of what to say and continued to shake his head, at a loss. This was okay for Heidi. Suddenly, she felt she had too many things to say at once.

"I'm selling the bookstore," Heidi explained.

"I heard," David said. "Why are you doing it?"

"I had a few bad years of revenue," Heidi said. "I took out loans and piled up debts. Somehow, the real estate developer knew all about my money problems and hit me at a perfect time."

"I know that place meant everything to you."

"You mean everything to me," Heidi corrected him. "The bookstore was just my job."

"It wasn't just a job," David told her.

But Heidi shook her head. “I have to think of it as a phase of my life that is now over. Maybe I can find something else to do. Maybe I can become a completely new person.” She paused, then added quietly, “I’m sorry to say I’ve been diagnosed with dementia. That has been a tough thing to wrap my mind around, especially because my mind is the very thing that’s sick. But I’ve met a few friends who’ve been very kind to me. Without their help, I don’t think I would have made it this far.”

David’s eyes glistened. “Alyssa and Maggie came to see me in New York.”

At this, Heidi’s mouth dropped open. “You’re kidding.”

“No. I’m not. They showed up at one of my readings and told me all about their friendship with you,” David said.

Heidi frowned. “That must have been before they stopped speaking.”

David nodded. “They have some issues they need to iron out, but who doesn’t?” He squeezed his mother’s hand again.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. Heidi stood up, having forgotten they were in Elsa’s office, and hurried to answer it. When she did, she found Maggie fully dressed in the clothes she’d come to the Lodge in. Her smile was serene, her eyes focused.

“Maggie!” Heidi stepped back to allow her to enter. “I’ve just learned you already know my son, David.”

Maggie crossed her arms over her chest and leaned against the wall of Elsa’s office. “I’m glad to see you made it to the island, David.”

David stood and beamed at Maggie. “I don’t know what took me so long.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Maggie whispered. “You’re here now.”

Maggie and David locked eyes in that warm and glowing office as Heidi shifted her weight, overwhelmed with her love for both of them.

Finally, Maggie looked at Heidi and said, “I’m heading back home now.”

“To New York?” Heidi asked.

Maggie shook her head. “Eventually, I’ll have to go back to the city, of course. But home is where my sister is, I think.”

David palmed the back of his neck. “I can’t tell you how happy that makes me.” He then eyed Heidi to add, “I spent the past couple of days with Alyssa. She’s a nervous wreck.”

“I’m sure she is,” Maggie said. “I’ve been terrible to her.”

“She’ll understand,” David breathed as he stepped forward.

Maggie’s nose twitched. “I guess she told you everything?”

“She needed to talk to someone,” David admitted.

“Yeah.” Maggie sighed. “Thank you for being there for her when I couldn’t be.”

“Thank you for being there for my mother when I couldn’t be, either,” David returned. “I don’t know how I’ll ever repay you.”



## Chapter Twenty-One

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Alyssa walked along the beach about a quarter of a mile from the Remington House. The wind blew out from the Sound and tore through her hair, and her eyes were filled with tears that she refused to let fall. It had now been so long since she'd spoken to Maggie that she'd begun to throb with sorrow. *What would happen when the baby came? Would Maggie make a pit stop at the hospital, pick up the baby, and then leave Alyssa to recover alone?* This wasn't what Alyssa had signed on for.

That afternoon, David had gone to the Katama Lodge to speak to his mother. Since he'd left, Alyssa hadn't heard anything from him, nor any of her other family members. Grandma Nancy watched Lucy back at the house as Janine performed her duties as the head naturopathic doctor at the Lodge. This left Alyssa wandering around, lost in her swirling thoughts.

Suddenly, somewhere behind her came the sound of Alyssa's name. Her name echoed across the rolling sands and out across the water. Alyssa froze, thinking at first she'd imagined it, but when she heard it again, she turned quickly around to find a beautiful image. Maggie ran across the sand toward her, her hair flying out behind her. She ran so frantically, her eyes manic, that Alyssa worried there was something very wrong with her. Alyssa began to run toward Maggie, and she heard herself calling Maggie's name back. By the time they reached one another, they were breathless, laughing.

“I’ve been looking for you on the beach forever!” Maggie cried.

Alyssa’s smile waned. For a moment, she had no idea what to say. She locked eyes with her sister, burning with curiosity about what had happened since they’d last seen one another. Before she could ask a single question, however, Maggie’s face crumpled, and she burst into tears. Alyssa hurried forward and wrapped her arms around her so that Maggie could burrow against her in sorrow.

This was it. This was what Maggie had been trying to avoid— she hadn’t wanted to break down and so she’d run away. Alyssa understood it better than most.

Slowly and without speaking, Alyssa and Maggie walked back to the Remington House, where they sat on the enclosed porch with hot cocoa, wrapped in blankets, watching the soft waves roll toward the beach. Alyssa didn’t want to press Maggie for details. She knew Maggie would reveal whatever shadowed her soul soon.

Finally, Maggie lifted her eyes to Alyssa’s and said, “I don’t know how to tell you how sorry I am.”

“You don’t have to.”

Maggie set her jaw. “I do. I can’t believe I treated you like that.” She shook her head slightly and added, “I never wanted us to be like Heidi and Dee.”

“Neither did I,” Alyssa whispered.

“I love you, Alyssa,” Maggie said.

“I love you, too.”

“I don’t expect you to forgive me,” Maggie said.

“I’m going to, anyway,” Alyssa said.

Maggie smiled slightly. “You’re too stubborn. You know that?”

“We’re related, you know.”

Maggie sipped her hot cocoa and returned her gaze to the beach. After a very long silence, she said, “I suspected Rex

was cheating on me as early as last summer. There were signs. Missed hours. Days where I hardly heard from him or knew what he was doing. I told myself he was working overtime for us, for our future, but a part of me knew that wasn't true.

“By that time, we had Lucy to take care of, and you and I were driving back and forth to Martha’s Vineyard frequently. On top of all that, my body was busy with IVF treatments. I was so sure each new treatment would take and told myself that once I was pregnant, Rex would stop messing around behind my back and fully commit. Isn’t that laughable?”

Alyssa shook her head and frowned, unsure of what to say.

“You asked me several times over the past few months if I was still happy with Rex,” Maggie continued. “Each time, I basically bit your head off just because I knew you knew how miserable I was. Sometimes, it’s hard to be seen so clearly, you know?”

“I wish you could have talked to me about this,” Alyssa said quietly.

Maggie sighed. She looked very weary and older than her twenty-six years. “It almost feels like the engagement party should have been an indication that my marriage was doomed. That night, when we learned about Dad’s affair with Maxine, I should have called the whole thing off.”

“You were in love with him,” Alyssa insisted. “And I always really liked him until recently.”

“Until recently. Yeah,” Maggie repeated it, her eyes glazed. “I can’t believe I’ll be twenty-six and divorced. Even Mom made it to her forties without getting divorced.”

“You shouldn’t think of it like that,” Alyssa tried. “You’re getting out of an unhappy marriage early to make space and time for something much better and healthier in the future. Rex isn’t good enough for you! That’s so obvious now.”

Maggie stared into her hot cocoa and remained very quiet for a moment. “Last week, when I was cleaning, I found evidence that he’d had a woman in our bedroom. I didn’t stick around long enough to accuse him of anything. I just put Lucy

in the car and drove here. I should have come to you immediately, but I was so broken and lost. After I dropped Lucy off with Mom, I went immediately to Heidi's. You'd texted me to say her bookstore would be sold, and I had a hunch she was just as lost as I was. You should have seen the way her eyes looked. She'd just been sitting in her house by herself, waiting for her life to end. I realized that could be me someday if I didn't do something about it."

"I would have broken down your door," Alyssa told her. "I wouldn't have let this go on."

Maggie laughed and wiped tears from her cheeks. "We're pretty good for each other, aren't we?" She then dropped her gaze slightly to add, "Every day of the past week or so, when I woke up, I remembered you're carrying my baby—the baby Rex and I were supposed to raise together. And I felt crippled with guilt."

Alyssa reached across the table. "It is literally my greatest pleasure."

Maggie stared up at the ceiling. "I was a fool to think Rex wanted to raise children with me."

"Why? He told you he did," Alyssa shot back. "Why wouldn't you believe your husband when he tells you something like that? You're not a fool to believe someone who promised to love you. You're only a fool if you stay when he shows you what kind of man he really is."

It was the following week, and Maggie and Alyssa were in the car, headed back to the city—probably for the final time in a very long while. Alyssa did her best to keep Maggie's mind off of the matter at hand, telling stories to try to make Maggie laugh and building up hope for the next years of their life. Together with Janine, they'd decided to move permanently to Martha's Vineyard, where they would raise Lucy and Maggie's baby, spend time with Grandma Nancy, and strengthen their love for the island. The city was their past now.

Maggie had spoken on the phone to Rex exactly once since she'd left the Katama Lodge and Wellness Spa. Alyssa had overheard the conversation, which had involved Maggie

telling Rex it was over. Rex had grown angry with her and spat accusations at her, telling her she was *“so involved with her family and Lucy that she didn’t have time for him anymore.”* Maggie had listened patiently and then told him, *“I hear what you’re saying, Rex, and I do not agree. I hope we can move through this divorce amicably.”*

Alyssa had rarely seen Maggie so resolute and calm.

Maggie parked the car in the parking garage across the street from the apartment she’d shared for many years with Rex. Together, Alyssa and Maggie walked into the foyer and took the elevator to the apartment, both quiet with apprehension.

Maggie used her house key to enter the apartment. Just as she’d ordered, the moving company had spent the previous day and morning boxing up her and Alyssa’s things, and boxes were stacked and labeled across the foyer and living room. It was surreal to walk through the apartment and see only Rex’s things. The apartment felt much less personal without Maggie’s touch.

Alyssa entered her bedroom to ensure everything had been packed and sat on the bed for a moment, heavy with memory. She’d sought refuge in this apartment when times had gotten very tough for her— and now, she and Maggie would journey together to the next phase of their life.

Suddenly, the front door burst open, and Rex’s voice boomed through the apartment. Alyssa bristled.

“Maggie? Are you here?” Rex stomped toward the kitchen.

Alyssa hurried to the hallway to peer down at him. His swagger was strange, as though he’d decided to get drunk and come home to accost Maggie.

Maggie hurried out of their bedroom, her face very pale. “Rex? I thought you said you weren’t going to be here.”

“This is my apartment, too. I can be here whenever I want to be here.”

Maggie looked defeated. Alyssa realized this was the first time Maggie had seen Rex since she'd found evidence of his affairs. Although she'd demonized him in her mind, it was probably difficult to see his face, as it was the face she'd pledged to love her whole life long. You couldn't just tell yourself to stop loving someone and expect it to happen.

"Maggie, I don't want you to go," Rex said quietly. He stepped toward her and tried to take her hand.

Maggie shivered. "I have to go, Rex." She sounded as though she didn't believe herself.

"You don't mean this, Maggie. We haven't even been married two years," Rex pleaded.

"Rex, you've been cheating on me," Maggie whispered.

"I told you. I had to cheat on you. I felt so lonely in our marriage," Rex admitted.

Alyssa's stomach curled with rage. It was one thing to cheat; it was another to blame the affair on the not-guilty party. *Had Jack Potter blamed Janine for his affair with Maxine?* She wouldn't have put it past him.

Maggie raised her eyes to look at him. "I love you, Rex."

"Then stay, Maggie," Rex begged. "I need you here. We're going to have a baby."

Maggie shook her head ever so slightly. "We aren't going to do anything— not together. Not anymore." She paused, then added, "I'm so sorry." She then walked toward the front door and hurried into the hallway.

Alyssa ran toward the front door, whipping past Rex.

"Maggie!" Rex continued to cry her name. "Maggie, come back! I can change."

At the door, Alyssa turned and glared at Rex, this monstrous man who'd destroyed Maggie's confidence. "You stay away from us. Understand?"

Rex yelled Maggie's name again, but his eyes were evil, hardly human.

“Sign the divorce papers as soon as you get them,” Alyssa said icily. “Have a nice life.”

With that, she stepped through the front door and slammed it behind her. Maggie remained in front of the elevator doors, her hands cupping her elbows.

“The movers should be here soon,” Alyssa said. “I’ll stay to make sure it goes okay. Why don’t you call a friend? Go have some tea somewhere? I’ll call you when it’s over, and we can drive back to the Vineyard.”

Maggie nodded. She was very pale, almost blurry around the edges. “Thank you, Alyssa,” she breathed. “I don’t think I could have gotten through this day without you.”

“Don’t mention it,” Alyssa said. “I’m sorry Rex came here so aggressively. It must have been really hard to see him.”

“In some ways, yes. But in other ways, he looks like a stranger. And I’m glad it’s okay,” Maggie whispered. “I know it will be a long road to get over this, though.”

“Today is the first day,” Alyssa told her. “It’ll be even easier tomorrow.”

“I hope you’re right.”

## Chapter Twenty-Two

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Heidi was in her kitchen, flipping pancakes as the Martha's Vineyard radio station played hits from David's youth. David buzzed in and out of the kitchen, laughing and singing along to the songs. "This one reminds me of sophomore year. Do you remember when I went out for the football team and broke my wrist?"

Heidi laughed and slid several pancakes onto a plate. "Are you kidding? I still remember how panicked I was when the coach called me."

"You forbid me from playing after that," David said as he poured himself a mug of coffee and sat at the kitchen table. "I could have been a brilliant football star by now."

Heidi laughed and sat across from him, unable to calm herself down. After David had come to the Katama Lodge several days ago, he'd decided to stick around Martha's Vineyard so they could catch up properly. It had been non-stop storytelling, eating, laughing, apologizing, and forgiving. Although Heidi kept her memory book close by, she found that her memory zipped along better than normal, as though a combination of the Katama Lodge and David's return had helped heal her.

"What do you want to do today?" Heidi asked her son, watching as he drizzled syrup over his pancake.

David considered this. "To be honest, I might have to do a little bit of editing this morning."

Heidi's heart lifted. "For your next book?"



“Yes. My agent is expecting another round of edits by the end of the month, and I’m a little bit behind,” he explained.

“You can work in the sunroom!” Heidi said, overwhelmed with joy that her son wanted to bring his writing career into her home.

“Sounds perfect,” David said.

“Do you mind if I sit with you and read?”

David’s eyes lit up. “I would love that.”

After Heidi had done the dishes, she crept into the sunroom to sit in a cushioned chair and do her best to focus on her book. At the desk, David typed on his manuscript, adjusting his glasses when he got stuck and deleting entire paragraphs to make room for better words and more clarity. Heidi alternated between looking at her book and up at David, unable to believe he was actually there.

All Heidi’s life, she’d thought books to be endlessly magical. It was incredible that her son was a part of that magic.

Throughout the few days she and David had spent together, David had shared a number of stories from the past seven years. The fact that he’d been married and divorced already shocked Heidi, although she tried her best not to show it. Although she knew pain was always a part of life, she hated that her son had had his heart broken so profoundly.

When David had asked Heidi about any love in her life, Heidi had struggled not to laugh. Romance had never been a part of her world. All she’d had was the bookstore, and now, all she had was David. She decided that was a pretty good trade.

Around lunchtime, Heidi rose to prepare soup and sandwiches. David thanked her, his smile illuminated, and Heidi said, “Keep writing. I’ll come get you when it’s ready.”

Just as she began to slice onions for a homemade soup, the doorbell rang. Heidi washed her hands and hurried toward the foyer, where she opened the door to find Alyssa and Maggie,

with Lucy propped up on Maggie's hip. March sunlight glowed behind them, making them look almost angelic.

"Oh goodness!" Heidi's smile widened. "Maggie! Alyssa! Lucy! Come in, please."

They did, laughing at Heidi's excitement.

"You look so beautiful and happy, Heidi," Maggie said as Heidi closed the door behind them.

"Having David around has done wonders for me," Heidi said. "Our stay at the Lodge didn't hurt, either. It was so dreamy there."

Heidi ushered Maggie and Alyssa into the living room, where they sat on the couch as Lucy played with her toys on the floor.

"David's hard at work in the sunroom," Heidi explained. "His agent wants to see a new version of the manuscript by next week."

"Wow," Maggie said, clearly impressed.

"Don't be too impressed." David appeared in the living room, adjusting his glasses again as he smiled down at Maggie and Alyssa. "Good to see you again! How was the city?"

Heidi's curiosity was piqued. *How had David known the girls were in the city?*

Maggie winced. "It was interesting, to say the least."

"We won't be back for a while," Alyssa explained.

David sat in the cushioned chair nearest to Maggie and crossed his ankles. "I have to admit that I feel no desire to go back to the city right now, either."

Heidi's heart lifted. "I already told you that you can stay here as long as you want."

David's smile lit up Heidi's soul. "She's too good to me," he told Maggie and Alyssa.

"She's too good to us, too," Maggie breathed. She then lifted her eyes toward Heidi as she added, "Heidi, I've come

here to talk to you about something.”

Heidi frowned. Her first thought was that she'd done something wrong.

“Over the past few months, my personal life went up in flames,” Maggie continued. “Now that I'm in the early stages of a divorce, I'm remembering the few times I was happy this year. Almost all of the times involve baking for you at The Dog-Eared Corner. It really thrilled me.”

“Oh.” Heidi dropped her gaze. “I'm so sorry that I've already sold it.” She hated that she'd gotten rid of Maggie's only source of joy.

Maggie raised her chin. “I've come to tell you I've bought The Dog-Eared Corner from the developer who took it from you.”

Heidi's gaze was filled with shock as she looked up at Maggie. “What did you just say?”

Beside Maggie, Alyssa nodded.

“Girls, no. You shouldn't have spent all that money,” Heidi said softly. “You have a baby on the way. Lucy needs you. It shouldn't have gone to a silly bookstore.”

“That bookstore is not silly,” Maggie corrected. “And I guess we haven't been very forthcoming about our situation. Our father was very rich and left us a lot of money when he died.”

“Our dad wasn't a very nice man,” Alyssa continued. “And I feel uneasy about the money he left us.”

“Me too. But that's why I want to use it for things like this,” Maggie explained. “I want The Dog-Eared Corner to go on, and I want it to be in your name.”

Heidi's eyes filled with tears as she started to understand what the girls were telling her. On the one hand, she wanted to throw her arms around these young women and weep. On the other, she wanted to refuse the money, to tell them she didn't need it.

“Mom,” David murmured. “That bookstore is your life. You have to take it.”

Heidi placed her hands over her face, genuinely at a loss. Maggie stood and hurried over to her, placing a hand on her shoulder.

“Why?” Heidi spoke into her hands. “Why do I deserve this?” Her heart burst with emotion. David was back and the bookstore was hers.

Maggie sighed. “Because you’re a wonderful and kind person. You deserve to keep doing what you love to do.”

“And because we just like you, Heidi,” Alyssa added, her voice sassy. “Isn’t that enough?”

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## Chapter Twenty-Three

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It was mid-April and time for the opening party for the new and revitalized Dog-Eared Corner. New books had been ordered, the shelves had been returned to their original places, and the real estate developer had begun to sniff elsewhere, no longer interested in the old colonial. Maggie had made it very clear that he couldn't have it. Good riddance.

Alyssa was almost two months pregnant, miraculously, and although she didn't show yet, she felt the pregnancy in numerous ways. Most days she was very tired, very nauseated, or both at once. "It's fun," Alyssa said as she placed her head on the kitchen table, watching Maggie do the finishing touches on her red velvet cupcakes. She'd made so many baked goods for the party, staying up late and waking up early that morning to make sure everything was done in time.

Maggie hurried over to her sister to rub her back. "I'm so sorry, Alyssa. They say the second trimester is easier?"

Alyssa groaned. "They better be right."

"This summer, we can go shopping for pretty maternity clothes," Maggie tried to lift her spirits. "I know how much you love shopping."

"Big, flowy summer dresses?" Alyssa asked.

"As many as you want," Maggie assured her.

Not long afterward, David knocked on the front door of the Remington House. He'd become a frequent fixture in Alyssa and Maggie's lives as they'd begun to put The Dog-Eared Corner back together again. If Alyssa wasn't mistaken, David

had an epic crush on Maggie. His eyes were all goo-goo when he looked at her, and he laughed at even her worst jokes. It was adorable to see, even if Alyssa wasn't sure if Maggie had feelings for him at all. Maggie needed an ego boost right now, and David was marvelous company— so none of it felt harmful in the least.

“Hi, David!” Maggie greeted him warmly and led him to the kitchen, where he assessed the boxes of baked goods.

“Mom said you would outdo yourself,” David said to Maggie.

Maggie blushed. “It wasn't that much work.”

This was the lie of the century, Alyssa knew.

As Maggie and David loaded the baked goods into David's car, which he'd recently purchased to get around the island better, Alyssa stole a red velvet cupcake and ate it slowly, relishing every bite. Lately, Maggie had loosened her restrictions around Alyssa's diet, saying, “As long as you eat plenty of nutrients, you can have a few goodies here and there. Life's too short to be so strict.”

When Maggie and David returned to the kitchen to grab more boxes of baked goods, they were buzzing with laughter.

“Did I miss something?” Alyssa asked.

Maggie sputtered. “It's hard to explain.”

“Yeah. It doesn't make any sense,” David said, watching Maggie continue to giggle.

Not long afterward, Alyssa and Maggie drove over to The Dog-Eared Corner to help David and Heidi with set-up. The party was set to begin at three and go until eight, during which time Heidi planned to feature book sales and dole out sugary goodies and other prizes. The goal was to remind Martha's Vineyard how special The Dog-Eared Corner had always been.

In the bookstore, Heidi was hard at work on the finishing touches of the redecoration. She wore a light blue blouse and a sharp skirt, and her gray hair flew out behind her beautifully. It

was a rare thing to see a woman lean into her years so gracefully, but Heidi had recently made it look easy. The bookstore and the reunion with David had saved her.

Of her early onset dementia, Heidi had said the doctors had her on a better medication, one that should allow her many more years of normal life. “I plan to appreciate the time I have left,” Heidi explained.

Now, Heidi greeted Maggie and Alyssa with warm hugs and then set them to work, which they were glad for. Maggie and David set out the baked goods and stored the extras in the back for easy retrieval as Alyssa swept the floor, cleaned the coffee shop tables, and set the music on the speakers.

At three exactly, Heidi unlocked the door and opened it to allow April sunlight to beam through. On cue, Janine, who carried Lucy, Elsa, Grandma Nancy, and Carmella, with little Georgia, stepped through the door, smiling and congratulating the team on the re-open. Heidi blushed and thanked them, guiding them to the punch and the baked goods. Elsa looked at books for a little while and purchased several for gifts as Janine grabbed a chocolate chip cookie and nudged Alyssa with her elbow.

“What’s going on there?” Janine said as she nodded toward Maggie and David, who flirted openly behind the counter.

Alyssa laughed. “I have no idea.”

“She hasn’t mentioned anything?”

Alyssa shook her head. “I think David is in love with her, and Maggie is too numb to realize it.”

Janine sighed. “I hope he’s a good guy.”

“Maggie needs a good guy,” Alyssa agreed.

Janine’s eyes sparkled. “What about you? Have you met anyone lately? Anyone who caught your eye?”

“Mom, I’m pregnant,” Alyssa told her.

“So? That hasn’t stopped women before.”

Alyssa chuckled. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. Maybe I’ve turned that part of my brain off.”

“I think that’s really good,” Janine said reflectively. “It’s healthy to focus on yourself for a little while. To ask yourself what makes you happy, and not anyone else.”

\* \* \*

The first day at The Dog-Eared Corner couldn’t have gone better. Heidi’s sales were through the roof, and they gave out nearly every cupcake, cookie, slice of cake, and piece of tart. When Heidi flipped the open sign to closed, she turned and clapped her hands joyously, her eyes alight.

“Today was wonderful,” she said as she walked back toward her team. “I could feel my father here every minute of it. I know he’s looking down on us with a lot of pride.”

Heidi admitted she was exhausted, and as soon as she finished cleaning up, she said goodnight to the three twenty-somethings and bid them goodbye. Afterward, Maggie, David, and Alyssa gathered their things, locked up the bookstore, and decided to head to a local bar for a small celebration. Alyssa said she would come to have juice or tonic water and then head home to sleep. “I’m not like you youngins,” she joked. “I need my sleep.”

In the bar, David led them to a corner booth, where they sat, ordered sodas, and spoke excitedly about the newest era of The Dog-Eared Corner. They toasted the future, told one another they would make peace with the past, and then ordered a round of French fries just because.

David disappeared to go to the bathroom, leaving Alyssa and Maggie alone for the first time since that morning. Alyssa placed her head on Maggie’s shoulder, her heart ballooning with joy. Maggie grabbed a French fry and nibbled at the edges as her eyes dimmed.

“What’s up?” Alyssa bucked off Maggie’s shoulder, suddenly frightened.



Now that David was gone for a moment, it looked as though Maggie was finally allowed to show her true feelings. Alyssa felt nervous and strange.

“If you don’t want to hang out with this guy, we can leave,” Alyssa said softly. “We can run out the door right now and head home.”

Maggie closed her eyes, and the corners of her lips wiggled toward her ears. She looked as though she suppressed nervous laughter.

“Oh my gosh. You like him,” Alyssa joked, knowing it was impossible for Maggie to have fallen for David so quickly.

Maggie raised both of her shoulders.

“Oh my gosh! You do!” Alyssa laughed as joy flowed through her. “Well, you could do a lot worse, Maggie. He’s cute and successful. A little neurotic, maybe, but that only adds to the cuteness.”

Maggie finally opened her eyes and stared at the hallway that led to the bathroom, as though she was frightened he would return too soon.

“Okay. Yeah. We’ve been out a few times,” Maggie whispered.

Alyssa’s mouth fell open in shock. “When?”

Maggie shrugged. “I don’t know! You were with Scarlet in Nantucket one of the nights.”

“You snuck out on a date while I wasn’t around?”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” Maggie shot out.

Alyssa laughed. “What’s the big deal? I’m happy for you!”

Maggie winced and then placed her hands over her face. Her reactions were strange and all over the place. *What was going on?*

“Maggie, don’t beat yourself up for falling for someone,” Alyssa urged. “You told me you and Rex were over for a long

time before you officially left him. You deserve a little love in your life.”

Maggie again laughed into her hands. “Thank you for saying that. Really.” She paused for a long time, and Alyssa stirred with curiosity and agony. *Why was she acting so strangely?*

And then, finally, Maggie revealed what was actually going on.

“I was stupid, Alyssa. Really stupid.”

“You’ve never been stupid.”

“Well, I was. I um. I wasn’t careful.” Maggie dropped her hands and stared at the bathroom hallway. “I mean, every doctor in Manhattan told me I couldn’t get pregnant.”

Alyssa’s jaw was now nearly on the floor. “Maggie. No.”

But Maggie couldn’t keep it in a second longer. Her smile widened from ear to ear. “I haven’t told him yet.”

Alyssa squeezed Maggie’s elbow so hard that Maggie yelped. “Ouch!”

“I’m sorry,” Alyssa cried. “I just cannot believe this!”

Suddenly, David emerged from the bathroom hallway. He rolled his sweater sleeves to his elbows and grinned at Maggie as he approached, his face echoing with love.

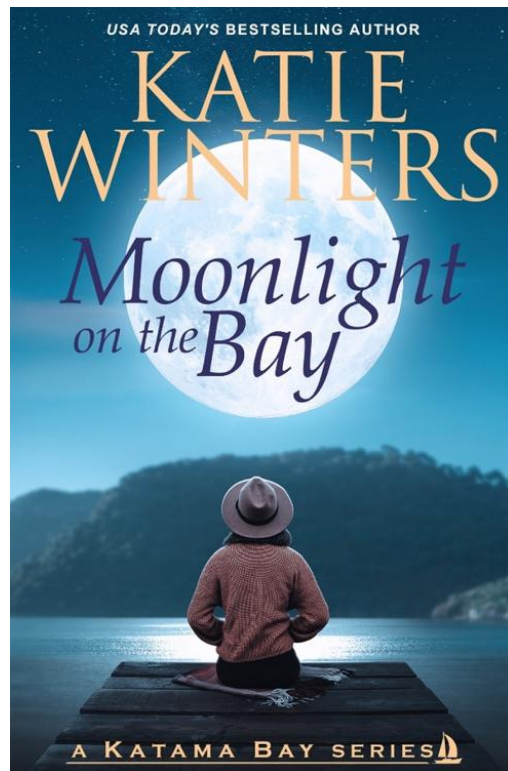
“What can’t you believe?” David asked as he slid into the booth across from them.

Maggie looked like a deer caught in headlights, and Alyssa knew she had to take over— to say what needed to be said.

“We just can’t believe how well everything worked out,” Alyssa explained. “We think we might be the luckiest women in the world.”

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