

KATIE WINTERS



A
Vineyard
Spring

— THE VINEYARD SUNSET SERIES —

A Vineyard Spring

The Vineyard Sunset Series

Katie Winters

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Chapter One

The year had not gone how Isabella Montgomery had planned. Had her mother, Laura, been there, she'd have said, "The best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry. But we keep making plans, don't we? We don't give up just because everything else has fallen apart."

Isabella was twenty-three years old. This was a fact. Another fact was she'd planned to move from Martha's Vineyard to New York City last September to begin the next phase of her life. Graciously, and although Isabella's decision to leave had broken her mother's heart, Laura had agreed to help her move. Hours after their arrival to the Big Apple, the place where all of Isabella's dreams were meant to come true, her mother suffered an aneurysm and passed away. Isabella had been right beside her. The last few words she'd said to her were, "Do you want to share some guacamole?"

It was February on Martha's Vineyard, and Isabella was still reeling from Laura's death. Grief was a difficult thing to carry, as it felt different every day. Some days it felt so enormously heavy that getting out of bed was out of the question. On other days, Isabella carried her mother's death around with her, as though it was a sword that had gone all the way through her belly but left her capable of movement.

Because of Laura's death, Isabella had decided to stay at her childhood home with her father, Steven Montgomery. He had lost a lot of weight since Laura's death, and he walked silently around the house like a ghost. It was difficult for Isabella to find topics to discuss with him. She'd always been

closer to her mother. Both of them knew that. But she also wanted to find the strength to make their relationship stronger, especially during this time when they needed company so badly. Last year, they'd both gone through grief therapy, and it had helped a little bit, but with each other, they remained lost.

That week, Isabella's father had decided to re-open the auto shop he'd owned and operated since he'd married Isabella's mother. Although Isabella had been afraid that the work would be too much for him, she'd noted a lightness in his eyes after each hard day, proof that it was probably good to put your brain somewhere during very dark times.

On the fourth day after the re-open, Steve suggested that Isabella come work at the auto shop. "I could use some help in the office," he explained sheepishly. "I would pay you, of course. Whatever the going rate is."

Isabella wasn't sure what the going rate was as a secretary at an auto shop. They decided together on eighteen an hour, twenty hours a week. Although normally, in the summertime, Isabella made much more than that as a waitress, this amount was nothing to scoff at.

Isabella suspected her father wanted her at work because he was lonely there. Isabella was lonely, too. Most of her friends had left the island, and in the frigid light of winter, there was really not much to do on the island.

Isabella set herself up at the front desk of the auto shop. The air stank of grease, fuel, and car upholstery, but for the daughter of a full-time mechanic, it smelled like home. Steve helped her get to know the computer system, where they kept phone numbers, addresses, and payment information for numerous local clients. Vineyard residents knew Steve to be a fair and good repairman. They trusted him with their family vans, their SUVs, their trucks, and their camper vans. Steve decreased prices for family, and if there was anything Steve and Isabella had, it was family. The Montgomery and Sheridan clans extended across Oak Bluffs. With each new birth, their Christmases at the Sunrise Cove Inn grew bigger and brighter.

Of course, the most recent Christmas at the Sunrise Cove had been bleak for Isabella, Steve, and her brother, Jonathon. They'd left early and returned to Steve and Isabella's place, where they'd sat quietly and watched television. Their sorrow had been very heavy that day.

The Sunday after Isabella's first full week at the auto shop, Grandma Kerry and Grandpa Trevor invited the Montgomerys to their home for dinner. The night before, dark clouds had blanketed the island in snow, and the drive from their place to the grandparents' was slow and steady to ensure they didn't skid on any black ice that hid beneath the snow. Steve parked the truck in the driveway, and Isabella carried the pie she'd baked for dinner with gloved hands. Before they reached the front door, Grandma Kerry opened it and squealed with excitement. It had only been a few days since they'd seen each other, but Grandma Kerry was sentimental. She always made you feel like you belonged.

Everyone in the Montgomery clan had already arrived. They sat across the living room, stood in the kitchen, or drank wine and beer at the dining room table. Isabella dropped off the pie in the kitchen and said hello to Aunt Kelli, Aunt Charlotte, and Aunt Claire, who attempted to help their mother with dinner, despite Grandma Kerry's refusal. Aunt Charlotte approached and hugged Isabella a little harder than the others. A few years back, she'd lost her husband, Jason, and had been a sort of "guide to grief" for Isabella and Steve. There was no telling how bad it could have been without her.

"You're looking as beautiful as ever." Aunt Claire beamed from the counter.

"Your dad told us you're working at the auto shop?" Aunt Kelli asked.

Isabella blushed, overwhelmed with the attention. Normally, she and her father were very quiet, and the sudden onslaught of conversation was difficult to adjust to.

"It's fun to work at the shop," Isabella explained. "Yesterday, Dad tried to show me how to change someone's oil."

“Goodness!” Aunt Charlotte looked impressed. “I don’t know how to do anything with my hands.”

“Me neither, except make bouquets,” Aunt Claire said. She owned a popular flower shop on the island.

“I have to admit, Xander has me doing a bit more with my hands these days,” Aunt Kelli said with a laugh. “The Aquinnah Cliffside Overlook Hotel has my blood, sweat, and tears in it, that’s for sure.”

“Are you still planning to open by summer?” Isabella asked.

“We’re hoping for a mid-May opening.” Aunt Kelli winced. “But gosh, I don’t want to jinx myself. If we open by Amanda’s wedding, I’ll be thrilled.”

The Aquinnah Cliffside Overlook Hotel had been under construction for almost two years. Kelli, who had worked in real estate, had sold the property to Xander; as they’d fallen in love with the old place, they’d also fallen in love with each other and, eventually, gotten engaged.

At the time of Xander’s purchase, they hadn’t known the dramatic family history within the old hotel. Back in the forties, Grandma Kerry’s mother and father had met there—but there was a catch. Grandma Kerry’s mother, Marilyn, had been married to a man named James, who had wanted to purchase the hotel from its owner, a man named Robert Sheridan. After their affair had begun, Robert sold the hotel to James. Moments after the sale had gone through, a hurricane ripped through the old hotel and left it in shambles. It had been completely unusable, until now.

“Girls? Why isn’t the table set yet?” Grandma Kerry bustled in and out of the kitchen, and Aunt Kelli and Aunt Claire moved like lightning to the old china cabinet, where they withdrew beautiful Sunday plates upon which someone had painted a delicate floral pattern. Isabella remembered her childhood fascination with the plates. Once, she’d plotted to steal one to take home and use with her dolls, but she’d decided against it, as she knew the china had belonged to Grandma Kerry’s mother, whom she missed dearly.

At the time, she hadn't been able to comprehend what it meant to lose your mother.

Aunt Charlotte remained in the kitchen with Isabella for a moment. They were alone. Out in the living room and dining room, the rest of the family chatted easily and chuckled at one another's stories from the week.

"How is everything?" Aunt Charlotte said softly.

Isabella's face crumpled for only a moment. "We're okay. I think it's been good for my dad to go back to work."

"Is he still going to therapy?"

"No. We both stopped," Charlotte said.

Aunt Charlotte furrowed her brow. "There's no shame in going for as long as you need."

"I know." Isabella wasn't sure why she'd stopped. Maybe it was because she just got so tired of telling someone how sad she was. She felt bored with herself.

Aunt Charlotte hesitated. "Have you thought about going through a few of your mother's things?"

Isabella shook her head. "Dad sleeps in a different bedroom now. All of her books and clothes are still in the same place."

"It took me a long time to go through Jason's things," Aunt Charlotte said. "But when I did, I realized it gave me mental space to think about myself and my life and what I wanted to come next." She hesitated, then added, "Everyone has their own process."

"Yeah. Like I said, I don't think Dad is ready." Isabella wasn't sure if she was ready, either. "How is Everett doing on Orcas Island?"

"Oh. He's good. He calls me every other day to talk about all his new writing projects and how excited he is." Charlotte's eyes were suddenly heavy with sorrow. Her fiancé had moved to Orcas Island to pursue his career in journalism, and Charlotte chose not to join him until her daughter, Rachel, had left for college. It had splintered her heart in two.

Isabella squeezed Aunt Charlotte's hand and searched her mind for something appropriate to say. Before she could, Grandma Kerry hollered that everyone had to come to the table. It was time to eat.

* * *

Later that night, Isabella's father sat in front of the television with a glass of soda and left Isabella to her own devices. Slowly, she ascended the staircase, then stood in front of the bedroom her parents had shared throughout their marriage. She was reminded of being a very small child, running to her parents' room in the dark after a nightmare. All she'd wanted in the world was to crawl into bed with them. Only within their arms could she find peace.

As far as Isabella knew, nobody had been in their bedroom in months. Steve had moved all of his belongings to the guest bedroom, and half of the closet was now empty. The bed was made, and little knick-knacks lined the dresser and the side tables, like gifts from Isabella and Jonathon and photographs of Jonathon's children, the grandchildren. Again, it made Isabella's heart hurt to think of Jonathon's children and how they would never really know their grandmother.

Laura deserved to be a grandmother. It was so unfair that it made Isabella want to scream and kick the wall at the pain she felt.

Isabella wasn't sure where to begin. She didn't want to do too much at once, and she certainly didn't want to alert her father with any loud noises. Slowly, she approached the closet and touched the fabric of her mother's dresses, blouses, and skirts. Not all of them brought back memories, but quite a few of them did. Images of her mother at picnics, on her father's sailboat, and out on the back porch flooded her mind. Exhausted, she collapsed to the carpet and crossed her legs beneath her. Down here, she faced her mother's iconic collection of shoes, heels, boots, and tennis shoes. Her mother's feet had been bigger than Isabella's, so that now, as

Isabella slipped on a pair of heels, a full two inches remained behind her heel. She hated it.

Isabella was twenty-three years old, which meant that she wasn't so far away from her teenage years. She regretted to remember that she and her mother had both adored and hated each other during that era, on constant repeat. They'd fought about Isabella's too-tight shorts, her choice in boyfriends, and when Isabella had come home after curfew again and again.

Isabella hadn't been an easy teenager. She'd wanted to live as a free spirit. She hadn't had any foresight.

When she'd talked about this with her therapist, her therapist had asked her to forgive herself. "You were young. You couldn't have known you would lose your mother like this." Isabella wasn't sure forgiveness was possible. To her, she'd wasted many years of her mother's life with her volatile moods. *Why? Because of puberty? Because of boys?* Ugh. She hated it.

Unsure of what else to do, Isabella removed one of her mother's floral dresses from a hanger and pulled it on. The cotton was so soft and lovely over her skin, and it flowed all the way to her ankles. In the mirror, she saw a woman who was very much the spitting image of Laura Montgomery. Her mother had had children young, and she'd kept herself youthful with a healthy diet and a good skincare regime.

It wasn't that a skincare regime mattered in death. Still, all of that work had been proof of Laura Montgomery's love of life. She'd wanted to stick around longer. She'd wanted to be there for her children and grandchildren. She'd wanted to be strong.

In the back of the closet, Isabella found a stack of books. Some of them were leftovers from Laura's years at accounting school. Others were fashion-related, with images of long-ago trends. She had an old copy of *The Great Gatsby*, one of *Moby Dick*, and another of *Pride and Prejudice*. And then, at the very bottom of the stack sat three small books in which Laura had apparently written her thoughts.

Isabella's heart pounded. She stared down at the journals on her lap, flabbergasted. Never had she seen her mother write in a journal. Never had she imagined there was an entire secret side to her mother, a life Isabella hadn't known anything about.

Isabella stared at the door that led to the hallway. Nervous, she tip-toed toward it and listened for any sign of Steve. It seemed that he remained at the television, waiting to feel tired. Insomnia was a symptom of grief.

Isabella removed her mother's dress, slid it back onto the hanger, then carried the diaries to her room. Perhaps she wasn't ready to get rid of her mother's things. But perhaps she was ready to read the stories she'd left behind, as it meant bringing her back to the world for a little while.

Chapter Two

September 15, 1995

Should I properly introduce myself? After all, this is the first journal I've written as someone's wife, and I find it funny and surreal to write my new name over and over again.

Laura Montgomery. Laura Montgomery. I am Laura Montgomery.

That's right. I managed to steal his heart. Steven Montgomery, my high school sweetheart and the man of my dreams, asked me to marry him, and I said, "What took you so long?" We were married in a small ceremony just this past summer, and we immediately moved into a beautiful four-bedroom home with a wrap-around porch and a view of the water. Every morning, I wake up in Steve's arms in this big house surrounding us, and I think, did all of that really happen? Is this really my life?

Steve isn't as sentimental as I am, but he can be a bit of a sap. When I learned I was pregnant, he broke down and hugged me and didn't let me move a muscle the rest of the night. He cooked an enormous meal, washed the dishes, and rubbed my feet. I told him the 'feet rubbing' thing probably would be more necessary nine months down the line, and he said, "It can't hurt to start now."

The pregnancy is still very new, and we haven't told anyone yet, not even Steve's enormous family. His mother, Kerry, probably won't leave us alone after that, bless her. This

baby will be her first grand baby. He or she will be spoiled rotten.

September 18, 1995

Morning sickness is not a joke. I spent most of the morning in a pile in the bathroom. Steve came home at lunchtime and made me soup and cuddled with me on the couch until he had to go back to the auto shop.

A note on the auto shop. Steve had always worked for his father or for others in the auto repair business. Unfortunately, Trevor Montgomery can be a difficult man, and Steve wanted to step out on his own, anyway. When he opened the auto shop, I prepared my heart and soul for chaos and for sleepless nights of worry about how we were going to make ends meet. I couldn't have been more incorrect! Steve is a beloved member of the Oak Bluffs community, and people have come from across the island to have their cars serviced. His schedule is packed, and the income is flowing. He promised me a bigger diamond for my Christmas present, but I told him to save that money for baby items instead. Who needs a bigger diamond, anyway? The one I wear is the one he could afford at the time he wanted to propose.

Isn't that what love is all about? About doing what you can in the moment to show the enormity of your feelings? I pity people who think love is a direct reflection of how much money is spent. Although I know Steve and I are lucky, I'm naive enough to think that we could live in a shack by a river and still make each other happy.

Then again, with the baby coming, things will get more complicated. That's the nature of children. Maybe it's the nature of getting older, too.

September 20, 1995

I had a job interview this evening. After all, I'm a trained accountant, and I can't just wallow around the house until the

baby comes. It's the nineties! I want to be a provider just as much as Steve is.

The interview was held at a swanky restaurant in downtown Oak Bluffs, one I've only ever walked past and never entered. I met Mr. Franklin Butler there. Everyone on the island of Martha's Vineyard knows who Mr. Franklin Butler is. To us islanders, he's about as rich and powerful as you can get. He works in trading, owns a lot of land across the island, and lives at a property called "The Butler Estate," which includes a large mansion and a mini-mansion for guests, located very far from any other homes or hotels. Of course, I've driven past it, as has everyone else I know. My general question was always, who on earth needs all that money?

Through my father-in-law, I learned that Mr. Franklin Butler needed a personal accountant. Trevor's dear friend set up the interview, and there I was, seated across from this prominent and handsome billionaire. He wore a chic suit and cologne I didn't recognize, and he flirted with me lightly in a way that told me he was accustomed to getting anything and anyone he wanted. (Obviously, I did not flirt back, but because I am a woman in a man's world, I smiled and made sure not to offend him. I sometimes wonder if that's the wrong way to be.)

We went over my accounting accomplishments and the services I could offer him. He was intrigued. He explicitly told me that his accounts are very delicate and that he needs someone he can trust. I assured him I was trustworthy. Still, this rang a few alarm bells for me. Are any accounts really so "delicate"?

Is this a sign Mr. Butler is involved in something not-so-legal?

But after that, he offered me an insane amount of money to work for him. More money than I knew was possible—nearly one hundred thousand per year. I leaped at the chance, thinking about vacations I could take Steve and my baby on. Thinking of the perfect crib I would buy. Thinking of the shoes, oh, the shoes!

Anyway, I've just told Steve I'm going to go for it. He's proud of me. He keeps calling me his "sugar momma" and kissing me. I might burst with how much I love him. I'll keep tabs on Mr. Butler, of course. But I won't do anything illegal myself. I don't think I have it in me.

September 27, 1995

Here I am at the Butler Estate, if you can believe it. I'm seated in a gorgeous office with a view of the Vineyard Sound just beyond, and four of Mr. Butler's ledgers are stretched out in front of me upon a mahogany desk. I should mention that every item in this room probably costs more than everything I own put together. On the wall hangs a painting of Mr. Butler's mother, with whom he was incredibly close. The painting is very regal and finely done, but I have to admit that there isn't a lot of "motherly love" coming from her facial expression.

Today is my third day, and I'm starting to get the hang of things. Mr. Butler is very strict about privacy. He asks that only certain things are brought onto the grounds. I'm allowed to bring a lunch, a pen, and pad of paper. I've been told that if I bring a camera onto the property, I'll lose my job!

On the first day, I met Mrs. Butler. She is a strange woman, I must say. She is very soft-spoken with small, pale hands. At the time I met her, she wore only a black dress, as though she was in mourning. When I made a joke about something—something simple like the weather—she didn't smile or laugh at all. It was as though I wasn't even really there.

Because Mr. Butler is so jovial, arrogant, and powerful, I have to wonder about Mrs. Butler. Was she once like that? Did he have something to do with how "small" and "weak" she seems now? I wonder if she's ever allowed to be herself, whoever that is.

Again, I find myself so grateful to be married to the kind of man who doesn't mind that I'm fully myself—flaws and all.

September 28, 1995

I'm back home after my fourth day at the Butler Estate, and I'm not sure what to say. I saw something that I shouldn't have.

Midway through my shift, I took a break to eat a sandwich and walk the hallways. My pregnancy sickness has been relegated to the nights and mornings, thank goodness, so I haven't had to spend much time in any of Mr. Butler's ritzy bathrooms. This also means I haven't told them about the baby. This scares me, as I'm sure Mr. Butler won't be pleased that I have to take time off. But I'll cross that bridge when I get to it.

As I walked down the hallway with my sandwich, I heard Mr. Butler's voice. It was deep and aggressive. I froze with fear, trying to comprehend what he said. After a little while, I understood that he was berating someone. Under his voice was the sound of someone crying.

I hurried to the corner and peered around it to find Mr. Butler screaming at a young woman who seemed to be his maid. What he said to her was terrible, so belittling. I don't even want to write it down.

When I got back to my desk, I shivered for a long time. Everything inside told me to run out of that mansion as fast as possible. Miraculously, I stayed, finished my work, and left at the right time. I even said, "Goodnight" to Mr. Butler.

Just now, I explained to Steve what I saw and heard, and he's flabbergasted. He told me Mr. Butler has revealed who he is, and that I should pay attention to that and quit. But again, I reminded him of the money, along with the fact that I'm good at my job. I don't think I'll make Mr. Butler as angry as the maid did today.

Then again, I am very apprehensive and wary. What kind of man speaks to someone like that? Who told him he was allowed to be so cruel?

Chapter Three

Isabella and Steve were beneath a brown sedan with their noses pointed up toward the grimy interior. Under there, Isabella breathed only dirt and grease and nodded along as her father pointed out the various parts and where each connected to what. Very slowly, the mess of metal and the guts of the vehicle began to make sense to her. After Steve finished, he asked her to repeat what he'd taught her back to him, and she did, only messing up twice before she got it right. When she heaved herself out from under the sedan, she coughed into her hand for a few seconds, and the world tilted around her.

"You're getting the hang of this stuff." Her father was already up. He rubbed his hands with a handkerchief and grinned sheepishly at her, clearly pleased to share his trade.

"It's interesting," Isabella answered truthfully.

"I used to think my son would take over the auto shop," Steve said. "Guess that sounds pretty sexist, huh?"

Isabella waved her hand.

"Not that I'm expecting you to take over," Steve hurried to add. "Your mother and I were always adamant about not demanding anything from you and your brother. Your mother always said, 'Our children have to build their own lives, just like we did.'"

Isabella tried to smile. "Thanks for saying that." Before she burst into tears, she hurried into the office to wash her hands and continue to go through paperwork. In the garage, her father put on a Bruce Springsteen song and continued to

work on the sedan. The owner planned to pick it up that evening.

Isabella hadn't yet told her father about her mother's diaries. She knew he wouldn't be pleased that she'd gone through Laura's stuff, especially as he'd expressly stated he wasn't ready. Beyond that, what Isabella now read about her mother was very intimate and very emotional, from a time period she knew very little about. Her mother's clear love for Steve shattered Isabella. *How was it possible this woman hadn't been allowed to grow old with her husband?* She'd done everything right.

Everywhere Isabella went, she felt as though her mother's voice was in her head. She could hear Laura narrating almost everything and felt she could see the world through her eyes. Isabella wasn't sure if that helped or worsened her grief. Still, it was as though she carried her mother around with her in a more physical way, and it made her feel less alone.

As Isabella worked at the computer that afternoon, a very sleek Porsche pulled into the driveway in front of the auto shop. It was a light-yellow color with a convertible rooftop. A very handsome man in his mid-twenties stepped from the driver's seat and ruffled his black hair. As Isabella's father went outside to greet him, the driver smiled and shook Steve's hand.

Isabella's heart did a somersault, which she cursed. She was in no mood to be attracted to anyone.

But soon after he arrived, Isabella's father sent the young man into the office to put his name into the system. The bell jangled over the door as he entered and smiled at Isabella. *How was he old enough to have earned that Porsche?* The answer was obvious. He probably came from money, and the car had been a gift— his twenty-first birthday or a congratulations for his first job. Men who came from money like that were a dime a dozen around Martha's Vineyard.

“Hi,” Isabella said, her voice flat. “Can I help you?”

The young man stepped forward slowly, in no hurry to get wherever he needed to go. “Hi, there. Steve out front told me

to come in here to fill out some paperwork. I can go ahead and pay for the oil change, too.”

Isabella nodded and pulled out the relevant form, which she handed over to him.

“Do you have a pen?” His smile was delicious.

Isabella passed him a pen and watched as he filled out the form there at the counter rather than going back to the seating area to finish it. He smelled good, as though he’d spritzed himself with cologne. From above, she saw him write his name in block letters: RHETT BARLEY.

“You have a pretty nice car,” Isabella said, surprising herself.

Rhett lifted his head to lock eyes with her. “Thank you. I feel a bit conspicuous, driving it around the island. But she’s a beauty, isn’t she?”

Isabella watched as he filled out the rest of his form. He then passed it back and studied her, as though he wanted to say something else.

“Steve comes highly recommended on the island,” Rhett said.

“He’s the best,” Isabella assured him.

“Have you worked here long?” Rhett asked.

Isabella’s cheeks burned. Oh, how she wanted to tell him what she’d planned to do that year. She was supposed to be in New York City. Her mother was supposed to be alive.

Instead, she said, “Steve is my dad, so. The job is sort-of built into being a Montgomery.”

Rhett laughed kindly. “Does it drive you nuts to work with your dad?”

“No. He’s been showing me how to do loads of stuff,” Isabella explained. “I’m going to be able to take an entire car apart and put it back together again.”

“That’s quite a skill,” Rhett said.

“Yes. I don’t know how the world works, and I definitely don’t understand people, but maybe I can understand cars,” Isabella said.

Rhett’s smile widened. “I thought I was the only one pretending I knew what the heck was going on.”

Isabella leaned over the counter. “I have a hunch that nobody in the world knows what they’re doing. Everyone is just making it up as they go along.”

Rhett laughed with surprise. To Isabella’s shock, she felt the corners of her own mouth lift toward her cheeks. They held one another’s gaze for a little too long until suddenly, Isabella’s father opened the door between the office and the garage. Bruce Springsteen roared from his speaker.

“Hey,” Steve said to Rhett. “Do you want me to try to get this big dent out of the side?”

Rhett frowned and followed Steve out into the garage. Curious, Isabella followed after them and watched as Steve gestured along the right of the vehicle, which caught the light differently due to a small dent. The dent itself wasn’t immediately visible if you looked at the car straight-on or from the right.

“Huh,” Rhett said. “I must not have noticed it when I bought it.”

“It’s not that bad,” Steve said. “I’m pretty sure I can pop it out.”

“That would be incredible,” Rhett said. “I can pay extra. Whatever you want!”

“Naw. It’s your first time here at the shop,” Steve told him kindly. “It’s on us.”

It was February and still wretchedly cold. Rhett hurried back into the office, where Isabella poured them both cups of coffee to drink while he waited.

From the counter, Isabella watched as Rhett sipped his coffee and checked something on his phone. Although she’d first taken him as an arrogant young man who’d been born

with a silver spoon in his mouth, she'd begun to think differently of him. The way he carried himself and joked with her showed very little arrogance. His eyes were curious and honest, and he hadn't even noticed the dent in his car.

"Are you new to the island?" Isabella asked him.

Rhett nodded. "Yeah. I just got here about a month ago. A friend of a friend told me there were tons of jobs here, but they didn't bother to mention those jobs don't start till May or June." He laughed uncomfortably. If he'd come to the island on a hope and a prayer, he clearly wasn't rich. But why did he own that car?

"Oh no. Yeah, the island is pretty dead from October to April," Isabella explained. "But you can be whatever you want to be in the summertime, provided it's in tourism. I once spent a whole summer working on a whale-watching boat."

"I'm intrigued," Rhett said. "But I'm lucky. I nabbed a job a week ago, and it's better than I ever could have imagined."

"Congratulations." Isabella waited for Rhett to explain what the new job was, but he didn't. What did she care? He was a stranger.

"Thank you..." Rhett trailed off, searching for something.

"Isabella," Isabella finished.

"Thank you, Isabella." Again, he flashed that sinful smile at her, one that told her he was nothing but trouble for her heart.

Not long after that, Steve entered the office to report the car was finished. "You've got a real beauty out there," he told Rhett. "You get her used?"

"Yeah," Rhett said. "But I've never been too good for a used car."

Steve chuckled. "As long as the car has good bones, there's no reason you can't drive her for years. But you be careful out there, okay? Convertibles can be dangerous. And cops come after you quicker to fill their ticket quotas."

Rhett thanked Steve and Isabella and jangled his keys as he left. If Isabella wasn't mistaken, Rhett locked eyes with her for an extra few seconds before he disappeared into the glittering frigid weather of that February afternoon. Very soon, his Porsche fled the driveway and snaked off. Probably, Isabella would never see him again, not up close, but maybe she would see that Porsche whisking around town.

A moment later, another customer arrived and took Steve back outside, where they spoke over the top of a sputtering engine. On her phone, Isabella looked up Rhett Barley on all relevant social media channels but found nothing. Was he too cool for social media? Or did he have a fake name online?

Then again, what did she want to find out about him? Did she want to see pictures of a beautiful girlfriend? Did she want to scroll eight years back to see him graduate from high school? What?

Slowly, Isabella allowed her curiosity for the young man in the Porsche to float away. It left her cold and sorrowful and eager to return home for the night, where she planned to dig deeper into her mother's diaries.

Chapter Four

It was the first week of March. Steve Montgomery woke from a post-work nap as dusk fluttered in pinks and purples across the expanse of his living room window. After he rubbed the sleep from his eyes, he checked his phone to discover several messages from Claire, Charlotte, Kelli, and Andy. Apparently, he was already late.

Steve scrambled through the guest bedroom to pull jeans over his legs and button up a plaid shirt. Down the hall, the light from Isabella's bedroom swelled beneath the door. It worried him that Isabella hadn't made any new friends since her mother had died. So many of the friends she'd grown up with had left the island to go to university or follow their careers, leaving Isabella to rot in the very place she'd planned to get away from. Only once had Steve considered telling Isabella that she could leave if she wanted to. But before the words had gotten out, he'd bit his tongue, knowing that saying such things would make him even more lonely.

He and Isabella didn't talk to one another, not really. But she was the only person in the world he saw every single day. *If she left, what would he do? Would he crumple up from loneliness? Would he forget how to talk?*

It was selfish to think this way. Laura would be ashamed of him.

Steve knocked on Isabella's door to tell her he was on his way to meet his siblings for their monthly dinner. She called back that she loved him, and a shiver of sorrow raced down his spine. "I love you, too," he said.

Steve drove out to the Clam Shack, where his siblings were already sitting around a long table in the back of the restaurant. His sisters drank white wine while Andy nursed a beer. Steve stepped around the table and hugged each of them as they gave him a hard time about being fifteen minutes late.

“I know. Going back to work has taken a lot out of me. When I get home, I just collapse,” Steve explained nervously. He was never sure how open with his feelings he should be with his siblings. As the oldest, he was meant to be the strongest sibling, the one they could always count on, not the one on the verge of dying of a broken heart.

“That first month back to work after Jason was hard,” Charlotte admitted.

“But Charlotte, wasn’t the first wedding you did after Jason’s death that outrageous one for the actress and the basketball player? Gosh, that was ages ago, now,” Steve remembered.

“Two and a half years ago,” Charlotte affirmed.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get over the stress of that wedding.” Claire’s eyes were wide at the memory. “Not two and a half years later, and not fifty, either.”

“Are they still married?” Andy asked.

“Incredibly, they are,” Charlotte said.

“That’s an infinite amount of time in celebrity years,” Steve joked, surprising himself. *Was he capable of humor?*

The server approached and took Steve’s order, along with a side of onion rings, roasted cauliflower, and fried pickles.

“Ew. Fried pickles? Are you serious, Andy?” Claire laughed as the server disappeared.

“He’s the father of two little kids,” Kelli pointed out. “He needs a break, and if that means fried pickles, so be it.”

“They’re delicious,” Andy pointed out. “I would order them even if I didn’t have a toddler and a ten-year-old.”

For a little while, Andy spoke of Beth, their toddler, and Beth's ten-year-old son, Will, whom Andy had adopted after their marriage. Steve's heart ballooned at the stories. For many years, Andy had kept his distance from Martha's Vineyard, swearing off their family and any amount of love they offered. He'd done stint after stint at war in the Middle East until he'd sustained an injury that had kept him Stateside. Only their father's car accident a couple of years ago had brought him back.

Beth had been Trevor's physical therapist in the wake of the accident—which Steve could only call divine intervention. Beth's own brother had passed away in the same war that had destroyed Andy's peace of mind. Bit by bit, Beth and Andy had found ways to patch each other up again.

“And how is our darling Isabella doing?” Charlotte lifted a piece of cauliflower onto her fork as Andy dug into the fried pickles.

Steve blushed. “She seems fine. I don't know.” *How could he explain to his siblings how little he and Isabella spoke to one another? It was pathetic.*

“I'm sure she's just trying to find her own way through this,” Kelli pointed out. “There's no blueprint.”

“When spring officially starts, there will be more things to do, more reason to go outside, sail, swim, and hike,” Claire continued. “I'm sure being cooped up in the house all winter doesn't help the situation in the least.”

Steve searched his mind for any conversation topic that had nothing to do with him, Isabella, and Laura.

“And Kelli, what's the status of the Aquinnah Cliffside Overlook Hotel?”

Kelli's eyes widened. “You sound just like our darling cousin, Susan. She's panicked, calling me every few days to check on the hotel.”

“Her daughter's about to get married there,” Charlotte reminded Kelli. “I should know because I'm the one planning the wedding.”

Kelli giggled. “The Aquinnah Cliffside will be open by then. We will make it so in honor of Amanda Harris and that darling fiancé of hers. What’s his name again?”

“Sam,” Claire said.

“That’s right.” Kelli snapped her fingers.

“I’m sure she’s nervous,” Claire breathed. “I don’t know if I’d go through with a full-blown wedding if my first fiancé left me so publicly at the altar like that. Gosh, I’ll never get her face on that day out of my mind! Poor Amanda.”

Steve remembered Amanda’s face on that fateful day, too. Amanda wasn’t much older than Isabella, and Amanda’s fiancé’s abandonment of her had solidified his belief that nobody in the world was good enough for his daughter, not if they all had the potential to enact such harm. Back then, Isabella had been much wilder than she was today, changing boyfriends like most people change socks. But now, at twenty-three, with that sad look in her eyes, Steve was aware that she was more vulnerable. He had to take care of her.

“I don’t think we should pity Amanda,” Charlotte corrected. “She’s a very bright and beautiful young woman who just fell in love with the wrong man. It happens.”

“You’re right,” Kelli agreed. She was the authority on the subject, as she was the only one among the Montgomerys who’d gotten divorced. Her ex, Mike, had always been a suffocating dirtbag.

Soon afterward, the server reappeared with their main courses. Steve had ordered a burger and French fries, which Claire lectured him about. “You need to watch your cholesterol.” Charlotte had ordered salmon, Andy the bluegill, Kelli a clam chowder with fresh bread, and Claire a veggie burger, which looked disgusting and fake to Steve.

“Come on, Claire. Don’t lecture me about the one thing that makes me happy today.” Steve took a large bite of his burger, and the succulent juices and the grease of the cheese filled his mouth. He groaned. “Claire, you don’t know what you’re missing.”

Claire laughed, her eyes alight. “Oh no.” She peered down at her veggie burger, which looked like a brick of soy. “I hate to admit I’m getting sort-of jealous.”

Steve and Andy laughed. Steve raised his burger slightly and said, “You can have one bite, Claire. I’ll allow it.”

But Claire shook her head and took a bite of her own burger, imitating him. “Oh, Steve. You don’t know what you’re missing.”

Everyone at the table laughed. Steve’s heart lifted into his throat. “Touché,” he said.

As they ate, their conversation meandered from their children to their careers to the vacations they planned. Everything was light and happy until Claire came out with a bit of news that hit everyone hard.

“Did you hear about that young woman who disappeared?” Claire’s eyes were enormous over her half-eaten veggie burger.

“What are you talking about?” Steve asked.

“It’s a terrible rumor,” Claire continued. “Apparently, a young woman named Mandy Dolores came to the island to finish writing a novel of historical fiction set here on the island. She drove here by herself, rented a hotel room, and told her parents and boyfriend she would be back in Pittsburgh by the end of February. Unfortunately, after the first few days, her parents and boyfriend stopped hearing from her.”

“My goodness.” Charlotte shook her head.

“Her family must be distraught,” Kelli breathed. In her eyes, Steve could see the panic Kelli had for her own children. It was only natural, as a parent, to project all the horrors of the world back onto your family.

“I can’t even imagine,” Claire agreed.

“Did the hotel check her room?” Steve asked.

“They did. Almost all of her stuff was still there,” Claire continued. “But they haven’t been able to trace where her phone is.”

“Gosh. We have all the technology in the world,” Kelli said. “You would think they’d be able to track down her cell.”

“I hate stories like this anywhere, but they hit especially hard when they happened on Martha’s Vineyard,” Charlotte whispered. “Normally, I feel like I raised Rachel in the safest place in the world.”

“Nowhere is really so safe,” Andy said.

“Yeah. But what’s the answer?” Claire asked. “Should we all go to the middle of the woods and hide from society?”

“No. You’re right. We can’t just hide,” Charlotte agreed.

For a moment, all five of the Montgomery siblings were quiet and contemplative, lost in sorrow for this young woman and her family.

Later on, as they walked into the chilly night, Charlotte sidled up next to Steve and squeezed his elbow. “You look pretty good, big brother,” she said.

Steve arched his brow. “Do I?” He did not feel he did.

“Yeah.” Charlotte hesitated, then hurried to add, “Gosh, I’m sorry. I hated when people commented on my appearance after Jason’s death. It never matched what I felt on the inside.”

Steve shook his head. “It’s okay.”

“No. It’s not.” Charlotte stopped and shoved her hands in her coat pockets, her eyes swollen. “You’ll tell me if you need anything, won’t you? You know I’m here for you?”

Steve nodded, although he wasn’t entirely sure. It was fun to go out to dinner with his siblings and pretend everything was just as it always had been. But he wasn’t prepared to lean heavily on his siblings, not this deep into his journey of grief. Eventually, a man had to figure out how to do things on his own.

“Don’t be too proud, Montgomery,” Charlotte teased, as though she could read his mind.

Steve drove home, then parked in the driveway and sat inside his truck for a good fifteen minutes before he went inside. Isabella's light was on upstairs, and he imagined she wouldn't come downstairs to say hello. He half-imagined Laura coming to the window and waving him in, as though to say, *What's taking so long?*

Instead of going back inside, Steve started his engine and reversed out of the driveway. He knew he couldn't sleep, and he couldn't do another night of terrible television. Too much of it made his brain bleed from his ears.

Out on the dark roads, Steve cruised with his hands on the wheel at five and seven. A radio DJ became his only friend, taking him through the "eighties, nineties, and now." Steve sang the lyrics he remembered and hummed the parts he didn't. During a break, the DJ spoke about Mandy Dolores and everything the police now knew about her disappearance. Steve's heart dropped into his stomach. With urgency, he yanked the truck around and sped back home. Without thinking, he hustled up the stairs and paused outside of Isabella's room, where he heard her talking on the phone to someone. The sound of her voice calmed him immediately. She was safe. She was home.

Chapter Five

Isabella was off from the auto shop that Thursday. From her bedroom window that morning, she watched her father's truck ease from the driveway and rush down the road, leaving her in the big, creaking house alone. A part of her wanted to run after him, tell him her supposed "free time" was more like a prison. But another part of her wanted her to be stronger than her fears.

It was just one day off. It was just one day to do whatever she pleased.

Isabella took her time that morning. In the kitchen, she emptied the dishwasher, made herself a green juice, and fried an egg. Her social media channel advertised hundreds of friends who lived out some version of the dreams she'd once had, so she closed that, went upstairs, and collected her mother's diaries. Because a powerful springtime wind continued to rip against the house, she packed a backpack and headed downtown, where she parked next to a quirky coffee shop named The Blue Spoon and entered to find a cozy nook for reading.

December 15, 1995

Today after work, Steve drove me out to the Christmas tree farm. We've been so busy with our jobs, and it's kept us from putting up Christmas decorations, but a visit from his mother, Kerry, shamed us into getting ourselves into gear. You should have seen her eyes when she saw the calendar hanging in the kitchen. It was still on September! I wanted to tell her that not everyone can be the perfect homemaker and that I'm still

pretty new at this. But there was no getting out of the shame she sent my way.

That's not to say Steve and I didn't have a marvelous time at the Christmas tree farm. (Leave it to my mother-in-law to know how to have a good time.) Together, Steve and I bundled up and wandered through the aisles of trees, listening to children's laughter, and imagining countless years in the future, picking out trees with our own kids. We found the perfect tree in just under thirty minutes, at which time we were frozen stiff. Steve used his chainsaw to cut the base until it fell, then we dragged it back with us to the truck.

Now, there's a monstrous tree in my living room. It's sticky and thick, and I'm fairly sure there's one or two things living inside of it. Steve bought some lights to string around it, and it's become the center piece of the living room. We had to move the television to make space for it.

Even still, Steve and I are like children ourselves, gazing at the tree and sipping hot chocolate. My pregnancy is about two and a half months along now, and I'm still not showing. Even still, he or she feels very present in the way we talk about our lives. The love we have for this baby is so powerful. It makes everything else feel like magic.

December 17, 1995

I'm at the Butler Estate today. Unfortunately, the baby has decided to make himself known, and I've spent the morning more-or-less in a fetal position on Mr. Butler's bathroom floor. I'm fearful of his wrath, but he's been occupied today with clients who seem to come in and out of the estate at-will. I saw a few of their fancy cars and whiffed their perfume and cologne. These people have money the way Mr. Butler has money. I imagine they're all down there together, just making one another richer.

Meanwhile, I'm again balancing Mr. Butler's accounts. It seems like a never-ending mission, given that he makes so much money from so many different avenues. He also spends

money like it's water dripping through his fingers, so much so that it took me a little while to figure a few things out.

I have to be delicate about the way I word this.

Let's say there have been several instances over the previous few months wherein Mr. Butler spent upward of five thousand dollars in a single night. Almost all of these instances have taken place at a hotel, either here in Martha's Vineyard, in Boston, or in New York City. I can only assume the obvious—that Mr. Butler is having some kind of affair and that he'd like me to make this affair “disappear” by expensing everything.

The confusing part for me is that Mr. and Mrs. Butler don't seem to share a lot of love for one another. Why, then, is Mr. Butler so insistent about hiding his affairs? Is there a clause in their marriage contract that says Mrs. Butler gets more money from the divorce if Mr. Butler is caught cheating? Then again, I can't imagine Mrs. Butler would ever want to divorce Mr. Butler and turn her back on this luxurious life. Once you get used to a life like this, you can't return to normal.

But that's not all. I'm not entirely certain yet, but I think I've begun to understand the very intricate illegal empire Mr. Butler has built for himself here. His business is built on lies. I imagine there's a drug ring somewhere at the root of it. And it chills me to the bone to imagine myself crunching numbers and making things easier for him.

It's taken me two months to see through some of the chaos of his financial books. They're a nightmare. I stay up late at night, worrying about what I've gotten myself into.

Steve was right. I should have gotten out of this job as soon as possible. Maybe in the new year, I'll find something else.

At the coffee shop, Isabella closed her mother's diary and lifted her head. The flat white she'd ordered had gotten cold, but she sipped it anyway. The chilly milk soured her tongue. Around her, middle-aged women met for coffee, tea, and sandwiches. They spoke of upcoming shopping trips and local gossip. Like popcorn, Isabella heard the name “Mandy

Dolores” bounce through the room, never far from anyone’s mind. *Where had she gone? How had the island of Martha’s Vineyard swallowed her up?*

Suddenly, the coffee shop door opened, and a familiar face stepped through. Isabella’s heart rattled in her rib cage. Without knowing she’d done it, she stood abruptly and smiled.

Rhett remained near the doorway, surprised and pleased. “Isabella!”

Isabella could have melted with embarrassment. She was just an ordinary girl. “Hi.”

Rhett took small steps toward her. “I didn’t know you came here.”

“There aren’t that many coffee shops in town.”

Rhett laughed gently and weaved his fingers through his dark hair. The woman behind the counter asked him what he wanted to order, and he said, “I’ll have what she’s having,” and gestured toward Isabella. Isabella nearly swooned.

“Mind if I sit for a minute?” Rhett asked.

Isabella shook her head and made space for him, lifting the diary from the small table. Rhett removed his coat and sat across from her, as though they were friends or lovers who did this kind of thing all the time.

“What’s that book?” Rhett asked.

Isabella grimaced. “Oh. It’s um.” *Why would she lie?* “It’s my mother’s diary. She passed away last September.”

Rhett’s smile fell just as the grinder behind the counter roared through the espresso beans. “I’m so sorry to hear that.”

“Thanks.” Isabella wasn’t sure what to say next.

“It must be fascinating to read her diary,” Rhett offered, looking from the diary to her.

Isabella laughed. It was the understatement of the century. “I worry it’s invasive, which I know sounds crazy since she’s

gone. But I don't think my dad would be very pleased with me. He wants to wait before going through her stuff."

"What do you think he's waiting for?"

"Good question. I guess he imagines that one day, we'll wake up, and her death will feel easier. But I really don't think it happens like that."

Rhett nodded. Slowly, he stood to fetch his flat white, then returned to add, "My parents are dead, too."

Isabella's face crumpled. "I'm so sorry. Gosh. I don't know what to say."

"Don't worry. It happened a long time ago. I was eighteen, and I had two little brothers to take care of." His eyes widened at the memory. "I can hardly remember what I was like before they died, you know? Because I had to grow up so quickly. I sometimes wish I had kept a diary from back then, just so I could remember how much easier it was before. Or how optimistic I was."

Isabella sipped her cold flat white. "Where are your brothers now?"

"Oh. Gosh. Well." Rhett winced. "One of them is in prison, unfortunately. And the other lives with his girlfriend in Newark. We don't talk much, which breaks my heart."

It broke Isabella's heart, too. Her instinct was to place her hand over his on the table, but she held it back. "I'm sure they're both so appreciative for what you did when you were eighteen," she said. "It must have been really hard to take care of them."

"It was." Rhett laughed gently, maybe because it was the only thing he could think to do.

Rhett and Isabella spoke for a little while about simple things, about Rhett's new apartment and about Isabella's time at the auto shop. Eventually, Rhett asked if she wanted to walk around in the sun a little bit, as it glittered through the windows with springtime promise.

Outside, Isabella and Rhett walked side-by-side toward the harbor. A crisp March wind laced through her hair.

“I wasn’t supposed to be here this year,” Isabella heard herself say. “I was supposed to be in New York City.”

Rhett’s face echoed his empathy. “You stayed because of what happened to your mom.”

“There was no way I could start a new life when I was crippled with all that grief,” Isabella admitted. “Now, that ‘new life’ seems like the most unlikely thing in the world. Maybe I’m just a Vineyard girl. Maybe that’s all I’ll ever be.”

“Is that such a bad thing?”

Isabella thought about this, considering her mother and her mother’s clear love for the island, which seeped through the pages of the diary. “I love my parents, and my parents love this island,” she explained simply. “Millions of people love New York City. I don’t need to be one in a million.”

“Well said.”

Rhett and Isabella walked toward the boardwalk, where they leaned over the wooden railing and watched the first of the season’s sailboats tilted against the docks. Isabella wondered if her father would even want to sail that summer, as it was normally something he and her mother did together.

“How is that new job of yours going?” Isabella asked, switching the subject to avoid more talk about her own inner darkness.

“It’s going well. And gosh, I’m so appreciative of him.” Rhett paused for a moment, his face marred with nervousness. “Things were really tricky after my parents died. I did some things I’m not totally proud of to make ends meet.”

Isabella cocked her head, imagining an eighteen-year-old Rhett against the cruel world.

“I had to steal food for my brothers and I,” Rhett explained. “Which did not end well, as you can imagine. After my third offense, they threw me in jail for a while. When I got out, one brother was in prison, and the other had taken off.

With a record like that, I'm not exactly a prime candidate for white-collar jobs."

Isabella wanted to throw her arms around him. What a terrible story this was. *Why had she been given all the love and tenderness in the world while men like Rhett had been given nothing? It made no sense to her.*

"It sounds like you did what you had to do to survive," she said.

Rhett raised his eyebrows. "At the time, it seemed like the only way."

They held the silence for a moment. Isabella was conscious this was the first time she'd opened herself up to a stranger, or really anyone her own age— since her mother's death. It made her feel more connected to the ground.

"This is going to sound crazy," Rhett said.

"Nothing can be crazier than what's already happened to us," Isabella corrected.

"Sure. Good point." Rhett swallowed, anxious. "Would you like to go out with me? For dinner or just a drink?"

Isabella hadn't been asked out on a date since last summer when she'd been a different sort of person with a different sort of future. Her heart felt warm from Rhett's gaze.

She could do nothing but nod her head and whisper, "Yes."

Chapter Six

Steve was under a Ford truck when he heard Isabella's voice. With a steady motion, he wheeled himself out from beneath the vehicle to speak to Isabella, who laughed and said, "You have black stuff all over your nose, you know."

"Ha. Ha." Steve rolled his eyes as laughter flowed from his daughter beautifully. It almost reminded him of the past. "What were you saying? I couldn't hear you."

"I said I'm going down to the grocery store," Isabella explained. "We need food at home, and we don't have any more appointments this afternoon. I think it's a good time."

Steve hadn't considered the emptiness of the refrigerator at all that day, despite having cursed it that morning. He'd read somewhere that grief made a mockery of your memory. "Do you need money?"

"I got it," Isabella explained. "Do you have anything to add to the list? I'm getting basics and some essentials. Oh, and more paper towels. We've been out of those for weeks."

Steve rubbed his forehead with the palm of his hand and considered how silly he probably looked to his daughter, still on his back under the back end of a Ford truck with gunk all over his nose. "Can you get some Oreos?"

"Daaaad," Isabella teased. "I think we need to lower our sugar consumption."

"And I think we need to take more opportunity for joy in our lives," Steve quipped with a grin.

Isabella chuckled, removed her phone, and typed the cookie's name into her notes app. In the silence, as she typed, Steve's heart swelled with the realization that they'd just laughed and joked with one another. *When was the last time they'd managed that?*

"Okay. I'll see you at home?" Isabella asked.

"I'll be back around six," Steve assured her. "You'll prepare the Oreos for me? It's a complicated recipe."

"Funny guy." Isabella rolled her eyes and hurried inside to gather her things. In a moment, she fled to her car, waved at her father, then disappeared down the road. Steve remained on his back, his eyes toward the splendorous blue sky above. The weather seemed cruel and manipulative—it demanded a smile or two, no matter how down you felt. Steve decided to welcome it.

Just before Steve could wheel himself back under the truck, a white Prius wheeled into the driveway. Steve stood up to greet it and rubbed the grease of his hands across his pant legs. It wasn't until a slender woman with a brunette bob and almond eyes stepped from the vehicle to smile at him that he remembered the smear of grease on his nose. Shoot, he thought. Then again, he was a mechanic. *Who was he trying to impress?*

"Hi, there." The woman closed the Prius door and walked toward him. Under her coat, she wore black slacks and a black turtleneck. Although Steve wasn't entirely sure what "chic" meant, he had a hunch she was the definition of it.

"Good afternoon," Steve greeted. He wanted to ask her where she was from, as she was clearly not from around here, but he wasn't sure if that was rude.

"I wondered if you could take a peek under the hood of this godforsaken vehicle." The woman pointed her thumb back to her vehicle. "I rented it two days ago, and it's given me nothing but trouble. I'm considering driving it into the Vineyard Sound."

Steve laughed appreciatively. “It’s rare Priuses act up so much.”

“Yeah? Well, this one has been possessed,” the woman said. “Or it’s just out to get me. Or both.” She groaned and rubbed her face with her hands. “The guy at the inn said you were the best.”

“Where are you staying?” Steve walked toward the car, hungry to fix it.

“Sunrise Cove,” she explained. “Here in Oak Bluffs.”

Steve smiled. “My Uncle Wes has owned the Sunrise Cove for years. These days, his daughters and extended family operate it for him.”

“A family affair, huh? I hope they didn’t recommend you just out of family loyalty,” the woman said. “Although your google reviews aren’t bad, either.”

“My daughter said something about updating our social media,” Steve said. “But I never really got into Facebook.”

Steve started the engine of the Prius and listened as it coughed. The woman crossed her arms angrily. “See? It refuses to do as it’s told.”

This woman’s personality was hilarious. It reminded Steve of when Laura used to come home after a bad day, ranting and raving about all the impatient people who’d cut her off in their cars, or been cruel to her at the post office, or hadn’t been able to end the meeting on time. Steve had always called it the Laura Show. He’d had a hunch she’d played it up just for him.

Steve popped the front and began to inspect the engine and coolant. As he did, the woman paced the driveway of the auto shop and waved her arms around, putting on a show of her own. “You can’t imagine what a nightmare it was to get here. Two of my planes were canceled. Two! And then, I waited in line to rent this car for over three hours. I don’t even think that’s legal. I mean, it’s not that I planned to tell the car rental company why I’m coming to Martha’s Vineyard, but I’m not just an average tourist with all the time in the world.”

Steve discovered the source of the problem almost immediately. The battery connection was loose, which meant the battery died quickly and without warning whenever it pleased. He reconnected it and prepared to boost the battery, which would get it back on track in no time.

“You said you’re not an average tourist?” Steve asked as he set up the jumper cables.

The woman frowned. “Did you already figure out what’s wrong?”

“Yeah. It’s a quick fix. No charge.”

The woman’s jaw dropped. “Are you kidding me?”

But already, Steve had the jumper cables in place. After he turned the key, electricity whizzed through them and entered the vehicle, and the Prius purred back to life. Steve let it run for a little while as the woman performed a small, excited jig.

“I was stranded so many times!” the woman cried.

“You won’t be again,” Steve said proudly. He enjoyed quick fixes just as much as his clients.

The woman puffed out her cheeks and walked slowly toward him. Her heels clacked on the ground. Although Steve wasn’t sure what to make of her, she certainly wasn’t an “average” tourist. That was clear.

“I’m sorry for my attitude earlier. My name is Rina, and I’m having a bad day.” She held out her hand.

Steve showed her his dirty palms. “I don’t think you want that.”

Rina laughed and shrugged. “I’m on my way back to the Sunrise Cove, anyway. Come on. I can afford to get my hands a little dirty.”

Steve shook her hand as they locked eyes. A shiver raced up his spine. “My name is Steve,” he told her. “Thank you for choosing my auto shop.”

“And thank you for being so handy,” she returned. As their hands dropped, she pointed to her nose and said, “You have a

little something on your face.”

“That’s all in a day’s work,” Steve explained, deciding not to be ashamed.

Rina’s smile widened. If Steve wasn’t mistaken, she scanned his arm and then his left hand. *Was she looking for a wedding ring?* He normally still wore it when he wasn’t in the auto shop, where it was apt to get stuck on things.

“Where are you from?” Steve asked, bolstered by her smile and the March sunlight.

“I’m from California,” Rina explained.

“Long way from home.”

“Yes. It feels very different over here, I must admit.” Rina paused, as though she considered whether she should go on. “I work as a private detective. A family hired me to come out here to do some digging.”

Steve suddenly felt very grim. “You’re here to figure out what happened to Mandy Dolores.”

Rina nodded. “Her parents are, obviously, very worried about her. It’s been several weeks since they heard anything.”

“I can’t even imagine,” Steve muttered. “How is the search going?”

Rina’s nostrils flared, and she struggled to look him in the eye. “I haven’t been here long. But I have to admit that I’m a bit disappointed in my own findings. Every conceivable trail I’ve followed has led me nowhere. Back in California, I’m known as a very worthwhile hire. I get to the bottom of disappearances. I unite families. I find ex-husbands who are trying to avoid paying child support. You name it, I’ve done it.”

Steve nodded, impressed.

“But Mandy Dolores seems to have vanished from her hotel room,” Rina continued, sounding defeated. “There’s no record of her at all. On top of that, the CCTV footage at the hotel has been deleted during the last week she was ever seen. I’ve questioned everyone who works there. Either nobody

knows anything, or nobody is willing to admit they know anything.”

“But this is Martha’s Vineyard,” Steve tried to explain. “We’re not used to things like this happening.”

Rina’s eyes glittered. “Bad things happen everywhere, Steve. Don’t be naive.”

Steve dropped his gaze, feeling foolish.

“I’m sorry,” Rina hurried to say.

“Don’t worry. It was naive.”

“No. It was honest. I understand that.” Rina sighed. “To be honest with you, I’m worried I’ve lost my touch. The past few years have been difficult for me privately, and this is my first case in a little while. Maybe I don’t have it anymore, you know?”

Steve was mesmerized by her. *What kind of woman became a private detective? What kind of person put herself in such danger? And, if she had a boyfriend, what did he feel about it?*

Then again, would a woman with a boyfriend talk to Steve the way she did now? It seemed she’d gotten closer to him, and she tilted her head adoringly. Steve was reminded of being a teenager, when he hadn’t understood when or if a girl was flirting with him.

“Anyway, it’s looking like I’ll be on this island for the foreseeable future,” Rina added. “I don’t give up on a case quickly.”

“The island is about to come alive,” Steve told her. “The trees will bud, the flowers will bloom, and everyone will want to be outside all the time to enjoy it. I’m sure you’ll be swamped with work responsibilities, but I hope you’ll have time to take a look around. I’ve lived on Martha’s Vineyard all my life and never once considered moving elsewhere.”

Rina considered this. “You’ve never lived anywhere else?”

“Where else is there? California? Too expensive.” He scoffed playfully and smiled. Rina matched him.

“Listen,” Rina began, stuttering slightly. “I don’t know a single person on this island.”

Steve’s heart pattered wildly.

“Would you maybe like to grab a drink this weekend? Maybe you could show me a decent place to eat, as well?” Rina suggested.

Steve paused for a moment, panicked. *Was she asking him out on a date? Or was he confused?*

“Um... I.” Steve almost became tongue-tied. “I just feel like I should say that, um... I just lost my wife. And I’m not ready to um...”

Rina’s face was marred with shock. She waved her hands out between them and stepped back. “Oh, no. No, no. I mean, as friends. Obviously. Just as friends.”

Shame warmed Steve’s cheeks.

“I mean, my heart hasn’t been open to anything like that in years,” Rina continued. “I’m way too busy with work, anyway.”

“Right,” Steve said. He tried to smile to make up for the awkwardness. “Well, sure. Let’s grab some dinner this weekend. There’s a new restaurant I want to try.”

“Perfect,” Rina said. She then removed her wallet from her purse, took out a business card, and pressed it into Steve’s hand. The corners of the card stung his dirty palm. “Give me a call here. I’m free Saturday evening?”

Steve hadn’t had plans on a Saturday evening in months. “That should work,” he said.

“See you then.” Rina sauntered back to her Prius, slipped into the driver’s seat, and started the engine. She drove away and left Steve standing alone in the driveway of his auto shop with his heart in his throat. *Had a beautiful woman from California just ask him out? Hadn’t he had gunk on his nose?*

Inside the auto shop, he peered at himself in the mirror. There, he found a sturdy-looking man in his late forties who had a great deal of black on his nose. As he scrubbed himself

clean, he considered what it would be like to sit across from Rina at a restaurant and listen to her stories from her life as a private detective. It would certainly be better than sitting at home in front of the television.

Slowly, as the black gunk lifted from his face, a part of his soul seemed to open up along with it. It was the first time he'd imagined there would be more to life, more to his story, even after the worst thing had happened to him.

Laura had always quoted the Scottish poet Robert Burns to say, "The best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry." Truer words had never been spoken.

Chapter Seven

Aunt Kelli's daughter, Lexi, had taken full operation of Aunt Kelli's second-hand boutique in downtown Oak Bluffs. The place was a madhouse filled with racks and racks of floral dresses, leather jackets, vintage bathing suits, Levi's jeans, cowboy boots, and so much more. Like all second-hand places, it reeked of old fabric, body odor, and leather, but like all second-hand places, it was stocked with treasures.

It was one of Isabella's favorite places in the world.

"Lexi!" As Isabella scoured the aisles, she also hunted for her cousin, who was probably lost under a pile of vests or eighties prom dresses. "Where are you?"

"I'm over here!" Lexi popped up from behind an extensive hat rack and smiled broadly. She hurried around the rack and hugged Isabella a little too roughly, then said, "I have the perfect thing for you to try on."

"You're my hero."

Lexi led Isabella to the back of the second-hand shop, where she kept a carefully curated closet of her favorite things for family members and dear friends. For Isabella's date with Rhett, Lexi had set aside an iconic black dress with a high neckline and no back. "It's from the seventies," Lexi explained as she removed it from its hanger. "And it'll look killer on you. This Rhett guy won't be able to keep his eyes off of you."

Inside the dressing room, Isabella changed into the black dress and then flipped back the curtain to show it off. Lexi shrieked. “It’s better than I imagined.”

And in truth, the dress was something special. It hugged Isabella’s figure sublimely and created drama with the open back. The skirt went to her ankles, which was practical given the chill of typical March evenings. With a bright red lip, Lexi suggested Isabella would “destroy” Rhett. Isabella laughed and said she didn’t want to destroy him; she wanted to date him.

Lexi’s face echoed her surprise. “I haven’t heard you say you were interested in anyone in a long time.”

Isabella shrugged and stepped back into the dressing room. “Maybe it’s finally time to do something with my evenings. I don’t know.” After a pause, she added, “My mom wouldn’t have been happy that Dad and I just hang around the house like losers.”

“She would have understood,” Lexi insisted. “Your mother had more empathy than most people.”

At the counter, Lexi reduced the price of the dress until it cost a whopping two dollars and fifty-seven cents.

“You won’t be able to stay in business if you charge that much,” Isabella protested.

“Come on,” Lexi sighed as Isabella pressed another twenty into her hand.

“I know this dress retailed for sixty,” Isabella said. “And I know your mother put you in charge of this place. It’s your bread and butter now. I won’t be the reason you go under.”

“You’re too good to me,” Lexi said.

“Right back at you.”

Isabella meandered downtown after that, killing time until her date at seven, at which time she and Rhett had decided to meet near the carousel and grab drinks and dinner. In her black dress and full makeup, she felt overdressed for five p.m., as though she was an extra in a James Bond movie. As a way to

hide from the roaming tourists and locals, she ducked into The Blue Spoon again to grab a cup of tea and continue to read her mother's diary. She hoped her mother's voice would give her confidence for the night ahead.

January 11, 1996

Based on the recent accounting I did for Mr. Butler, I can say for certain he had a wonderful time over the holidays—more than most.

Over the span of December 22-26, he spent more than fifty-thousand dollars. Isn't that extraordinary? I can't believe how naive I was to think one hundred thousand a year was a great deal of money to make. Now, he's asked me in very soft and round-about terms to ensure that money is shown to be purchases of goods and services for the Butler Company.

I have been asked to hide fifty thousand dollars.

Honestly, it's kept me awake at night. I don't know how to discuss it with Steve, and I've kept it to myself. He senses something is wrong with me, and he's worried it has to do with the baby. He asks me frequently if I'm stressed about the baby and if I'd like to see a therapist. But I tell him no. Steve and the baby are my two sources of joy right now. They are distractions from this horrible man.

January 14, 1996

I interviewed for a job this evening. It was for an accounting firm in downtown Oak Bluffs, not far from home. Had I gotten the job, I could have even walked there, which would have been so dreamy.

Unfortunately, just days ago, we told Kerry Montgomery news of the pregnancy... and apparently, that news has already found a way into the nooks and crannies of this island.

I don't know why I'm surprised. I shouldn't have told anyone about the pregnancy until after I'd secured a new job. Now, it's out there—and it will taint everything.

Naturally, the men at the accounting firm were kind to me, but they said it wasn't a good time to hire anyone new. That was a lie, obviously. They just don't know how to deal with a woman and her needs around pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, and time off. It's too much for their little minds to handle.

I was quite devastated and didn't go home right away. I couldn't face Steve because I'm angry with his mother, and I didn't even want to be. She's a terribly kind woman, and she already loves this baby so much. It's just that I still want to feel like my brain is worthwhile, even as my body grows a baby. That's difficult for some people to understand.

As I walked downtown, I noticed a familiar vehicle parked outside of one of the swankier hotels on the island. It was Mr. Butler's Lamborghini, of course. I even recognized the license plate, as I'd seen the car on his property a number of times.

My alarm bells rang. I realized this was it. This was another night wherein he planned to spend upward of five thousand dollars. I burned with curiosity. Who was the woman he was with tonight? Idiotically, I decided to wait, just to catch a peek.

I knew it was risky.

I lingered outside the hotel for the better part of an hour, staring at the front door. That door opened and closed for a number of beautiful people, all of whom stepped into fancy cars or smoked very long cigarettes or adjusted fur coats over their shoulders. None of them was Mr. Butler or his young mistress, not yet.

But finally, there he was. He wore a regal-looking overcoat, and he walked alongside a gorgeous blond woman with legs about a mile long each. She laughed at something he said, and he smiled that dangerous smile of his. At that moment, my hatred was equal to my fascination with him. But a second later, they disappeared into his Lamborghini and took off elsewhere.

This left me to take my tired, pregnant body home, where I had to tell Steve I hadn't gotten the new job. I decided not to

tell him why. I also didn't mention Mr. Butler and the young woman, as it felt gossipy and stupid. What do I care what Mr. Butler does with his time? I'm on my way out of there, anyway.

* * *

Isabella met Rhett at the carousel at seven o'clock sharp. As they approached each other, they couldn't help but smile flirtatiously, overwhelmed with apprehension. Isabella's black skirt fluttered around her ankles, and the March breeze caught against Rhett's overcoat. Because they weren't sure of what else to do, they hugged each other for the first time.

"You look stunning," Rhett told her.

"You look pretty good yourself."

Rhett palmed his neck, clearly nervous. "I thought we could grab dinner. I made a reservation at that Italian place just off of Ocean Avenue."

Rhett and Isabella walked toward the vibrant Italian place, where white tablecloths shone beneath vintage-looking chandeliers, and Italian-born waiters greeted guests with "ciao" and "buenos dias." One of them led Isabella and Rhett to a corner table, upon which a candle flickered.

"I thought Italian would be perfect for you," Rhett explained. "Because of your name."

Isabella blushed. "I think my mother had a little bit of Italian in her. Maybe that's why they chose it."

"It's a gorgeous name," Rhett told her, his voice serious.

"I like yours, too. I was obsessed with *Gone with the Wind* as a teenager," Isabella told him. "Rhett Butler has to be the hottest guy in all literature."

Rhett's face broke open with excitement. "My mother loved it, too, obviously. I'm embarrassed to say I've never read it. I've seen parts of the movie, though."

“Clark Gable is the perfect man for the role,” Isabella said. “You sort-of look like him.”

Rhett dropped his head back with laughter. Isabella blushed, embarrassed. *Had she really just compared her date to one of the most classically handsome actors of the twentieth century? Why was she coming on so strong? Was she that desperate?*

The server arrived to take their orders. Isabella decided on a glass of merlot and a plate of anchovy pasta, while Rhett went with a glass of chianti and lasagna. After their wine was poured, they settled into their date, and both warmed up from plenty of laughter and teasing. Unlike last time, they wouldn't speak of the dark events that lurked in their pasts. It was time to start anew.

Although Isabella had never met anyone who'd been in jail before, she was surprised to find Rhett was so well-read, educated, and informed about essential things like world politics and geography. Their conversation traipsed from one end of the universe to the other—they never had to search for something to say.

Once, when Isabella paused for air and a sip of wine, Rhett beamed at her from over his plate of lasagna.

“What?” Isabella asked.

“I'm just having a really good time,” Rhett told her. “Thank you for coming out with me.”

Isabella blinked back tears. It was a rare thing for men to be so open with their feelings. Perhaps Rhett was just a different sort of man.

After Rhett paid, he asked Isabella if she wanted to go for a short walk and maybe grab a nightcap before they parted ways. Outside, stars twinkled in an inky black sky, and early-season tourists roamed the streets, probably on the hunt for nightcaps of their own. For a little while, Rhett held Isabella's hand, which made her feel open-hearted and wild with optimism.

“This place isn’t too bad,” Isabella said, pointing to a little dive bar. But just as she approached the door, she noticed someone familiar in the window.

It was her father.

“Oh my gosh!” Isabella stopped and stared at him. Rhett followed her gaze.

“That’s your dad, right? Who is he with?”

Isabella hurried around a bush as her heart pounded dangerously in her ears. From there, she could fully analyze the woman across the table from her father. She had a brunette bob haircut, and she wore red lipstick and thick eyeliner. She seemed to be in her early forties, maybe, and her skin glowed beautifully in the candlelight of the bar. Just then, the woman’s face opened up with laughter at something Isabella’s father said, and Isabella burned with rage.

Who did this woman think she was? Why was her father on a date?

“Hey. Are you okay?” Rhett had noticed a shift in Isabella’s mood.

Isabella forced herself to turn around. Her eyes to the ground, she breathed, “I’ve never seen him with another woman like that. I hate it.”

Rhett strung his arm around her waist and pulled her into a hug. “I can’t imagine what that feels like. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Isabella lied. “It’s just that I’m not anywhere near letting her go, or getting over what happened, or forgetting her. I figured my dad was in the same place.”

After that, the silence stretched between them. Rhett seemed conscious there was nothing to say that would make the situation easier. Again, Isabella strung her fingers through his, and slowly, they walked away from the dive bar toward home. To Isabella’s surprise, Rhett walked her all the way to the porch yet demanded no conversation and no performance. On the porch, he hugged her and told her he was there for her and to have a good night. Upstairs in her bedroom, Isabella’s

heart ached with the tenderness he'd shown her. He seemed to be a very rare breed.

Chapter Eight

Steve was having a better time on this not-date than he'd expected to. True to what he'd asked for, Rina had kept everything friendly and easy, which had allowed him to be himself—a rare thing since Laura's death. He and Rina had met at a burger place, both wearing jeans, and chatted about things like sports, bands they'd grown up listening to, and whether or not anyone could ever replace Harrison Ford as Indiana Jones. Their consensus: no way.

Now, Steve and Rina sat at a dive bar and sipped local craft beers as a basketball game played on the television that hung from the wall. Impossibly, it was March Madness, and Steve had forgotten to fill out a bracket that year. This made him realize just how outside of himself he'd been. He was a foreigner in the world.

This was their second beer. Rina had gone with a pilsner, and Steve had opted for a stout. This had led Rina to talk about a work trip she'd taken to Ireland once when she'd drunk her weight's worth of Guinness as she'd tried to find someone who'd gone missing.

“Who was this person?” Steve asked.

“He was the son of a very rich businessman,” Rina explained. “He stole loads of his dad's money and disappeared in the blink of an eye. He was pretty sure he would get away with it because he had fake IDs and passports and all that. Unfortunately, he also drank quite a bit of Guinness and had a habit of telling his new friends about what he'd done. The

rumor mill in Dublin was very easy to crack. I handed his address to his father in only a few days.”

“Impressive,” Steve said. “I cannot imagine doing what you do.”

“Right now, I can’t imagine doing something as easily as that,” Rina explained, disgruntled. “I’m still losing my mind about the Mandy Dolores case.”

Steve held the silence, unsure of what to say. It broke his heart that Mandy’s parents still had no idea where she was. The pressure on Rina was extraordinary.

“I’ve been losing sleep,” Rina admitted. She looked disappointed in herself. “Mandy’s parents call me every morning for answers, and I have very little to share with them.”

Rina’s eyes were glazed. On the television, a basketball player shot a three-pointer, and several people at the bar roared with excitement.

“Steve, do you mind if I try something?”

“What is it?” Steve locked eyes with Rina.

“Sometimes, if I talk about the case out loud, I notice new things about it. It’s a way of untangling all the facts I have in my head.”

“By all means,” Steve said. “I should warn you that I’m not sure I’ll be able to help at all. I was never very good at that game, Clue.”

Rina laughed and sipped her beer. *Did she actually think he was funny? Or was she just tipsy?*

“Okay. Here are the facts.” Rina placed her palms together. “Mandy Dolores arrived on the island of Martha’s Vineyard on the afternoon of February 22. At the time, she’d told her parents and her boyfriend she planned to rent a hotel room on the island, where she wanted to finish the second draft of her historical fiction novel. Phone records indicate she’d been in consistent contact with someone who probably had a burner

phone. The number has been disconnected and was never associated with any name or address.”

“Who could this person be?”

“We’re not sure, but it’s clear Mandy and this person was pretty close. They spoke about three times a week for a full two months prior to her visit,” Rina explained. “Whoever this was didn’t want to be found or traced. That means it’s likely that whoever made those phone calls has something to do with her disappearance. And for some reason, that person led her here. To Martha’s Vineyard.”

Steve felt very stoic. Fear overtook him. *Was it possible that Isabella was in conversation with someone she shouldn’t trust?* He didn’t know everything she did or everyone she talked to.

“How could she have met someone from Martha’s Vineyard? I mean, she isn’t from here,” Steve pointed out.

“I don’t know. The internet, I suppose. But her laptop isn’t at the hotel. There is a charger, which indicates she had used her laptop there previously.”

“She’s a writer,” Steve repeated.

“Right.” Rina sighed and drank her beer. “I spoke to the boyfriend about these phone calls. He had no idea who she was talking to. Apparently, every time Mandy spoke with whoever this is, her boyfriend was either with friends or at work.”

“So, Mandy didn’t want anyone to know about this person,” Steve said. “And she came here explicitly to see them. It sounds like an affair.”

“It does, doesn’t it? One that clearly went awry,” Rina muttered. “And then, there’s the issue of the car. Nobody has reported seeing it.”

“What is the make and model?” Steve asked.

“It’s a light-yellow Porsche,” Rina said. “You’d think people would have noticed that.”

Steve's jaw dropped. As his heart hammered in his chest, he felt the world tilt off its axis. On the television, the crowd at a faraway basketball court screamed and cried as the game went into overtime. He wasn't sure what was real.

"Steve? Are you okay?" Rina's eyes widened with fear. "Steve?"

Steve sputtered. "I'm sorry. Did you say a light-yellow Porsche?"

Rina wrapped her hand around Steve's wrist and squeezed hard. Her hand was soft against his gruff skin. He blinked into her eyes.

"Have you seen a light-yellow Porsche?" Rina was rapt with attention.

"I have," Steve said. "I can't believe this. A young man in his twenties brought a car like that into the auto shop. He needed an oil change."

Rina leaned far over the table. Her face had changed—it was more angular.

"Do you think that young man had something to do with Mandy's disappearance?" Steve breathed, conscious that Rina now wanted him to whisper.

"Let's not talk any more about it here," Rina said.

Steve nodded. His blood pressure had spiked. "I have records back at the auto shop," he explained. "We can go there immediately and get the guy's name."

Rina leaned back in her chair, closed her eyes, and did a brief little dance in her chair. When she opened her eyes, she sipped her beer and said, "You're really something, Steve Montgomery. You know that?"

Nobody had said Steve was anything more than a lump of grief in many months. Yet in Rina's eyes, he felt like "really something," all right. It ignited him.

Steve tried to pay for their beers, but Rina put her card directly in the server's hand and said, "It's on me." Steve blushed, unaccustomed to such forward women. "You're

helping me so much more than you know,” Rina explained. “You’ve seen the yellow Porsche, for goodness sake!”

The auto shop wasn’t far from downtown Oak Bluffs. Together, the two of them walked on the sidewalk as a pregnant moon shimmered in the night sky. Around them, men and women roamed in thick coats with their hands latched together as they scoured downtown for a good time. It felt bizarre yet beautiful to Steve to be out in the ruckus. He’d assumed the world had turned its back on him, just as much as he had to it—yet here it was, waiting for him.

Steve hadn’t been at the auto shop at night in quite some time. It reminded him of the first few years after he’d opened the place when he’d said yes to every client, every repair. This had caught him in a horrible cycle, wherein he had very little free time. When Steve had to work hours into the night, Laura stayed with him, reading or working in the main office. After Jonathon had been born, he’d used the office as his after-hours playground.

The circumstances of this late-night tryst couldn’t have been more different. Steve slid the key through the front lock and flicked on the lights, which flashed eerily across the desk and the plastic chairs in the waiting area. Several awards hung on the wall, advertising him as the most-trusted mechanic on Martha’s Vineyard and a beloved small-business owner.

Isabella had organized the paperwork just as well as any of Steve’s previous secretaries. It took him thirty seconds to find the paperwork from that fateful day. With a flourish, he splayed it across the counter, and he and Rina gazed down at the block letters that read: RHETT BARLEY.

“My gosh.” Rina shook her head. “What do you remember about this guy?”

Steve thought back a few weeks. The day had been blisteringly sunny, and Isabella had been in the office. This guy, Rhett, had pulled in with his beautiful car and walked toward Steve with a fire in his eyes. It was clear he felt on top of the world.

“He was tall, maybe six foot two,” Steve said. “With black hair and very dark eyes. He seemed terribly pleased with himself for driving a car like that. Oh, but there was a dent in it.”

Rina raised her eyebrows. Quickly, she removed a pad of paper and began to scribble notes to herself. Her handwriting was ornate and difficult to read.

“I managed to get the dent out,” Steve continued.

“Do you remember if he said he was just passing through?” Rina asked.

“I don’t think we talked much,” Steve admitted. The light in Rina’s eyes dimmed slightly, and Steve cursed himself for not having asked this potential criminal more questions. “But I remember he said he hadn’t noticed the dent when he’d purchased it.”

“Hmm.” Rina seemed pleased. Again, she scribbled in her notepad.

“I thought it was strange that a guy who owned such a nice and expensive vehicle hadn’t noticed the dent,” Steve said. “I figured he was just lying about when the dent had happened. Rich people don’t like to admit fault. At least, in my experience.”

Rina nodded. “That could be it.”

“He said he could pay me extra to get the dent out,” Steve continued as bits and pieces of that day returned to him. “That surprised me, too. Rich people aren’t exactly keen to hand over their money like that.”

“So, you got the sense that maybe he wasn’t rich?”

“I don’t know,” Steve told her. “It was a lot of mixed messages.”

Rina puffed out her cheeks. “Do you mind if I take a photograph of these records?”

“Of course not.”

Rina did so, then shoved her phone back in her purse. “I guess you don’t have CCTV footage here?”

“We do,” Steve explained. “But I only use it when I keep especially nice vehicles here overnight. I wouldn’t have had it on when Rhett Barley was here.”

“Hmm.” Rina made another note on her pad.

Steve stepped behind the counter, dropped down to the mini fridge, and removed a can of Diet Coke. “You want one?”

Rina nodded and cracked it open. “You have a treasure chest down there?”

“Something like that,” Steve said.

Rina’s eyes remained far away as she sipped her soda. This was her private detective persona; she’d switched over from her casual, friendly persona. It had always boggled Steve’s mind that every person in the world had multiple personas, some of which were only shown to their spouses or their best friends or their family members. It was a privilege to see this side of Rina.

“I hope this helps in some way,” Steve said when the silence became too painful for him.

“It’s certainly something,” Rina offered. After a pause, she asked, “You mentioned he seemed proud of the car.”

“Yes. Slightly arrogant, but only in the way men in their twenties always are,” Steve explained.

Rina sipped her soda and placed her pad of paper back in her purse.

“What are you thinking?” Steve asked. *Where were all these clues leading her?* He had to know.

“Oh, I have a lot to consider.” Rina was secretive and unsmiling. “Suffice it to say, I’m worried about Mandy. There’s obviously someone very bad out there. Someone who didn’t have her best interests at heart.”

Rina's eyes glistened, as though she was on the verge of tears. Steve wanted to run around the counter and console her.

“This job is a whole lot easier when I'm searching for bad people,” Rina whispered. “I know they've disappeared for selfish reasons and that nobody is out there missing them. Maybe I should have known not to take on this Mandy Dolores case. Learning what happened to her might rip me in two.”

Chapter Nine

That Sunday was another Montgomery family dinner, which Kerry called “the only way we can keep track of one another” and “a required family function— don’t be late.” A few hours before it was set to begin, Steve heard Isabella in the kitchen, smashing pots and pans. Her Bluetooth speaker blared, echoing through the hallways and out the cracked kitchen windows. Upstairs, Steve wandered out from the guest room and appeared in the doorway of the kitchen, watching his daughter tear a wooden spoon through a bowl of cookie dough. She looked on the verge of tears.

“Isabella?” Steve felt panicked.

Isabella stopped and turned to glare at him. “What?”

Steve was suddenly very sure he’d done something wrong. *But what? Had he and Isabella had an argument he’d forgotten about?* Admittedly, his mind was awash with thoughts of Rina, Mandy Dolores, and Rhett Barley, and he’d hardly given himself the requisite number of hours to grieve Laura, not last night nor that morning. The guilt for that was palpable. *What else had he lost along the way?*

“Is everything okay?” Steve asked, mentally preparing for her to bite back at him.

Isabella shrugged and returned her attention to the cookie dough.

“Did you have a good weekend so far?” Steve asked. There was coffee in the coffee pot, and he poured himself a mug, practically tiptoeing around Isabella’s volatile emotions.

“It was fine,” Isabella said. She rolled cookie dough into balls in her hands and lined them across the baking sheet.

“What did you do?”

“Hung out with Lexi,” Isabella answered. “And a few other friends.”

Steve sipped his coffee. Last night after he’d returned from the auto shop, he’d been so panicked about this Rhett Barley character that he’d knocked on Isabella’s bedroom door to make sure she was there. When he’d opened it, he’d found her cozied up in bed, playing a television show on her computer. “Good night,” she’d said in a slightly sarcastic tone.

“I think it’s important to be careful right now,” Steve said. “They still don’t know what happened to Mandy Dolores.”

Isabella placed the baking sheet in the pre-heated oven, closed the door, and turned to lock eyes with him. There was rage burning behind her irises. “Don’t you trust me?” Isabella asked.

Steve hated this question. Of course, he trusted his daughter. She had a brilliant head on her shoulders; she was courageous enough to stick up for herself. Then again, up against terrifying creeps of the world, was anyone really so strong?

“I just want you to be aware,” Steve said as Isabella turned back toward the counter and continued to roll the dough between her palms. This left Steve in the silence of himself, feeling more alone than he’d been upstairs.

* * *

Steve’s mother opened the front door of the Montgomery house with an exuberant, “Welcome home, you two!”

Isabella carried a big bowl of chocolate chip cookies and hurried up the porch steps to hug her grandmother hello. Steve held back, noting the marked difference between Isabella’s behavior with her grandmother and with him earlier that day.

“I used your recipe,” Isabella explained as Kerry took the bowl and blushed. “I’ve never found a better one.”

“You went looking for something better?” Kerry teased. “I can’t believe you!”

Isabella disappeared into the house to say hello to the other Montgomerys as Kerry welcomed Steve into her arms. For a moment, Steve closed his eyes and allowed himself to be hugged, really hugged, by the one woman in the world who’d always known how to make everything all right again.

“Jonathon, Carrie, and the kids are already here,” Kerry said. “I think they want to see their grandfather.”

“You just love calling me old, don’t you?” Steve joked.

“No way! Calling you old means calling myself much older,” Kerry said.

Inside the living room, Jonathon sat with his wife, Carrie, and their two little kids. When Steve entered, the grandkids rushed to his legs and wrapped their arms around them, squealing with excitement. Steve’s heart opened like a window. For a little while, he forgot about the chaos with Rina, about Isabella’s anger, and even about his own sorrows, and he collapsed on the floor with the children, tickling them and teasing them and arranging little races with their toy cars. Throughout, Jonathon played along as well, howling with laughter at his children’s joy.

“They’re never going to be able to calm down for their nap,” Carrie said, not unkindly. “I should have known their grandfather would rile them up too much.”

When Steve took a small break from playing, he sat near his father, Trevor, and his brother, Andy, and listened as they spoke of the upcoming baseball season and their excitement for the Red Sox. Very soon, Kelli arrived with a beer, and Steve cracked it, watching as the sunlight fluttered through the big porch window.

“It’s not that cold out there today,” Steve informed Andy. “We should play a few innings of baseball.”

Andy's eyes flickered with surprise. It had been ages since Steve had been up for anything active.

"You sure about that?" Andy asked.

"We don't have to get too competitive about it," Steve said, already leaping up to grab the supplies from the garage. As he passed from room to room, he announced the plan and said, "Whoever wants in on the game of a lifetime, grab a baseball mitt and head to the backyard."

To Steve's surprise, many members of the family wanted in on the game. Kelli, her boyfriend, Xander, Charlotte's fiancé, Everett, who was in from Orcas Island, Kelli's son, Josh, Rachel, Gail, Abby, Lexi, Jonathon, Andy, Beth, Will, Trevor, and Uncle Wes, who'd decided to join in on the Montgomery festivities, all gathered together with the baseball mitts and baseball bats they could find in the garage. Uncle Wes was already smack-talking his brother-in-law, Trevor, telling him, "I'm going to take you down, Old Man." To this, Trevor said, "Who are you calling old, Old Man?"

"That's a great attitude to teach our kids," Kelli joked.

"All right. We have to divide into teams," Steve said as he slid a mitt over his palm. He then tried to balance the teams based on athletic talent, with Andy on one team and him on the other. Andy had been a marvelous baseball player back in high school— but only because Steve had taught him everything he knew. Steve was quick to remind Andy of that.

As Steve divided everyone up, he tried not to think about the fact that Isabella had opted not to play. Back in middle and high school, Isabella had been a killer softball player. Like her Uncle Andy and her father before her, she'd pitched no-hitters and hit homeruns plenty of times. Steve and Laura had sat in the stands night after night, mesmerized by her skill.

Now, Isabella seemed too annoyed with her father to participate in his game.

They flipped a coin to figure out who was "home" and who was "away." The coin decided that Andy's team was home, which meant Steve's went up to bat first. Using old

pillows Kerry didn't care too much about, they set up home, first, second, and third base, along with a pitcher's mound.

With Andy on the pitcher's mound and Steve at-bat, Steve felt he was throttled through time. Perhaps it was actually twenty years ago, and perhaps he and Andy were messing around after Andy's real baseball practice.

Andy took a few practice pitches, then said he was ready to go. Just before he reeled back, the front door opened and closed, and a figure appeared at the corner of Steve's eye. Distracted, he missed the first ball, then turned to find Isabella watching him. She scowled, but her eyes were focused. Her love for the game had never really gone away.

Suddenly, instinct took over, and Steve smacked his bat against the ball, and it sailed clear past second base. Jonathon took off after it and soon threw it back to Andy at the pitcher's mound, but not before Steve had gotten to second. Steve's team howled with excitement. On the porch, Isabella nodded in approval, then took the porch steps down.

"Hey! Isabella! We could use another on our team," Uncle Wes called. "It's uneven."

Isabella paused and thought for a moment. Steve's heart rammed in his throat.

"Okay," Isabella agreed. "But only if I can go up to bat next."

Everyone agreed Isabella was up. Steve hovered on second base and watched his daughter wield the bat over home base, her eyes focused. Just before she swung the bat with sheer power, he was reminded that despite any disagreement they had in life, they were always on the same team. They had to be.

As the ball sailed over the backyard, many people on Andy's team howled that the teams were unequal. Isabella cackled and raced toward first base, then second, as Steve burned his way home. When Isabella came around for a homerun, she high-fived her father, and Steve's heart flooded with love for her.

Together, Steve and Isabella gasped for breath.

“You’re really something,” Steve told her.

Isabella shrugged. “I figured you needed a bit of help.”

As Uncle Wes stepped up to bat, Steve and Isabella walked to the edge of the porch, where Steve collected his beer. Isabella clapped her hands and cheered for Wes, who, despite his age and his early on-set dementia, was not an athlete to scoff at.

Just before Andy threw the ball, an older woman stepped out onto the porch and wrapped her hands around her mouth.

“GO GET ‘EM, WESLEY!”

Isabella and Steve turned to see Beatrice, Wes’s girlfriend, her eyes electric as she howled his name. Wes turned and blew a kiss at his new girlfriend, a woman who’d re-shaped the way he looked at the world. At that moment, Steve was filled with hope.

After Uncle Wes was safely on first base, the teams quieted and re-focused. Under his breath, Steve said, “I’m sorry if I freaked you out this morning with all that talk of Mandy Dolores.”

Isabella shook her head. “I get it. It’s a weird time.” After another pause, she added, “I do want you to be happy, Dad.”

Steve furrowed his brow, unsure what she meant. “I want you to be happy, too.”

“Good.” Isabella seemed resolute.

This left Steve more confused than ever.

But later that evening, after they’d eaten their weight in Kerry’s cooking, Steve again found himself with his son, Jonathon. They sat out on the back porch and sipped domestic beers as the March light dimmed to blues and grays around them. It was too chilly to sit outside for long, but the freshness was rejuvenating after such a big meal.

“How have you been, Jonathon?” Steve asked.

Jonathon considered this. “I guess the only word for this time of my life is busy.”

“From what I remember, having two little kids is like being in a non-stop tornado.”

“So, the tornado does stop, eventually?” Jonathon asked.

“I’m not sure it ever stops.” Steve laughed. “It just changes.”

“Sometimes, I think Carrie is much better at the parenting thing than I am,” Jonathon confessed. “It seems to come naturally to her while I’m floundering.”

“You don’t look like you’re floundering,” Steve said. “You play with them. You make them laugh. You make sure they’re warm, well-fed, and cared for. To me, that ticks all the boxes.”

Jonathon remained quiet, as though he wasn’t sure he believed his father.

“I’m sure I had similar thoughts after you were born,” Steve offered. “You were so small! I had no idea how to hold you or how to feed you. The first time your mother left me alone with you, I watched you sleep the entire time because I was afraid something bad would happen if I left your side.”

Jonathon’s eyes widened at the story. Steve hadn’t remembered it in ages, yet here the memory was, tucked between the folds of his mind. *Was it possible that Jonathon had ever been so tiny?*

“I got better at it,” Steve admitted. “I had to because I loved you and your sister so much.”

Jonathon’s voice cracked. “I can barely remember my life before them now. They’ve changed me in every single conceivable way. Hard to believe that only ten years ago, I was still basically a kid myself.”

Steve sipped his beer, too overwhelmed with pride to speak. His son’s own joy for parenting was probably one of Steve’s greatest gifts. It meant that Steve and Laura’s love had survived to a new generation. It meant Laura was never far.

Chapter Ten

Isabella wasn't sure what to do with her feelings about her father's new dating life. On the one hand, when she'd seen him out on the makeshift baseball field at her grandparents' place, there had been a spring to his step and a light to his eyes. He'd looked ten years younger and less plagued by grief. On the other hand, the image of the woman with the brunette bob was burned into her mind, so much so that she often felt overwhelmed with anger.

After dinner at the Montgomery house, Isabella and her cousins Rachel, Gail, Abby, and Lexi were in the kitchen helping with dishes. Aunt Charlotte, Aunt Kelli, and Aunt Claire were at the table, going through old photographs and discussing the golden old times. This left Isabella an opening.

"Rachel?" She spoke very quietly. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure!" Rachel was very pleased. She was about five years younger than Isabella, and Isabella knew she'd always looked up to her, trying to dress like her and talk like her.

"What was it like when your mother started dating again?"

Rachel's smile fell for a moment. She swiped a towel over a shining plate and placed it in the cabinet. "I struggled with it, of course. Like, a part of me expected my mom to just be alone forever to honor my dad."

"I get that," Isabella said.

“But then again, I mean, my mom hardly got out of bed for a year,” Rachel said very softly. “I was young, but I still knew what was going on and how bad it was. It sounds strange, but after she started working again and met Everett shortly thereafter, she seemed alive again. She wanted to do things with me again. I don’t know. She laughed again.”

Isabella’s heart lifted.

“Let me know if you want to talk about it more another time,” Rachel added, her eyes toward her mother at the kitchen table. “I’m not an expert, obviously. But I have lived it.”

* * *

That night, Isabella tugged on her pajama pants and a big t-shirt, then tucked herself into bed. Her mother’s diaries sat on the bedside table, waiting to be read. Isabella opened the 1996 one hungrily, eager to learn more about her mother’s first pregnancy and her evil employer, Mr. Butler. The story had begun to seem almost fictionalized. Perhaps that’s how memories started to feel after you lived long enough.

January 31, 1996

The job search has been bleak, to say the least. Word of mouth isn’t cutting it, and the only other interview requests have been for off-island positions, which just won’t work.

But my life isn’t all bad news, and I really shouldn’t complain. Because I’ve remained at Mr. Butler’s estate as his full-time accountant, my bank account has exploded with money— more money than I’ve ever seen all at once. I’ve again reminded myself that this is just one season of my life. Perhaps this one isn’t so bad.

The fact is, besides the nameless woman I saw outside the hotel that evening, I haven’t a clue who Mr. Butler is having these affairs with. I also don’t understand where he gets all this money or how he spends it. But right now, as my baby grows bigger and healthier in my belly, and my nest egg grows bigger and healthier in my bank account, I’m not sure I care.

Tonight, Steve is surprising me with dinner and a movie. I cannot wait to be back at home and away from the sterility of the Butler Estate. Do people actually dream of living in places like this? There's no joy in it. There's no sense of coziness.

February 3, 1996

Something terrible has happened. I don't even know how to write about it, but I'll try.

A week or so ago, a young woman named Felicity Rodgers was reported missing on the island of Martha's Vineyard. Her parents and husband say she came to the island for a business trip and that she called home every single night until, one day, she just didn't anymore.

The hotel says Felicity Rodgers never checked out of her hotel. Staff members saw her every night at the hotel bar, up until the night she didn't make the call to her parents and husband. They presume this is the day she went missing.

I cannot imagine what her parents and husband must be thinking! According to the newspapers, Felicity is only twenty-six and at the beginning of her life and career. She and her husband dreamed of having children soon. Felicity herself spoke of opening her own marketing practice, as she was apparently a genius and no longer willing to work under anyone else.

Where do people go when they go missing? What happens to them? And what sorts of monsters take these people's lives into their own hands?

Then again, it occurred to me that Felicity might have wanted to go missing herself. Perhaps this husband isn't as kind as he seems in the newspaper interview. Perhaps he was cruel to her. But then— why go to all this trouble of “disappearing” when you could just get a divorce?

My head is a mess with this story. I'm not sure if I'll be able to sleep tonight.

February 7, 1996

It's been over a week since Felicity Rodgers went missing, and I regret to say I've found myself involved in the investigation.

I should have listened to Steve. My gosh, I should have listened to him. Something terrible could have happened to me.

This afternoon, I was at the Butler Estate, as usual. Because I'm now constantly hungry (four months pregnant), I'd taken a walk to the staff kitchen to make myself another sandwich. With my sandwich, an apple, and even a chocolate bar in-hand, I walked quietly back to the library to continue my work (figuring out how to "hide" twenty-five thousand dollars in payments made to numerous hotels over the previous few weeks).

On my way back, I heard Mr. Butler's voice in what he calls the "drawing room," which is a very fancy room with very fancy bottles of alcohol and a fireplace that seems constantly lit. Mr. Butler seemed very pleased about something, and I paused for a moment to listen. He wasn't alone. That was clear. There was a man with him, one with a deeper and creepier voice than Mr. Butler.

"You should have seen her, Bobby," Mr. Butler said. "She looked like a frightened mouse in the corner of the room, begging me to let her go."

My jaw dropped nearly to the floor.

This "Bobby" character laughed at what Mr. Butler had said and asked, "So, did you?"

"What? And spoil the fun?" Mr. Butler cackled. "You know me better than that, Bobby. Besides, Ms. Rodgers told me how bored she was in her normal life. 'Your life is so interesting, Mr. Butler! I wish I could find a way to be like you.' You should have heard her. It was pathetic, yet also sweet, in a way."

I was stricken. Immediately, I hurried as quickly and as quietly as I could back to the library, where I collected my car

keys and my purse. I didn't stop to say goodbye to anyone. Probably, the maid who saw me run from the premises thought I looked insane.

At the gate, the security guard waved at me and asked, "Are you off early today?"

My voice shook as I answered him. "I have a doctor's appointment." I felt I was running for my life.

"Right. Because you're pregnant," the guard said, almost as though he accused me of it.

Again, my jaw dropped. How had this news gotten around the estate? Steve and I had only told our families!

"Yes," I told the guard. "I'm pregnant."

"Mr. Butler won't be pleased if you have to take too much time off," the guard said. The gate remained closed, and I was terrified I wouldn't be allowed to leave.

"I really think I might throw up," I told the guard. At that moment, I was fairly certain I could.

Disgusted, the guard pressed a button and opened the gate. I slammed my foot on the gas pedal and shot out of there, heading straight for Steve's auto shop. I thought I was going to have a heart attack.

At the auto shop, Steve had to cut his time short with a client to comfort me in the office. After a few minutes, I managed to stop crying and tell Steve what I had heard. For a little while, he wasn't sure what to think, and he headed into the garage to speak with another client. This left me in the office alone.

Steve often got the newspaper and read it during his breaks. By chance, the paper had published a new article about what was currently known surrounding Felicity Rodger's disappearance. This time, I fixated on the photograph of Felicity, who was a beautiful blond with very long legs. I couldn't believe it—this was the same woman I'd seen Mr. Butler with weeks ago outside that swanky hotel.

When Steve came inside, I showed him the photograph and told him what I'd seen. "We have to call the cops."

But when Steve raised the phone to his ear, I panicked. If Mr. Butler was truly a dangerous person, we needed to handle things intelligently.

I'm pregnant. Steve and I are building a life together. We can't put ourselves in harm's way.

So, Steve called in an anonymous tip. In a deeper voice than normal, he translated everything I'd told him, including what I'd seen at the swanky hotel and what date that had been. (Of course, I knew the date because I'd written about it here in my diary.) The officer thanked him, and for a little while, I was able to breathe again.

But then, I remembered my job. I couldn't just go back to the Butler Estate. But if I didn't go back, Mr. Butler would know I'd been the one to turn him in.

With the last bit of strength I had left, I called Mr. Butler. My voice wavered as I told him the truth—that I was pregnant and that my pregnancy sickness had gotten considerably worse lately. I didn't think I could do the job to his satisfaction.

After this, Mr. Butler was quiet for a long time, and my heart felt like ice. At that moment, I considered screaming at him to tell me where Felicity Rodgers was, but I knew the police would take care of it. They would find her.

"I had heard through the grapevine that you were expecting a bundle of joy," Mr. Butler said. "I'm sorry to hear you've decided to end our working relationship. I do hope we can remain friends."

Oh, I hated to hear him say that. I realized he was the vilest man I'd ever met.

But I had to pretend to be grateful. I don't even want to remember what I told him—something about how grateful I was for the opportunity and that, of course, we would always be friends. After that, I got off the phone and threw up in the auto shop bathroom.

Now, we pray that Felicity is found.

* * *

Isabella was lost in her mother's diary. When she lifted her head, her eyes were heavy with tears. *Who was Felicity Rodgers? Why had she never heard of her before?*

A quick google search revealed Felicity had never been found. This darkened Isabella's heart even more. When she googled "Felicity Rodgers and Franklin Butler," there were no search results. *Had her parents' anonymous phone call not led to anything?*

The internet told her Mr. Franklin Butler was still a highly regarded trader living between New York City and Martha's Vineyard. She shivered at the photographs online, which showed an arrogant man in his late fifties who'd lived his entire life as New England royalty. *Had he had something to do with Felicity Rodgers' disappearance?*

Several photographs showed Mr. Butler shaking hands with public figures on the island, including several police officers. It wasn't a stretch to imagine Mr. Butler had too much power on Martha's Vineyard for a proper investigation.

The next few entries in her mother's diary confirmed this. No news came from the police station at all. When Steve inquired about his anonymous tip, the cop told him they'd followed up on the tip but found nothing.

Felicity Rodgers remained lost.

That night, Isabella struggled to sleep. As she tossed and turned, her mind was heavy with images of Mandy Dolores and Felicity Rodgers. *What had happened to them? And were the cases in some way connected?*

The next morning, her father was already at the auto shop when she got the call. It was a collect call from the police station. For a moment, Isabella thought she was dreaming.

"Isabella? It's Rhett."

Isabella was shocked and wordless. *Why was Rhett calling her from the police station?*

“I wanted to tell you I’ve been arrested,” Rhett continued, his voice hoarse.

“What are you saying?” Isabella tried to vision Rhett’s kind eyes with the man that was now calling her from the police station. “Rhett? What happened?”

Rhett let out a single sob. “I don’t know! They think I had something to do with Mandy Dolores. But I’ve never met anyone named Mandy Dolores! I have no idea what they’re talking about.”

For a long time, Isabella stood in the kitchen with her eyes closed as the world spun around her. None of it felt real— not her mother’s death, nor the girls’ disappearances, nor her father’s date with the brunette, nor Rhett on the phone. But it was. And somehow, she had to handle it.

“You have to believe me,” Rhett said. “I didn’t do this.”

“Okay,” Isabella breathed. “Okay. I believe you.”

Chapter Eleven

It was Monday afternoon at the auto shop, and Steve found himself with very little to do. Isabella had called to say she couldn't make it in, and Steve had said, "I just had an oil change, a tire rotation, and a glass repair, and now I'm home free for the day, anyway." Isabella had sounded very strange on the phone, and her voice had wavered as she'd said, "That's great, Dad. Um. I'll pick up groceries for us. See you later?" And then, she'd found a way off the phone very quickly.

Perhaps she was still angry with him for whatever reason. Steve couldn't fathom it.

As he swept the garage and prepared to head out, the clouds in the sky cleared to reveal a sterling blue. In his previous life, the one he'd shared with Laura, he might have called her up to ask her if she wanted to bail on work and meet him at the docks. Although the air was still brisk, it was on the warmer side of fifty, and if you bundled up just right, it was a perfect day for a sail.

As though the universe had heard his call, a familiar rental vehicle appeared in the driveway. Rina hopped out, her bob shaking around her ears, and waved at him excitedly. She no longer looked hard and angular the way she'd been as she'd pored over Rhett Barley's documents. She looked eager. More than that, she looked happy to see him.

"Hi there." Rina stepped up the driveway and blinked around the empty auto shop. "You look busy."

"Business is booming," Steve joked.

Rina continued to smile up at him, and Steve's heart fluttered. Quickly, he reminded himself of the facts: They weren't dating. He wasn't interested in her at all. Very soon, she would go back to California, and he'd be nothing but the man who'd remembered the light-yellow Porsche.

"You look happy," Steve commented.

"The sun does wonders," Rina affirmed. "That's why I live in California full-time."

"You don't appreciate the sun the way we do here," Steve told her. "You take it for granted."

Rina laughed and tucked her bob behind her ears. "Do you have more cars to repair, Mr. Repairman?"

"I'm done for the afternoon," Steve explained. "And I was thinking of going out for a sail." Before he could stop himself, he added, "Would you like to join me?"

In minutes, Rina was in the front seat of Steve's truck with her seatbelt on and a pair of expensive-looking sunglasses on the bridge of her nose. Steve wasn't averse to the sunglasses, just because they'd probably cost an arm and a leg. He knew Rina worked hard for her money— she solved puzzles and helped put away bad guys. Besides, Laura had once ranted about how people respected men who made a lot of money and belittled women who did the same. "People are sexist all over the place," Laura had said. "It's the twenty-first century. Women deserve to do what they want and make however much money they please. Period."

God, he missed her.

"You okay?" Rina had noticed Steve had faded away for a moment.

"Yes," Steve lied.

When they reached the harbor, Steve parked in the front row and led Rina to his sailboat, which he'd set up two weekends before in expectation for a day like this. He'd never imagined having a companion like Rina. As they walked down the dock, a man he was friendly with waved from several docks away, and Steve and Rina waved back. The man gave

Rina a curious smile, and Steve's stomach curdled at the thought of the gossip that would fly from this very moment. His mother would probably call tonight to ask him about "some woman everyone is talking about."

But right now, he couldn't care less. He stepped onto his sailboat and offered Rina his hand to stabilize herself as she boarded. Rina refused it and boarded easily, then sat to watch as Steve untied the boat from the dock and unfurled the sails. In only a few minutes, they eased from the dock and soared toward open waters. The breeze across Steve's face was a religion. He might have cried had he not been too embarrassed to do so in front of Rina.

After a little while, when they found a good rhythm out on the Nantucket Sound on the eastern side of the island, Steve got up the nerve to turn to Rina and ask, "So? Did they find the yellow Porsche?"

Rina's smile widened. She pointed toward the blue sky above and said, "They found the car, all right."

"Wow. And the guy? Rhett Barley?"

"Let's just say it doesn't look good for him. Some of Mandy's things are still in the car, for crying out loud."

"What kinds of things?"

"There's a gym membership card, a few CDs, and several receipts from Pittsburgh," Rina said.

"Did Rhett confess? Did he tell you where Mandy is?" Steve asked.

Rina shook her head. "They've been questioning him all day. I imagine that eventually, they'll get some information out of him."

"Wow."

"This isn't the first time Rhett Barley's been in trouble," she explained. "He went to prison for a little while."

"Oh my gosh." Steve tried not to give in to his feelings of panic. *Why hadn't he noticed how strange this Rhett Barley*

fellow was? Had he really allowed Rhett to be in the auto shop office alone with Isabella? How stupid was he?

“Those crimes were nothing in comparison,” Rina said. “He grew up poor, and it sounds like he had to provide for his brothers somehow. But now, it seems like he’s gotten himself involved in something else. Something he can’t come back from.”

Apparently, Rhett had said he’d just purchased the light-yellow Porsche for “a fair price.” Unfortunately for Rhett, there was no sign that he’d paid for the car in any way. No money had been taken from his account, and there was no paperwork to prove the sale.

“That’s fishy,” Steve agreed.

“It’s not looking good for him,” Rina said.

Steve arched an eyebrow toward her, understanding the source of her joy. Up until today, she hadn’t had much information to give to Mandy’s parents. Now, at least, she’d cornered the guy who had her car. It was a step in the right direction.

Still, if Steve had been Mandy’s parents (and thank goodness, he wasn’t), he wasn’t sure what he would think about the light-yellow Porsche and the young man who drove it. Mandy was still missing, and Rhett Barley wasn’t talking.

A part of Steve burned to ask Rina where she thought Mandy actually was or if there was any hope of finding her, but he decided to keep his questions to himself.

When the light began to die over the Nantucket Sound, Steve sailed them back to the harbor. By the time he’d tied them up, Rina’s teeth were chattering.

“Have dinner with me,” she said as they clambered from the boat. “I’d love to pay you back for this wonderful adventure.”

Steve remembered Isabella had said she would get groceries that night. Before he forgot, he called her as they walked back to the truck and said, “Hey, honey. I have a few things to take care of, and I might be home late.” Isabella still

sounded strange over the phone, as though she'd just woken up from a dream. When Steve hung up, he couldn't shake the feeling that he was a teenager, staying out past curfew. Isabella had expected him home.

Rina and Steve walked up to the entrance of the Sunrise Cove Bistro at half-past six and encountered a problem. Every single table was full, and Bistro employees rushed from one end of the restaurant to the other to accommodate them. Large trays were heavy with platters of fish, mashed potatoes, glasses of red wine, roasted Brussels sprouts, succulent meats, and so much more. Steve's mouth watered.

Just when Rina said they could try someplace else, Susan Sheridan Frampton appeared in the midst of the chaos. As usual, she was regal-looking and beautiful, and as she walked through the tables, a path was created in front of her easily. It was like Moses parting the Red Sea.

"Aren't you a sight for sore eyes!" Susan hugged Steve joyously and turned toward Rina. "I hope this isn't embarrassing to say, but I am a big fan of your work, Rina."

Rina laughed. "Aren't you Susan Harris? The east coast's most acclaimed defense attorney?"

"It's Susan Frampton, now," Susan corrected as the women shook hands.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Rina said.

"The pleasure is mine! Gosh, how do you two know each other? What a small world." Susan smiled at Steve, and Steve was again faced with the fact that the island would be swimming with gossip.

"Steve fixed my rental car," Rina explained. "And managed to make me laugh, even when I was having a very bad day."

"Steve is good for both of those things," Susan said. "I had heard you were on the island for the Dolores case."

"Yes." Rina's face dropped. "Steve helped me with that, as well. We even have someone in custody right now."

“I’d heard that,” Susan said quietly. “I hope you know more soon.”

Easily, Susan was able to make space for an additional table, one with a beautiful view of the water just beyond the inn. Rina and Steve sat and ordered wine and beer, respectively, as Rina continued to gauge him, seemingly confused yet happy.

“Susan is your...”

“Cousin,” Steve finished. “She’s just a bit younger than me.”

“She must have been a spitfire growing up,” Rina said.

“Yes. She was.” Steve’s memory flashed with a thousand images of him, his siblings, and his Sheridan cousins through the years. “But she left when she was eighteen and was gone for many years. Her mother died, and everyone was pretty sure her father was responsible. I think it was all too much for her. It came out later her father had taken the blame for the boating accident so that his daughters didn’t find out their mother was having an affair.”

Rina’s eyes widened. “My gosh. How terrible.”

“All the Sheridan sisters are back now,” Steve announced. “Our family feels more complete than ever. And my Uncle Wes, well. He’s come alive these past few years, thanks to all their support.”

After they ordered, Rina sipped her red wine and seemed to look at Steve with more urgency, as though she wanted to crawl into his brain and dig around. Steve wasn’t sure where to look.

“Your entire history is here on this island.” Rina crossed her arms. “Your daughter is here.”

“And my son and grandchildren,” Steve added.

Rina’s eyes softened. “Grandpa Steve.”

“I’m pretty sure they’ll just call me ‘grandpa,’” Steve joked. “And I’m not even fifty yet, so I’m on the younger side.”

“It means you’ll be a part of their lives for a very long time,” Rina said.

Steve wanted to correct her. He wanted to tell her that nothing in life was a guarantee— that Laura should have been around to see them grow up, too.

“I was married once,” Rina said suddenly. She sipped her wine.

Steve wasn’t sure why he was surprised. Perhaps she seemed too driven in her career or too independent to have ever settled down. Then again, perhaps Laura would have called him “sexist” for having those thoughts. After all, everyone fell in love. Everyone wanted the comfort of home within a person.

“Do you mind if I ask what happened?” Steve asked.

“No, I don’t mind. We’ve been divorced for over ten years now, so the story almost feels like it belongs to someone else.” Rina cleared her throat. “I met Vic in my twenties, and I fell head-over-heels for him. Actually, I was out of my mind for a few years. I hardly called my parents. I lost track of my friends. My career was on the rocks, all because I put him above everything.”

Steve’s eyes widened. He hadn’t expected a story like that.

“When I hit thirty, Vic and I started to try for kids,” Rina continued, her voice wavering. “We tried for a year, and then we tried for another year. When it came time to talk to a fertility specialist, Vic took me aside and told me that, actually, he didn’t want to have kids. In fact, he didn’t want to be married at all.”

Steve inhaled sharply. It was truly hard for him to imagine a sane man divorcing the beautiful woman before him.

“I found out later he was cheating on me during that time.” Rina waved her hand casually, as though it no longer mattered. “But by then, I was already so enmeshed in my career. I was looking for people who’d gone missing or people who’d done

very bad things, and I was no longer concerned with the trivial nature of my silly life.”

At this, Steve couldn't help himself. He reached across the table and gently touched her hand. A spark of electricity seemed to go between them.

“Your life isn't silly or trivial,” Steve said as he withdrew his hand. “And what that man did to you is unforgivable.”

Rina held his gaze for a long moment, then dropped it again. “Anyway,” she said. Neither of them could think of anything to say for nearly a minute, at which time the food came and gave them something to do with their hands.

Chapter Twelve

Tuesday at lunchtime, Isabella left the auto shop with a promise to bring her father back a burrito. Steve was hard at work under a Chevy Sunfire and hollered out, “Remember! Extra cheese! And no jalapeños.” Isabella laughed, her voice high pitch as she said, “Roger that.” In a moment, she was out in the gleaming sun of mid-March, and when she turned the corner, she broke into a run.

Yesterday, after Rhett had called her from the station, she’d wandered the house with her heart in her throat. It had been difficult to remember to eat or drink water, and midway through the afternoon, she’d been so exhausted she’d taken a spontaneous nap on the porch. When her father had called her in the evening to tell her he couldn’t come home for dinner, she hadn’t had the energy to feel anything about it. She certainly hadn’t been to the grocery store like she’d promised.

Now, Isabella stalled her run in front of the police station. According to the woman she’d called this morning who worked at the front desk, Rhett Barley was allowed two visitors per day. As far as Isabella knew, Rhett knew only one person on the island— and that was Isabella.

At the front desk, Isabella’s hand shook as she filled out the paperwork that proved who she was and why she was there. She wrote she was a friend of the accused, but that they’d only met a few weeks ago. As she sat in the waiting room, her stomach spasmed with hunger and nerves.

A few minutes later, a cop led her down a back hallway to a long room divided in two with a glass wall. There was a

chair on her side and a chair on the opposite side, along with a phone that allowed contact between the two. The cop told Isabella the rules of visitation, and she nodded along until he left. At all times, she was conscious that video cameras watched her every move.

Incredibly, the man who came through the side door and sat on the other side of the glass was the same man who'd bought her dinner and drinks last weekend. His black hair was wild and untamed, and he wore a baggy navy-blue onesie. He also had a cut on his cheek.

Isabella pressed the phone against her ear and watched as Rhett did the same. She thought, *I never imagined I'd do anything like this in my life*. But what she said was, "Rhett, are you okay?"

Rhett's Adam's apple bobbed slightly, as though he struggled not to reveal his true emotions. "Thank you so much for coming to see me."

Isabella's heart cracked. He sounded so genuine.

"When I was in prison, nobody ever came," he went on. "I never imagined anyone would."

Isabella couldn't look at his eyes through the glass. It was too intense.

"I have a defense attorney now," Rhett continued. "But it's different than last time. This one is a good one, the kind you have to pay for."

Isabella arched her brow. *How was he paying for this?* But the answer came immediately.

"My employer understands I'm in a bind," Rhett said. "He says he trusts me and that he's willing to go out of his way to make sure I get out of here. Granted, he has more money than God, so I'm sure a few defense attorney fees are nothing to him."

Isabella nodded. After a pause, she asked, "Why did you have Mandy's car, Rhett?" Obviously, she'd heard this on the news, on every social media channel, and through the gossip

channels on the island. She hadn't mentioned to anyone she knew the man in question, of course.

"I bought it," Rhett said, his brows furrowed. "Remember that day I brought it to your father at the auto shop? That was only a day or two after I'd purchased it."

Isabella wanted to be very delicate; she didn't want to accuse him or rile him up. "But why is there no record of sale?"

Rhett scoffed. "I'm an idiot, Isabella. That's for sure. But I don't know who owned this car before me. Like I said, I never met Mandy Dolores." After a pause, he added, "I mean, isn't it possible that Mandy sold her car to whoever my employer purchased it from?"

Alarm bells rang in Isabella's head. "So, you bought the car from your employer?"

"I mean, yeah. He gave me a deal since I needed a car for the job, anyway. He has plenty of cars. He's a collector. But he would never let me buy, or even touch, any of his nicer cars. This yellow Porsche was basically trash to him, if you can believe it. But you know what they say. One man's trash is..."

Isabella interrupted him. "Wait. Who is this guy? Your employer?"

Rhett's cheeks turned very red.

"Rhett? What is the name of your employer?" Isabella demanded again.

Very quietly, Rhett said, "I'm under contract not to say."

Isabella's eyes widened. "Excuse me? You can't tell me the name of your boss?"

Rhett seemed to shrink on the other side of the glass. "Listen. Isabella. I told you how hard it was for me to get a job. I told you that nobody wants a guy like me, who grew up in poverty and went to prison. My employer has been good to me. Too good to me."

Isabella lowered her voice. "You don't have to say anything, Rhett. But..." *How could she put this?* "Are you

doing something that could be perceived as illegal for your employer? Is that why you aren't supposed to say his name?"

Rhett was very quiet. He seemed to study the ceiling with great intensity. Something about his face told Isabella she'd guessed correctly— that whoever this employer was, he was bad news. And he'd hired someone like Rhett so that Rhett would take the fall for whatever he did.

Somehow, Mandy Dolores had gotten tied up in the mess of it all.

Finally, Rhett spoke. "My employer is a very intelligent man. Really, Isabella. He has more money and friends than he knows what to do with, so clearly, he's doing something right. What he does might not be on the right side of the law— but it isn't wrong, either. You know? The rules don't apply to him.

"Where I'm from, people commit blue-collar crime. They rob banks, kidnap people, and murder. My employer's crime isn't really criminal, you know? Like, the police don't care what he does. He just makes money for himself and money for his friends."

Rhett had begun to speak more quickly, as though he wanted to assure himself he was right. "But isn't that how the world works? Rich people get richer, regardless of the laws. I figured this was finally my time to be a part of that."

As he spoke, Isabella listened and tried not to judge him too harshly. To her, it sounded as though Rhett had gotten involved with a billionaire narcissist who didn't believe ordinary tax and money laws applied to him. As Rhett had said, it was true that numerous people across the United States and the world "stepped around" tax laws; they lived around the corner from legality.

"Rhett, is your employer's name Mr. Butler?" Isabella asked it out of the blue and watched as Rhett's face twitched.

Still, he remained silent. He was true to his word in not confirming his employer's name.

"I didn't do this, Isabella," Rhett repeated. "I'll give back the car if that's the problem."

“What about your alibi? Can you prove where you were during the dates when Mandy disappeared?” Isabella asked. She was suddenly not so trusting of his defense attorney.

Rhett sputtered. “I don’t know. Maybe? Although, for some of that, I was working for my employer, and I’m sure he wouldn’t be too happy if I explained what I was doing during that time.”

Isabella leaned toward the glass. “Listen. You need an alibi. You need proof you weren’t involved with this. If that means explaining what your employer is up to, so be it. Remember— Mandy disappeared. That’s serious. They say you have something to do with it. That’s even more serious. You need to think of yourself and your future first. Otherwise, you might be looking at many more years of prison.”

Rhett looked stricken and at a loss. Isabella wasn’t sure what else to say.

“Listen, Rhett. I have to go. But I’ll be back to see you, okay? I promise.”

Rhett nodded and wet his lips. “Thank you again, Isabella.”

Isabella closed her eyes as she placed the phone on the cradle. It felt horrendous to leave this sweet soul in jail like this. How she wanted to shake him and scream at him to give up his stupid employer’s name. But more than that, she needed to figure out how to use her mother’s diary to nail this horrible Mr. Butler guy. More and more, it seemed likely he’d been involved with Mandy’s disappearance. *But how could she prove it?*

Chapter Thirteen

Isabella returned to the auto shop with her father's burrito, extra cheese and no jalapeños, and then collapsed at the front desk and placed her face in her hands. For a long time, she sat like that, at a loss for what to do. When her father entered to thank her for the burrito, she ripped her hands from her eyes and looked up at him. For a moment, he seemed like a stranger.

"How's it going in here today?" Steve asked gently, as though she was breakable.

"Fine." Isabella quickly placed her fingers on the keyboard, but she had nothing to type. "How was your night last night? What did you get up to?"

Steve's eyes flickered strangely. *He's hiding something*, Isabella thought, and again, she remembered the woman with the brunette bob. A part of her ached for him to tell her straight-up. Maybe then, she'd get up the nerve to tell him she'd just visited her big, romantic crush— in jail.

Oh, what a mess it all was.

"I hope you like working here still?" Steve asked.

"I don't mind it," Isabella answered. "I mean, I planned to do something else this year, but this is fine for now."

Steve then quoted her mother, "The best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry."

"Ugh. She loved saying that." Isabella tried to laugh, but it sounded false.

“Why don’t you head out early today?” Steve suggested. “I just have a few more clients this afternoon. I can pick up dinner tonight. We can eat together and watch a movie. What do you think?”

Isabella thought she wanted to curl up in bed and sleep for seven days straight. Instead, she said, “That sounds pretty nice.”

After her father returned to his place beneath the Chevy Sunfire, Isabella zipped up her spring jacket and walked through downtown Oaks Bluff and tried to think of what to do. Although she hadn’t planned it, she again found herself in front of Lexi and Kelli’s boutique and hurried into the extravagant smells of leather and old perfume. Lexi was wrapped up in a feather boa and dancing in the middle of the room, as though confident she wouldn’t get any more customers that day.

When Lexi spotted Isabella, she stopped dancing and lifted both of her arms into the air. “Isabella! What are you doing here?”

The greeting made Isabella shake with laughter. Lexi hurried over to her and wrapped the feather boa around her neck. Above them, the speaker system played a Britney Spears song that had come out before either of them had been born.

“As usual, you look like a diva,” Lexi teased as she stepped back. “I hope you have good news for me about your date the other night. Did the dress kill him?”

Isabella wrinkled her nose and clutched the feather boa. So much had happened since she’d been at the boutique only a few days ago.

“Uh oh.” Lexi sensed something was off. “Listen, girl. He’s just a guy, remember? There are thousands of them. It’s important not to get hung up on the duds.”

“It’s not that.” Isabella stuttered obtusely, then said, “We actually had a pretty good time. And the dress was a hit.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

Isabella wanted to laugh. Slowly, she removed the feather boa and collapsed on the sofa in front of the changing rooms. “Are you ready for a pretty crazy story?”

“I thought I was going to die of boredom today,” Lexi said. “Shoot.”

And so, over the next few minutes, Isabella did her best to illustrate the insanity of the past few weeks. She spoke of Rhett and his beautiful light-yellow Porsche, about how kind he’d seemed, and about how he’d told her he’d come from nothing. “He feels indebted to his employer because nobody else was willing to give him a job,” she explained. “His record makes him untrustworthy.”

Lexi’s eyes widened as Isabella continued to the juicier parts, like that Rhett had called her from jail, where he was being held in connection to the Mandy Dolores case. Apparently, all this time, he’d been driving her car.

“He got the car from his employer,” Isabella continued. “If Rhett really isn’t involved in Mandy’s disappearance, the employer has to know something. Right?”

Lexi lifted her shoulders. “This is out of my depths.”

“Mine, too,” Isabella admitted. “Although...” Quickly, she removed her mother’s diary from her backpack and showed Lexi some of the passages about Felicity Rodgers’ disappearance and Mr. Butler’s apparent involvement.

“But this was all the way back in 1996,” Isabella muttered. “Do you think it’s likely the two cases are connected?”

“Gosh. Your mom wrote everything down,” Lexi said, impressed. “But if this was a crime show, do you really think a few diary entries from twenty-seven years ago would be enough for the police to arrest a billionaire?”

“That’s the thing. Even my mom and dad’s anonymous tip wasn’t enough to get the cops to investigate Mr. Butler,” Isabella continued.

“And you’re sure Rhett is working for this guy?”

“He won’t say, but you should have seen his face when I said Mr. Butler’s name.”

Lexi stood from the couch and shivered. Her face was pale and strange. “This is too much for us, Isabella.”

Isabella was wordless. She knew Lexi was right. In a way, she felt guilty for pouring her heart out to Lexi like this when there was no possible fix.

“The cops think Rhett did this,” Lexi continued. “And they probably know a whole lot more than you do.”

Isabella’s stomach tightened into knots. Maybe Lexi was right. Maybe Rhett was a criminal with too much power over her mind. She remembered the story about the Manson Girls, how they’d done anything Charles had asked them to. She wasn’t like that. *Was she?*

“Wait. While I have you here, I found a perfect dress for you.” Lexi shared a nervous smile, a clear sign she wanted to change conversation topics as quickly as possible. “Will you try it on?”

Isabella said she would. She wasn’t sure where else to go or what else to do with her anxious mind. Perhaps she was going crazy.

Lexi hurried into the back and returned with a cherry-red dress with a deep V-cut and a skirt with pockets.

“Lexi, where am I supposed to wear something like that? I don’t get invited to fancy events,” Isabella said. She reached out and brought the fabric between her thumb and forefinger as she allowed herself, very slowly, to fall in love with it.

“Just try it on,” Lexi insisted. “When I saw it, I knew it would look perfect on you. And you know I’m never wrong about something like that.”

Isabella stepped into the fitting room, removed her jeans and her sweater, and slipped the dress over her shoulders. She then stuck her back out of the fitting room so Lexi could zip it to her neck. With a flourish, she spun around to show off the flounce of the skirt as Lexi laughed.

“I knew it. I knew you’d look like a model.”

Isabella rolled her eyes and stepped in front of the floor-to-ceiling mirror to look at herself.

“I don’t know, Lexi. It’s a bit too revealing.” Isabella placed her hands around her waist and tried to inhale. “And I might faint if I wear it for too long.”

Lexi waved a hand. “Fashion is pain.”

“Not in my book. But the pockets are nice. Practical.” Isabella slid her hands into the pockets and allowed her elbows to fall into a chic position. “Oh. There’s something in them.”

Isabella clutched little pieces of paper and pulled them out of the pockets. It was a funny thing to find odds and ends from other people’s lives. It reminded you of the garment’s previous life in someone else’s care. *Why had the woman who’d owned it given it up? Had she had enough of the chicness? Had she realized just how much she didn’t care?*

“I can recycle those.” Lexi stepped forward to take the pieces of paper.

But out of curiosity, Isabella unfurled them and began to read. “We’ve got a receipt here,” Isabella began. “For hairspray, dark chocolate, and body lotion. It’s from a CVS in Pittsburgh.”

“Wow.” Lexi faked enthusiasm and crossed her arms over her chest.

“What else? Let’s see. We have another receipt from the Harbor Town Hotel here on Martha’s Vineyard,” Isabella continued. “February 21. Looks like whoever owned this dress was a big fan of Cosmopolitans.”

“I’m sure she watched a lot of *Sex and the City*,” Lexi affirmed. “The dress alone tells me she had style. The receipt confirms it.”

“See? Isn’t it fun to imagine this other woman’s life?” Isabella laughed and flipped to the next piece of paper, which seemed to be a to-do list. “Let’s see. Looks like the woman

who owned this wanted to buy blueberries, a protein bar, and new razors.”

“All practical things,” Lexi said.

“Let’s see. This paper says: **EDIT CHAPTER 12** and **CALL ALVIN.**” Isabella laughed.

“Oh! Maybe she’s a writer.”

“Maybe. That’s pretty cool, right? It makes me want the dress a little bit more,” Isabella agreed as she flipped to the final paper in the stack. “And this one says she has a meeting with someone named Franklin B. at four-thirty. She’s included the address.”

“Oh. Let’s look it up.” Lexi was fully on-board with Isabella’s game now. She fetched her phone and typed Franklin B.’s address into the search function. Isabella felt as though they traveled with this strange woman, discovering bits and pieces of her life.

The map result dropped them on the water’s edge, far from town. A cold wave of fear washed over Isabella.

“Wait,” Lexi said, her brow furrowed. “Isn’t that Mr. Butler’s estate?”

Isabella stared down at the handwriting on the piece of paper. She was speechless. Beside her, Lexi typed the address again and got the same results. Slowly, Isabella and Lexi locked eyes with one another.

“Wasn’t Mandy Dolores from Pittsburgh?” Lexi whispered.

Isabella couldn’t breathe. Very quickly, she typed “Mandy Dolores” and “Alvin” into the search bar on her phone and received numerous results, all of which confirmed that a man named Alvin Rutger was Mandy Dolores’s agent. He’d pledged to find her.

Lexi and Isabella were panicked now. Isabella shook as Lexi tugged the zipper down her back and helped Isabella out of the dress as quickly as possible.

“Who dropped this dress off?” Isabella demanded. “How long have you had it?”

“I don’t know!” Lexi cried. “Last week? The one before? I get so many donations, and I don’t keep track of where they come from.”

Isabella continued to shake. She sat in her underwear on the couch as Lexi hurried to lock the front door and shut off the speakers.

“You know what this is, don’t you?” Lexi demanded as she sat next to Isabella and stared at the papers still in Isabella’s hands. “This is proof of what you already suspected. Mandy was going to see Mr. Butler. She knew him, somehow.”

Isabella’s ears were ringing. Very carefully, she opened her mother’s diary and placed the pieces of evidence inside the pages for safekeeping.

“Do you want me to go with you to the police station?” Lexi asked.

Isabella shook her head. “I want to talk to my dad first. I’ve kept him out of the loop.” She swallowed, then added, “I saw him out on a date with a woman on Saturday night. I hated him for it, you know? But I also understand it.”

“How do you know it was a date?”

“I don’t know. But I saw his face as he looked at her. He didn’t look the way he’s looked the past few months. His eyes were bright. He was fully present.”

Lexi nodded, at a loss. Finally, she managed to say, “You’re both still here. You’re both still living. But you need to find a way to talk to each other— about the good things and the bad. Otherwise, you’ll find yourselves so far away from each other that you won’t be able to overcome the distance anymore. Everything will be lost.”

Chapter Fourteen

Before Isabella left for home, she took to her mother's diary for solace and support. Unfortunately, this led her to the most dramatic story of them all and a nail in the coffin in the case against Mr. Butler.

March 14, 1996

I'm six months pregnant and nearing whale size. Steve's sisters, Charlotte, Kelli, and Claire threw me a baby shower this afternoon, and I'm now the proud owner of many packages of diapers, baby onesies with multiple different patterns, a food processor for making baby food, and several baby blankets. It's funny to have a party for a person who doesn't fully exist yet, in preparation for a life you can hardly imagine. Everyone tells me having a baby will be the most delirious, happiest, exhausting, and maddening time of my life. I'm not sure what to do with that information. I suppose I'll learn all about that when Baby Montgomery makes his or her appearance.

Side note: Steve and I have decided not to learn the sex. This has annoyed Steve's mother greatly. She wants to buy gender-appropriate clothing and toys. To me and to Steve, there are so few surprises in this life anymore. You have to make space for them.

March 16, 1996

Tax season is in full swing, and because of my degree, I've managed to make quite a lot of money doing people's taxes from the comfort of my own home (yippee!). As I work through the paperwork and send tax documents off to the authorities, I'm normally in pajamas with my favorite snacks nearby. Steve comes home for lunch and dotes on me. Sometimes, we snuggle and nap until he absolutely has to return to the auto shop—which is a level of indulgence I know we won't have after the baby comes.

On particularly happy days, I think back to my months at the Butler Estate with horror. Yes, I was making a lot of money, and yes, I thought that job would get me "places," whatever that means. But ultimately, I was working for a truly evil man. I'm so glad I got out when I did.

I've asked Steve to call the police about his anonymous tip several times since January. Unfortunately, the police continue to tell us there's no reason to suspect Mr. Butler is in any way involved with Felicity Rodgers' disappearance.

It's maddening.

I took matters into my own hands last week and contacted a journalist about my suspicions. But when he wanted to use my name in the article, I told him it was impossible. I explained I'm pregnant and frightened of Mr. Butler. I'm not sure if the journalist took me seriously. I haven't received any news about an upcoming article, and I worry any progress has stalled yet again.

March 18, 1996

Steve and I just returned home from a prenatal appointment. My gosh, the sight of our baby on the monitor is mesmerizing. He or she is now almost at full term, just still too small to come out yet. The doctor told me to keep doing what I'm doing; it seems to be working just fine.

Steve is on the phone, ordering pizza, and outside a horrendous snow is falling. It's too late in the year for snow!

But of course, Martha's Vineyard spring comes whenever it wants to.

On the news this morning, they had another special report about Felicity Rodgers. I could hardly take the sight of her face on the screen. I remember the way she looked that day outside the hotel so clearly. Her face was open and honest and filled with laughter, and she looked at Mr. Butler as though he'd promised her the world.

Felicity, where are you? I hope you're safe.

March 22, 1996

I don't know how to write this, but I've decided not to tell Steve, and I need to put it somewhere. If I don't, I will go insane.

It took me hours to stop shaking.

This afternoon, I met Steve's sisters at the coffee shop. Now that I'm so pregnant, they seem over-energized, excitable, and young (compared to me), and I alternate between finding joy in our exchanges and finding them very, very exhausting.

Charlotte drove me home afterward, as she planned to meet her boyfriend, Jason, whom she plans to marry one day, and Jason lives near Steve and I. Jason and Charlotte are an adorable young couple, probably the way Steve and I were before I turned into a pregnant monster.

After Charlotte left, I entered my house, poured myself a glass of water, and hovered at the counter for a little while. Steve was at work, and I knew he would be for another few hours. I made myself a piece of toast and planned to sit in front of the television and maybe, eventually, read.

But when I walked out of my kitchen, I dropped the piece of toast to the ground with shock. The peanut butter splattered across the hardwood, but I didn't care at all.

In front of me, seated on the couch in front of the television, was a man.

But it wasn't just any man. When he turned around to face me, I realized it was Franklin Butler. He smiled at me easily, as though this had all been a part of the plan— as though I'd invited him over. At that moment, I thought for sure I would faint.

"Laura! Wonderful to see a friendly face," Mr. Butler said. "Why don't you sit down for a bit?"

Can you believe it? He invited me to sit down in my own house. I wanted to pick the piece of peanut butter toast from the ground and smear it across his face.

I was terrified, so I walked around the outer edge of the living room and eventually sat on the chair furthest from him with my hands over my stomach.

"You've gotten a lot bigger since we last saw each other," Mr. Butler said. "I take it the baby is healthy?"

I did not want to speak about the baby, so I asked, "What are you doing here?"

"Oh, Laura. That's no way to talk to your good friend, is it?" Mr. Butler said. He placed his ankle on his knee and smiled the same way he'd smiled at Felicity Rodgers that day outside of the hotel.

"You've broken into my house," I told him icily. "We aren't friends."

Mr. Butler laughed then, and the way he threw his head back made me want to cry. He has such power over every situation. It isn't even the money. It's something else.

"I heard you've been quite busy," Mr. Butler continued. "But not too busy to try to involve yourself in my affairs."

My ears began to ring. Who had told him I was trying to get him in trouble? The police? The journalist? Is his poison everywhere?

Mr. Butler leaned forward and spoke serenely. "I have to assure you, my affairs are my affairs. They have nothing to do with you."

Slowly, I nodded. I didn't know what else to do.

“If you would like to be involved in my affairs, that’s an entirely different matter,” Mr. Butler continued. “My dear friend Felicity once told me I was the most exciting man in the world. If that’s not a great review, I don’t know what is.”

At that moment, I nearly crumpled into tears. What would he have done if I had? He would have taken pleasure in my fear, of course. And I couldn’t have that.

Basically, he’d just admitted to my face that he’d had something to do with Felicity Rodgers’ disappearance. He knew I could do nothing about it, and I knew I could do nothing about it. So, we stared at each other as his silence ate through me. How I felt for him went beyond hate.

After Mr. Butler stood up, he walked around me and patted me on the shoulder. I flinched, and he laughed. He then went into the kitchen and made himself a sandwich with my bread, cheese, lettuce, and tomato. As he wielded the knife over the tomato, I watched him like a hawk. He then carried the sandwich and continued through the house until he reached the front door. Once outside, he left the door wide open and started to whistle as he walked away. When he reached the street and turned out of sight, I sprinted to the door and slammed it shut, then locked it.

For the next hour, I sat on the floor and sobbed. I sobbed for myself, and I sobbed for my baby, and I sobbed for Felicity Rodgers.

But mostly, I sobbed because I knew there was nothing to be done. There are evils at the root of the world that cannot be faced. Somehow, Mr. Butler can manipulate every situation. He can do what he wants.

This leaves the rest of us as victims in his game.

Chapter Fifteen

Steve locked the auto shop door just as Rina's rented Prius rounded the block. Overhead, the early evening light began to spill gently from behind bulbous clouds, and sharp rays of sun were mixed with dark shadows.

After Rina parked, she stepped out of the Prius and fell back against it. Her cheeks were hollow, and she looked slightly older and worn out than she had the day before. Something had happened. Steve grabbed his coat and hurried out of the auto shop to greet her. To his surprise, she cleared the distance between them and placed her head on his chest.

"I'm sorry," she breathed. "I just feel so broken."

Steve placed his hand on her shoulder and tapped it gently, remembering how he'd comforted Laura with full bear hugs and soft kisses. Rina wasn't Laura. Still, she needed some kind of support.

"What happened?" Steve asked kindly.

Rina sputtered into a sigh and stepped away from him. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to be so needy."

Steve was at a loss. "Why don't you come back to my place? We can make dinner together, sit, and talk."

Rina's cheek twitched. "Are you sure?"

Steve was suddenly very sure. He had nothing to hide, not from Isabella, nor from his mother, nor from himself. Friendship was a necessity, and he'd already learned more

about himself and his own happiness since he'd begun to spend time with Rina.

Rina sat in Steve's truck and allowed herself to be driven back to his house. Isabella wasn't home yet, and Steve breathed a sigh of relief as he set ingredients for cheesy pasta across the counter.

"I'm not the world's greatest cook," he explained. "But I know my way around a few things."

"Like pasta?" Rina smiled endearingly.

"I know you think it's simple teenage food," Steve said. "But my wife's family was part-Italian, and she taught me a thing or two about making my own pasta sauce."

With a flourish, Steve walked toward the window to remove several leaves from a real basil plant. Rina looked impressed. At the kitchen sink, she scrubbed her hands with soap and water and watched as he began to slice an onion and a few cloves of garlic.

"It's been a very long time since someone cooked for me," she confessed.

Steve smiled. "There's a bottle of wine in the cabinet. I think it's supposed to be pretty good. From one Italian region or another."

Rina laughed and fetched the bottle. "I'm impressed," she said as she uncorked it and used it to fill two glasses. "But I guess I shouldn't be. You're a mechanic who knows how to make his own pasta sauce."

"I'm a man of mystery," Steve quipped as he poured a layer of olive oil into the skillet.

Rina then sat at the kitchen table for a moment and sipped her wine. Her eyes looked very lost.

"Do you want to tell me what happened?" Steve asked tenderly as he sautéed the onions.

"Hmm." Rina thought for a moment. "It's sort of embarrassing."

“Try me.”

Rina took a long sip of wine. “Okay. Well, it’s looking like the police are going to release Rhett Barley.”

Steve’s eyes widened. “That’s surprising.”

“Yeah. I guess.” Rina looked defeated. “But to be honest with you, I figured it was too good to be true. Nobody is stupid enough to drive the vehicle of a missing person like that, not even someone as young and naive as Rhett Barley.”

“On top of that, Rhett came up with several alibis,” Rina continued. “He was off the island during the time Mandy probably disappeared. There’s record of him visiting his brother in prison.”

“Goodness.” Steve frowned.

“Yeah.” Rina shook her head. “I had to call Mandy’s parents today and explain we probably had the wrong guy.”

“That must have been really difficult.”

Rina nodded and sipped too much of her wine again. She’d nearly cleared her glass. “I’m beginning to think I shouldn’t have taken this job.”

Steve reached for the bottle of wine and refilled Rina’s glass, then grabbed her a glass of water, just in case. Rina thanked him.

“How has working with the police on Martha’s Vineyard gone?” Steve asked.

Rina cocked her head. “It’s been fine. Why do you ask?”

Steve shrugged as an ancient memory returned to his mind. “My wife and I had a hunch they were corrupt in the past. But that was ages ago. The nineties.”

“Huh.” Rina frowned and sipped her wine, clearly at a loss. “Why did you think that?”

“I had the privilege of marrying someone a lot smarter than me,” Steve said with a smile. “She could see things better than I could.” He shook his head, not sure he wanted to go too deep into the past. “Anyway, I’m sure they’ve cleared any

corruption out by now. As I mentioned before, crime on this island is very rare. We're lucky here. It was the perfect place to raise children, and it'll be the perfect place to grow old. I already imagine myself as a little old man with birding binoculars. I'll know all about the local flora and fauna and let all technological advancements pass me by. Like I said before, I don't even have a Facebook account. Maybe that means I'm already old."

Rina's face opened with joy at the thought. "Do you often think about how you'll be when you get older?"

Steve dribbled minced garlic into the skillet. "Well, I'm almost fifty, which seems like a milestone. In some ways, I feel older than dirt, and in other ways, I feel youthful and prepared to live another fifty years."

"One-hundred-year-old Steve," Rina quipped.

"Surrounded by birds and books," Steve agreed.

Suddenly, the front door of the house screamed open. "Dad?" Isabella's voice bounced down the hallway.

Steve froze and eyed Rina nervously. With Rina in such an emotional state and Isabella's moods unpredictable, he felt caught between a rock and a hard place. Quickly, he poured a can of tomatoes into the skillet and called, "I'm in the kitchen, honey! Just cooking."

Isabella appeared in the kitchen a moment later. Her face was very pale, and it looked as though she'd been crying. With one fell swoop, she eyed her father, then the tomato sauce, and then Rina. She looked unsurprised and unpleased.

"Hi." Rina stood, smiling nervously.

"Isabella, this is my friend, Rina," Steve said. "Rina, this is my daughter, Isabella."

Isabella's voice was very stiff. "Nice to meet you."

"You, too." Rina looked at Isabella with frightened eyes, which was a surprise. Steve had expected Rina to be brave in every way.

He wondered if this was proof that Rina had feelings for him. Perhaps meeting his child was a milestone for her. Quickly, he shook this thought from his head.

“I’m making my famous tomato sauce,” Steve said. “Would you like to sit for a while? We just opened a nice bottle of red.”

Rina nodded encouragingly, but Isabella seemed too distracted to engage in niceties.

“In California, everyone’s too afraid of pasta to eat it,” Rina added as a way to fill the space. “I haven’t had it in years.”

Isabella’s eyes caught the light in the kitchen. “You’re from California?”

Rina nodded, as though she’d sensed a young woman like Isabella was interested in faraway places. “I’ve lived there for years.”

Isabella, being young, answered the only way she could think to. “I was supposed to move to New York City.”

“Wow. That’s a great place,” Rina said.

Steve needed to save his daughter. As he stirred the tomato sauce, he turned halfway around to say, “Rina has a pretty cool job. Rina, will you tell her what you do?”

Isabella watched Rina like a hawk.

“I’m a private detective,” Rina answered. “I’m here investigating the disappearance of Mandy Dolores.”

At this, Isabella’s jaw fell to the floor. Steve was panicked, suddenly worried that any talk of Mandy Dolores would frighten his daughter.

“You’re really here for Mandy?” Isabella whispered as she removed her backpack.

“Her parents sent me,” Rina answered. “I’m sure you heard that the cops arrested someone.”

“But he didn’t do it,” Isabella breathed.

Rina furrowed her brow. At the stovetop, Steve was so shocked by Isabella's knowledge that he dropped his spatula to the ground.

As Rina sputtered with questions, Isabella zipped open her backpack and removed an old book. Steve recognized it immediately as Laura's, and he snapped off the stovetop and shoved the skillet to the side, feeling volatile. *Hadn't he asked Isabella not to go through Laura's things? Hadn't he said he wasn't ready?*

Then again, here he was in his kitchen with another woman. *Was he really in the position to point fingers?*

"Let me explain." Isabella interrupted Rina's words and pulled several pieces of what looked like trash from the diary — receipts and a couple of notecards. She spread them across the table, and Steve and Rina hovered above them. "I pulled these out of a second-hand dress at my cousin Lexi's boutique. We're sure they're Mandy's."

"My gosh," Rina breathed. "Alvin. That's the name of..."

"Mandy's agent," Isabella finished. She then eyed Steve nervously as she added, "I've been reading my mother's diary from 1995 and 1996. During that time, she was working for a very rich man on the island named Mr. Butler."

Steve's eyes widened with surprise. Only moments before, he'd thought about Felicity Rodgers and about Laura's suspicions of Mr. Butler's involvement. He hadn't thought about that in years.

"Mr. Butler. Yes. I read about him," Rina said. "He's quite the philanthropist here on the island. He gives money to every organization. He's well-respected."

Isabella scoffed. "Well, according to what my mom wrote back in the nineties, he definitely had something to do with Felicity Rodgers' disappearance."

Rina's eyes widened at this new revelation. "Felicity Rodgers! I was just reading about her, too. They never learned what happened to her. Her parents and her husband eventually stopped looking."

“Your mother had a hunch Mr. Butler was involved,” Steve remembered. “But the police didn’t think so.”

Isabella smacked the table. “Mr. Butler came to our house, Dad. He threatened Mom and told her to stop calling journalists and giving anonymous tips.”

It was Steve’s turn to be shocked. For a long time, he stared at his daughter, out of his mind. “That’s impossible.”

Isabella opened the diary to March 1996 and pointed to the relevant entry. Steve had to sit down to read it, and as he did, his toes curled in his shoes.

Mr. Butler had come to Steve’s house to threaten his pregnant wife. Her fear had been so extraordinary that she hadn’t even told Steve about it.

Rage didn’t even cover it. Steve wanted to destroy this man.

“The address on Mandy’s notecard is Franklin Butler’s address,” Isabella finished, her eyes hardening. “It’s obvious she had some kind of contact with him. And if the police had just listened to my mother all those years ago, this wouldn’t have happened.”

Rina nodded, clearly at a loss. “Do you mind if I take your mother’s diary and these papers as evidence?”

Isabella bristled. Clearly, she did not want to give her mother’s diary to the woman who had some sort of relationship with her father.

“Please, Isabella,” Rina said softly. “I believe what you’re telling me, and I believe your mother was treated terribly. Let’s do what we can to put this guy behind bars and find out what happened to both Mandy and Felicity. Okay?”

Isabella looked resolute. “Okay. But please. Be careful with the diary.”

Rina promised she would. She then leaped from the kitchen table, gathered Isabella’s evidence, and placed her hand on Steve’s arm tenderly. “I don’t know what I would

have done without the both of you. You've been an incredible help."

With that, she was gone.

Chapter Sixteen

For a little while after Rina left, Steve and Isabella sat at the kitchen table without saying a word. Isabella felt damaged and dehydrated from all the crying. Now, Rina had taken the diary with her, and with it, Isabella felt she'd chopped off Isabella's arm or leg. There was no end to the horrors of this day.

Across from her, Isabella's father looked defeated and aghast. The pasta sauce on the stovetop was now cold and unfinished, and the box of pasta on the counter hadn't even been opened. It was, of course, a slap to Isabella that Steve had decided to show off Laura's pasta sauce recipe. Then again, there were bigger fish to fry.

Out of nowhere, Isabella's stomach cried out with hunger. Steve, worried as any father would have been, snapped up and said, "Let's get out of here."

Isabella watched him move around the kitchen. He shoved his keys in his pocket and ruffled his hair. As he headed for the garage door, she snapped into action as well, running after him. She didn't want to be in the house alone.

In the front seat of his truck, Steve found his voice. "Call your brother. He needs to know about this."

Isabella did as she was told. In just a few seconds, she had Jonathon on the phone.

"This is a surprise!" Jonathon sounded bright and cheery, as though he spoke to his children rather than his little sister. Maybe his voice had gotten stuck that way.

“Hey.” Isabella couldn’t match his enthusiasm. “Dad and I are going out. You want to join us?”

“Like, out-out?” Jonathon asked.

“The dive bar with the burgers,” Steve quipped beside her.

“You hear that?” Isabella said.

“Yeah.” Jonathon’s voice dimmed. “Is everything all right?”

“We need to talk to you!” Steve called.

“Isabella, what is going on?” Jonathon demanded.

“Just meet us there, okay?” Isabella felt disgruntled. In the background, one of Jonathon’s children had begun to sob, and Carrie consoled them.

Steve parked the truck beside the dive bar and smashed his fist against the steering wheel. Isabella hadn’t seen him so enraged in her entire life. Maybe she should have been more delicate about her mother’s diary entry. Then again, she’d needed to prove Mr. Butler’s guilt.

At that moment, she cursed Mr. Butler— not only for the evils he’d done in the world, but because he’d drugged up such sorrow in her father. When she’d first gotten home, he’d looked so passionate and alive, standing there at the stovetop with a spatula in his hand. Rina had allowed him that freedom, just before memories from the past had ripped him in two.

Inside, Steve and Isabella sat in a booth and ordered a beer and a wine. On the table, Steve’s phone buzzed with Grandma Kerry’s name on the screen.

“Are you going to get that?” Isabella asked.

Steve shook his head and stopped the call.

“Are you mad at Grandma Kerry?”

Steve looked stiff. “The island thinks I’m dating that woman, Rina. The reality is that I finally made a new friend after a winter of loneliness and boredom. It’s lucky for the island, though. They finally have something new to gossip about. Good for them.”

Isabella's heart dropped. At that moment, any resentment she'd had for Rina and her father fell away. It was true what her father said, that he'd been lonely and bored. Nobody deserved to live like that.

But news of Steve's dating life wasn't the only fresh gossip the island had. As Jonathon stormed in and sat down, bringing with him the chill of the streets, he announced, "Carrie just told me they might release that Rhett Barley guy. Apparently, he has an alibi?"

At the booth directly beside them, an older couple looked up from their chili and joined in.

"Apparently, he was visiting his brother in jail at the time Mandy disappeared," the woman said.

"But if you ask me, that doesn't mean anything," the man countered. "He's been driving her car around without a care in the world. He thought he was too clever to get caught. The imbecile!"

The server appeared at their table to weigh in on it. "If Barley didn't do it, then who did? This island isn't that big."

"Yes, but you can disappear with someone anywhere in the United States," the older woman said. "We've got a lot of land."

"But there's no footage of Mandy Dolores leaving the island on a ferry," Jonathon chimed in.

"She could have been hiding in a car somewhere underneath," the woman said. "Think with your brain, son."

Jonathon's cheeks were pink. To the server, he said, "Could I get a beer, please?" Then, he added, "And an order of onion rings."

"And fried pickles," Steve joined in.

"That's Uncle Andy's order," Isabella remembered.

Steve nodded gravely. "I need anything to combat the stress of all this."

After the server returned with Jonathon's beer, the three Montgomerys sat for a little while and listened to the wild buzz around them. Everyone had a hunch about what had happened to Mandy Dolores, and some people thought they should keep Rhett Barley behind bars. They spoke over the top of one another, correcting facts about the case as though they were actors in *Law and Order*. It turned Isabella's stomach.

Finally, Jonathon bent his head and said, "What's up?" He searched Steve and Isabella's faces. "You guys sounded really upset when you called."

Isabella sighed and pulled her hair into a ponytail. *How could they begin to explain?*

"We have to keep our voices down," Steve muttered, his eyes searching the bar.

"I don't think anyone can hear anyone else but themselves," Jonathon joked. "They're certainly not waiting for anyone else to finish a thought."

Steve laughed for the first time since he'd read Laura's diary, then corrected his face. After a pause, he lowered his voice to say, "Isabella has done some brilliant detective work. She's pretty sure she knows who's responsible for Mandy Dolores' disappearance. And I'm pretty sure I agree with her."

Jonathon's jaw was slack. "Not you two, too."

"Seriously," Isabella said, giving him a dark look.

"Against my wishes, your sister went through your mother's things," Steve said with a sigh. "And thank goodness she did, because she discovered a story that I'd forgotten. Back in 1995 and 1996, your mother was pregnant but decided to take a job anyway. She worked as a personal accountant for Mr. Franklin Butler."

"That billionaire guy? The one with the epic estate?" Jonathon asked.

Isabella's cheeks were hot with rage. "He's the worst," she muttered.

“Anyway, while your mother worked there, a young woman named Felicity Rodgers went missing. Nobody on the island knew where she’d gone or what to do. The police were at a loss. But some things Mr. Butler said at the estate gave your mother pause. She immediately quit the job and asked me to give an anonymous tip to the police. Unfortunately, after many different inquiries, the police continued to tell me Mr. Butler was in no way responsible— and that they were following through on other possibilities. The island had quieted down at that point, and Laura was very pregnant, so I found myself thinking about other things.

“But according to a diary entry from March 1996, Mr. Butler visited our home and threatened your mother,” Steve went on. “He told her to stop digging around, or else.”

Jonathon’s face was marred with anger. “Are you kidding?”

Steve and Isabella shook their heads, then sipped their drinks. At that moment, the server arrived with onion rings and fried pickles. “And what else would you like tonight? We have a burger special and a tuna melt that’s to die for.”

The Montgomery Family shivered with panic and gave the server their order. As she walked back to the kitchen, Isabella was fairly certain she heard the woman say, “Everyone is acting so weird tonight.”

“I’ve become friendly with the private detective Mandy Dolores’ family hired to come poke around,” Steve began.

At this, the older woman at the booth beside them turned and glared at him, intrigued. Steve stopped talking and stared back until the woman turned around.

“Ah. Is that the woman everyone is talking about?” Jonathon asked.

Steve bristled. “We’re just friends.”

“They’re just friends.” Isabella gave her father a soft smile.

Jonathon shrugged. “Grandma is fielding all sorts of calls about it.”

“You’d think people would have more interesting things to talk about,” Steve mumbled. “Anyway. Isabella has passed off the diary to Rina, along with other evidence.”

“I found some notes in a dress at Lexi’s boutique,” Isabella told him.

Jonathon pressed his hands over his face. Isabella sipped her wine and stared out the window, where a late-March snow had kicked up. It seemed fitting, as it reminded her of the late-March when Mr. Butler had come to threaten her mother. *How many other women had Mr. Butler threatened over the years?* It had come so easily for him.

“It’s a lot,” Steve agreed. “We’re reeling.”

When Jonathon removed his hands, his eyes glinted with tears. “I’m sorry.” His voice broke. “It’s just that every day, I’m still mourning her. I miss her so much. And now, to learn about this whole time of her life— when she was pregnant with me? It’s just overwhelming.”

Steve placed his hand on Jonathon’s shoulder. Isabella wanted to say that her sorrow ate her alive and threatened to destroy her, but she knew they already knew. Instead, she placed her hand in the center of the table, and her father and brother placed theirs on hers. They were the last remaining Montgomerys, and they had to uphold the stories in Laura’s diary.

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d say Mom led you to that diary in particular,” Jonathon said as he wiped away his tears. “She wanted this guy behind bars.”

This wasn’t the first time Isabella had thought this. There was a reason she’d read the diaries so obsessively, even beyond wanting to hear her mother’s voice in her head.

Two burgers and a tuna melt arrived. Isabella’s fingers were heavy with grease as she ate through the sandwich as her brother and father painted their faces with ketchup and mustard. Laughing, she passed around more napkins, just the way Laura would have done.

After a little while, Jonathon placed his half-eaten burger on his plate and turned to Steve. “By the way, you can’t let island gossip manipulate what you do.”

Steve nodded contemplatively.

“Just because it might take Isabella and I a bit of time to get used to it, doesn’t mean you shouldn’t open your heart to someone new,” Jonathon continued.

Steve pressed a napkin over his mouth. He seemed at a loss for words. Isabella remained very quiet, watching him.

Finally, Steve spoke, “I might need a bit of time, too. But I appreciate you saying that.” He turned to look eyes with each of his children. “We need to support each other during this very strange time. No matter what.”

Chapter Seventeen

Steve left a note on the kitchen counter the following morning.

**AUTO SHOP CLOSED TODAY - WENT SAILING.
LOVE YOU. DAD.**

Isabella stood in her pajamas and watched the late-March sunlight bleed across the kitchen tiles. Coffee dripped into the coffee pot, and the world seemed slightly off-focus and strange, perhaps because she'd drunk one too many glasses of wine last night. The stress of it all had been too much for her. And when Jonathon had started crying for the third time at the dive bar, there'd been nothing to do but order another round.

Remembering last night, Isabella texted her brother.

ISABELLA: I hope you're feeling all right.

JONATHON: Well, having a slight hangover with kids is not for the faint of heart.

JONATHON: But I'm okay.

Isabella sent a thumbs-up and smiled to herself as she poured a mug of coffee. When her phone buzzed again, she glanced over, expecting another text from Jonathon. Instead, it was from Rhett.

She nearly dropped her mug.

RHETT: Hey. They let me go.

RHETT: I don't know what to do with myself.

RHETT: Do you want to meet up?

Isabella sat with her mug of coffee and thought about Rhett, Mandy Dolores, Felicity Rodgers, and her mother for a very long time before she answered. A small part of her burst with fear. *What if Rhett was involved in Mandy's disappearance? What if he was in cahoots with Mr. Butler?*

Then again, Isabella thought she was a pretty good judge of character. Rhett's eyes were eager and honest. He'd come from nothing.

Before she could change her mind, she texted Rhett she'd meet— but that they needed to go somewhere isolated, without crowds. The last thing she needed was an islander calling her grandmother to say, “I saw your granddaughter with that Rhett Barley.” Grandma Kerry didn't need the stress.

Eventually, Isabella suggested they meet out at the Aquinnah Cliffs. Rhett texted back to say he'd love to, but he no longer had a car. Isabella agreed to pick him up at his apartment complex at eleven-thirty. She'd pack a picnic. It would be a nice day.

On the way to his apartment complex, Isabella stopped at the grocery store to pick up a few more things for the picnic. As she walked through the aisle, she was so jittery and nervous that she nearly stumbled into things or dropped what she selected. When she rounded the corner and nearly ran into Susan's daughter, Amanda, she shrieked.

Amanda laughed gently, surprised to see Isabella, too. The girls didn't know one another well, as the Montgomery and Sheridan families were huge. It was hard to have close connections with every single relative. Still, there was a lot of love there.

“I was just thinking about you,” Isabella lied. “I'm headed to the Aquinnah Cliffs, not far from your wedding venue.”

Amanda clasped her hands together and winced. “Your Aunt Kelli keeps telling me it'll be open in time for the

wedding.”

“You have your doubts?”

“Every time Sam and I drive by the hotel, it’s like there’s a huge amount of work left to be done,” Amanda whispered, as though she was frightened that someone at the grocery would hear and spread gossip.

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” Isabella said. “Aunt Kelli wouldn’t lie to you. She knows how important this day is.”

Amanda sighed and rubbed her temples. “I know that. I do. It’s no surprise to anyone that I’m nervous about the wedding, is it?” She laughed lightly. “Everyone knows what happened at my first one.”

Isabella didn’t know Amanda well enough to do what she did next. But armed with her mother’s voice in her head, she reached out and took Amanda’s hand. “What happened to you last time was absolutely terrible, but it gave you space for this new love. It sounds like Sam is the one you were always meant to be with, anyway.”

Slowly, Amanda nodded. It was as though she’d needed these words of encouragement from someone she didn’t know well for the sentiment to stick. Isabella understood that. Sometimes, the voices of people you see all the time become background noise.

For years, Isabella’s own mother’s voice had been like background noise. She’d taken it for granted. But that’s what real love was, she knew. It was ever-present, so much so that you forgot to notice it until it was gone.

* * *

Rhett looked as though he’d lost five pounds, at least. He wore a dark hood over his head and slumped down in the passenger seat as Isabella drove them out to the cliffs. It wasn’t until they were out of Oak Bluffs that he managed to speak at all.

“Thank you for believing me,” he said.

Isabella eyed him nervously. “When did they tell you that you could go home?”

“Late last night,” Rhett answered. “I was really lucky that my brother’s prison spoke up for me.”

“Did your defense attorney reach out to them?”

Rhett nodded. “I was so freaked out in jail that it took me a little while to remember the events of that week, the week Mandy disappeared, I mean. After you urged me to consider it, it came to me that I was gone that week. And when my defense attorney came, I told him, and he made the relevant calls. But gosh, I was nervous.”

“I can’t even imagine.”

Isabella parked at the Aquinnah Cliffside and stepped into the fresh breeze. She’d worn a few layers, a sweater, and a jacket, and she put on a pair of gloves to grab the picnic basket in back. Rhett eyed the basket sheepishly.

“You didn’t have to do that,” he said.

“There’s a great place for picnics,” she explained. “It’s behind a big rock and a bit out of the wind. My mom used to take my brother and I there in the spring.”

When she and Rhett reached the edge of the cliffs, Rhett stopped and gasped at the view. There was a wonderful roar to the ocean beyond, a deep sound that was interrupted by the occasional crash of waves. Isabella felt a moment of pride for her island. She’d grown up there—it was her home. Perhaps she didn’t need New York City after all.

Rhett followed Isabella quietly down the path that led to the “secret” picnic spot. If Isabella tricked her mind just so, she could imagine her mother somewhere behind her, prepared to call ahead if Isabella went too quickly. *Watch out, Isabella. It’s steep.*

The picnic spot was just the same as it had always been. As she set up the picnic, Isabella was surprised to remember it had only been a year since she’d been there, when Laura and Isabella had walked the same route and sat on cushions and watched the waves. At the time, they’d spoken about Isabella’s

decision to leave for New York City. “I’m so proud of you,” Laura had said. “And I’m going to miss you more than you can even understand.”

“This really is a good spot,” Rhett said as he perched on a cushion and eyed the water, shivering.

“You should eat something,” Isabella told him.

Rhett winced. “I know. I will.”

“You could use some nourishment,” Isabella countered as she removed strawberries, sandwiches, cookies, and salted nuts from the basket. At the grocery store, she’d almost bought blueberries, but she’d put them back, remembering they’d been on Mandy’s shopping list.

Rhett took a sandwich and chewed it contemplatively, in no rush to get to the end of it. Sunlight played across his handsome face, and color returned to his cheeks. Isabella knew that one day, when and if he got his life together, some woman somewhere would fall head-over-heels in love with him.

“It was so stupid of me to get involved in anything illegal again,” Rhett muttered, mostly to the sandwich.

Isabella lifted her chin.

“I mean, I have to admit, it didn’t seem illegal at the time,” Rhett continued. “Like I told you when you visited, I’ve always known rich people to be very good at manipulating the systems in their favor. So, when my employer explained what I was supposed to do for him— take these goods here, these goods there, only sign for one-half of what I brought— yada yada yada, I figured I’d be in the clear. Next thing I know, I’m in jail.”

Isabella wanted to be very delicate with Rhett. No harsh questions. No quick movements.

“Again, you don’t have to answer this,” she breathed, “but was your employer Mr. Butler?”

Rhett closed his eyes. “Why did you know that?”

Isabella placed her sandwich back down. With her hands clasped, she explained what she’d learned about Mr. Butler

from her mother's diary, along with what she'd found in the red dress at Lexi's boutique. Throughout, Rhett's eyes grew wider and wider.

When Rhett finally spoke, he sounded panicked. "Mr. Butler couldn't have done this."

"Why not?" Isabella demanded. "He came over to my parents' house and threatened my mother!"

Rhett was very quiet. He stared out at the horizon and took an angry bite from his sandwich. "I have to believe you," he finally said. "Because you've believed me all this time."

Isabella's heart lifted.

"Are you still on good terms with Mr. Butler?" she asked.

Rhett shrugged. "Now that his defense attorney got me out of jail, I'm supposed to go back to work tomorrow. Isn't that insane? I'm definitely not going."

But Isabella had an idea. "Rhett, you don't have to say yes to this."

Rhett's eyes returned to hers, and a shiver ran up and down her spine.

"Mr. Butler likes you. He trusts you," Isabella continued. "And now, he thinks he has you in his pocket because he got you out of jail. Right?"

Rhett nodded.

"All day, I've been afraid that the police won't investigate him at all, despite all this evidence," Isabella said. "He's too important to this island; more than that, he's too rich."

"And the police won't want to admit they were wrong back in the nineties," Rhett agreed. "It's probably hopeless."

"Rhett, you are the only person I know with access to the Butler Estate," Isabella continued. "Which means, if you were very, very careful, you could do some digging— and maybe you could find enough evidence to get this guy."

Rhett's eyes widened. Isabella knew what she asked of him was very dangerous.

“That’s insane, Isabella.”

“I know. You really don’t have to,” Isabella said quickly.

But Rhett’s smile was suddenly bright as the sun. “It’s so insane that it just might work.”

Isabella laughed with surprise, then threw her arms around him. Her heart thudded with apprehension.

“You need to be careful!” she cried over and over again.

And each time she said it, Rhett’s smile widened. It was as though he’d never had someone who cared for him so much, and it gave him an impossible power.

“This isn’t the last you’ll see of me, Isabella,” Rhett promised. “I’ve been through worse and come out just fine.”

Chapter Eighteen

Steve was back at work the day after his sailing expedition. Despite the trauma of the previous evening and the never-ending shadow of grief, he felt tanned, healthy, and refreshed. It was a marvel what a few hours fighting the wind and the water could do to you. Out there in the wide-open blue, he'd wept for his wife and for all the years they were supposed to have together, and he'd wept for all the fear she'd gone through alone that day with Mr. Butler. But after all that crying, his soul had felt very quiet. In the distance, a spurt of water had told him a whale was near, and he'd been reminded of the immensity of the ocean, which humans understood so little of.

The best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry, he'd thought before he'd turned his sailboat back and hurried home.

Now, Steve had a full day of work ahead of him, and he relished it. It was time to get his hands dirty and to dig into the guts of clients' vehicles, fix problems he could solve, and feel a part of the great tapestry of human life. Out there alone on the water, he'd felt at a great distance from the world, but here, with his hands digging into an engine, he felt at peace.

Around noon, Steve was flying. He'd repaired two vehicles and had two more to go, and a buddy from down the road had just called about an oil change. Briefly, he paused to wash his hands and eat a sandwich in the sunlight, feeling genuinely content.

But suddenly, there it was. That rental Prius bounded toward him and cut into the driveway with such recklessness that Steve was reminded of James Bond's driving. Before he could put his sandwich away, Rina was already out of the driver's seat, her face wrinkled with anger.

"Rina!" Steve hurried toward her, frightened. He hadn't heard from her since she'd run out of his house two nights before, and he'd thought of her endlessly. "Are you all right?"

Rina scowled and pulled her hair behind her ears. "It's just like your wife said."

Steve cocked his head. "What do you mean?"

"The police force," Rina continued. "I think Franklin Butler has them wrapped around his finger. Despite the diary entries and Mandy's notes, they refuse to go after him. They said it's not enough evidence. Can you believe that?"

Steve's heart dropped into his stomach. Truthfully, he could believe it. It was so similar to what he and Laura had gone through in the nineties. Progress was an illusion.

"You know what else?" Rina demanded. "I just figured out that Rhett Barley's defense attorney is an employee of Franklin Butler."

Steve's jaw dropped. "No!"

"Yes," Rina said with a sigh.

"So maybe Rhett was involved somehow?"

"I don't know." Rina collapsed against her car and stared at the ground. Under her breath, she said, "I thought I had good news for Mandy Dolores' parents. But it's another dead end. I can't believe this."

"Is there any record of Rhett Barley and Mr. Butler's relationship?" Steve asked.

"No," Rina said. "My guess is that Rhett works for him somehow, but Franklin Butler's no idiot. He has no contracts citing Rhett as one of his employees. Obviously, he had Rhett doing something at least slightly illegal and didn't want it to trace back to him."

“What kind of things?”

“Gosh, I don’t know. Men like Franklin Butler make money in all kinds of ways, and they know how to hide it.”

“They hire people like Laura to hide it,” Steve remembered.

“Yes, well. Your wife was smart enough to get out when she did,” Rina said. “Unlike many, she didn’t relish the chance to make a lot of cash working for a criminal.”

Steve felt very quiet. Before him, Rina paced back and forth, exasperated.

“I went to Rhett’s apartment building today to try to ask him a few questions,” Rina said. “I knocked several times, but I heard nothing.”

“Maybe he took off?”

Rina shrugged. “I wouldn’t blame him. He got himself involved in something very bad.”

Suddenly, Steve turned to watch as Isabella’s car snaked up the road. *What was going on?* The day had suddenly erupted with chaos. Steve stepped out of the way as she drove up and parked alongside Rina’s Prius. For a split second, Isabella glowered at Rina, but her expression was soon replaced with one of shock and fear. She hurried out of the driver’s side and gasped. It was clear she had something to say.

“Honey, are you okay?” Steve reached out to steady her.

Isabella’s eyes darted between them. She looked out of her mind. “I—I don’t know how to tell you this. And I know you’ll think it was wrong, stupid, and reckless.”

Rina and Steve exchanged glances. Rina grabbed a bottle of water from her backseat and urged Isabella to drink it. As Isabella tried, her arms shook.

“It’s Rhett,” Isabella whispered as she dried her face.

Steve’s heart jumped into his throat. “What are you talking about?”

“Rhett Barley and I are sort of friends,” Isabella explained.

Steve’s anger mounted. *Had Isabella been friendly with that guy since he’d come to the auto shop?* He couldn’t stand it.

“I saw him yesterday,” Isabella went on, “And he confirmed he’s been working for Mr. Butler. I explained everything we know about Mr. Butler, and he was shocked. I mean, he had no idea Mr. Butler was so awful.”

“Why was he working for him in the first place?” Steve demanded icily.

But Isabella shook her head, not wanting to dwell on it. She gasped for breath, then said, “I asked Rhett if he and Mr. Butler are still on good terms, and Rhett said they are. It’s because of Mr. Butler that Rhett got out of jail in the first place, so Mr. Butler thinks Rhett owes him.”

Rina and Steve exchanged worried glances.

“Anyway, Rhett went back to work at the Butler Estate today,” Isabella continued. “And he said he’d dig around a bit to see if he could find more evidence.”

“Isabella!” Steve cried. “No.”

Isabella nodded. “He said he was going to text me from inside the grounds, but I haven’t heard from him at all in over four hours.”

“Oh my gosh.” Rina looked very pale.

“All my calls to him go straight to voicemail,” Isabella whispered. “I think there’s something really wrong. And I don’t know what to do.”

Chapter Nineteen

Work was out of the question for the rest of the day. Steve flipped the OPEN sign to CLOSED and called a few clients about a “hold-up,” promising their vehicles would be complete by tomorrow. All the while, Rina and Isabella sat in Rina’s Prius as Isabella wept into her folded arms. Occasionally, Steve watched through the window of the car as Rina placed her hand gently on Isabella’s shoulder to try to console her. Isabella shook with sorrow and fear, and Rina’s face was scrunched with worry. Steve thought about Rina’s desire to be a mother and how it had never happened for her. He hoped she didn’t feel inadequate now. He hoped she knew just sitting next to someone in your sadness was sometimes enough.

Steve’s emotions were complicated. On the one hand, he was very angry Isabella was “friends” with Rhett Barley. *Weren’t there other nice, handsome boys on the island— ones who hadn’t recently been arrested for Mandy Dolores’ disappearance?* On the other hand, he was terrified Isabella suddenly had such an understanding of the evils of the world. She was twenty-three now, and there was no way to keep her safe and out of harm’s way forever. But that didn’t mean a part of Steve didn’t want to tell her to go home and stay there until Mr. Butler was behind bars— even if it took ten years.

Steve walked back toward Rina’s Prius. Rina opened the door, and both Isabella and Rina raised their eyes to look at him.

“Listen. We don’t know anything,” Steve told them. “It’s possible Rhett got caught up doing daily work tasks for Franklin Butler, and he hasn’t had time to check his phone.”

Isabella let out another sob as Rina nodded.

“Honey,” Steve continued, his voice softer, “Isn’t it possible Rhett was lying to you? I mean, we know Mr. Butler sent his own defense attorney to get Rhett out of jail.”

When she managed to speak, Isabella’s tone was icy. “Nobody wanted to hire Rhett, and Mr. Butler knew that. He preyed on him.”

“That doesn’t mean Rhett hasn’t been breaking the law,” Steve pointed out.

Isabella rolled her eyes in a way that would have made her teenage self proud. “Dad, Rhett probably doesn’t even understand the gravity of what he’s done for Mr. Butler. Even Mom couldn’t figure out what he was up to. One thing she was sure about, though, was that he was involved with Felicity Rodgers’ disappearance. Now, we have hard evidence that he’s involved with Mandy Dolores’ disappearance— and I have a hunch Mr. Butler has no qualms about ‘disappearing’ Rhett as well, if only because he got too close.”

Steve’s heart sank. He understood the severity of her words. When he locked eyes with Rina, she nodded subtly and muttered, “Time’s running out.”

Steve felt as though he was somewhere outside of his body. He tugged his phone from his back pocket and stuttered, “We can’t just go over there by ourselves.”

“Rina said the police won’t listen to her!” Isabella cried.

Steve nodded. “True. But if Rhett really is in trouble at the Butler Estate, this is an emergency.” Before he could second-guess himself, he dialed 9-1-1.

“9-1-1, where is your emergency?” A stiff-sounding woman answered the phone.

“Hello. I would like to report an accident at the Butler Estate,” Steve said briskly. “We’ll need an ambulance and a

police presence.”

“What is the nature of the accident?”

Steve’s mind raced. “Machinery,” he said. “A malfunction. A potentially fatal injury.” He had absolutely no idea what lurked behind the gates of the Butler Estate, but he wanted enough sirens to wail outside to spook Mr. Butler.

After Steve gave her the address and got off the phone, he waved toward his truck, and Rina and Isabella followed his lead and leaped inside. Rina sat in the back, and Isabella took the passenger seat. The air was very tense, and it was difficult to breathe. Steve started the engine and shot out of the driveway, and in the distance, the first sirens howled.

“I feel like I’m going to throw up,” Isabella whispered.

“It’s going to be okay, honey,” Steve told her, although he had absolutely no idea if that was true. To Mr. Butler, Rhett was certainly a pawn in a greater scheme and very replaceable. Due to Rhett’s previous record and the fact that he had very little family to speak of, nobody would miss him.

But Isabella would miss him, Steve realized. Mr. Butler had calculated Rhett’s value incorrectly. He hadn’t expected him to get close to anyone with a heart the size of Isabella’s. It was the single luckiest thing Rhett Barley had ever done.

Steve hadn’t driven toward the Butler Estate in decades. Twice in the nineties, he’d taken Laura to work due to her car’s malfunction, and each time, he’d had to hover outside the gate and watch as she greeted the guard and wrote her name in the entrance book. It had been bizarre to him at the time that Mr. Butler wouldn’t allow him to drive his pregnant wife up to the front door. Then again, those had been the early days of the pregnancy; they hadn’t even told his mother yet.

“Imagine our lives, Steve,” Laura had told him all those years ago. *“If I keep working for Mr. Butler, and you keep building your client base at the auto shop, we’ll be golden. Nobody will be able to touch us. Gosh, my entire life, I’ve been so frightened to become a real adult, you know? With all these responsibilities and bills to pay and children to feed. But right*

now, I don't feel so scared anymore. I think it's because I picked the perfect partner to share my life with." Her smile had lit up the sky.

As they neared the Butler Estate, Steve shook off the memories. There wasn't time to dwell on the past, no matter how dangerously close it always seemed to lurk.

"Look!" Isabella pointed at the gates of the Butler Estate, where, already, an ambulance and two cop cars sat with their lights flashing. An EMT worker stood outside the ambulance as a cop spoke to the guard at the gate. There was exasperation on the cop's face.

"I bet Mr. Butler's told the guard never to let cops in without a warrant," Rina breathed.

"And the guard is probably telling them there's no emergency." Isabella wrapped her hand around her neck and seemed to struggle to breathe.

Behind the gate was the sprawling expanse of the Butler grounds. The main mansion was built in typical Victorian fashion, while the guest house just behind was slightly more modern and connected to what looked to be fifteen garages. Steve suspected they were filled with unspeakably nice cars. Occasionally over the years, he'd seen Mr. Butler in a Lamborghini or an Aston Martin or another luxurious vehicle that should have impressed Steve but just left him cold and angry. Steve wasn't a violent man, but he harbored a very small desire to smash through one of Mr. Butler's windshields with a baseball bat.

Now, because of Mr. Butler's threats toward Laura back in 1996, Steve could have done a whole lot more damage.

"It looks like they're about to head out," Isabella whispered.

Two of the cops spoke to one another with their hands on their hips. The guard at the gate had stepped around and now spoke to them through the bars. His face looked annoyed. The EMT worker looked very tired and spoke to another EMT worker through the window of the ambulance.

“Get a little closer, Steve,” Rina urged.

Steve groaned but slowly crept forward. Already, he’d begun to think about his dishonest 9-1-1 call. There would be legal repercussions, that was for sure— and the island would have a field day with that gossip. *What would his mother say?*

Further, it was possible Mr. Butler would find out Steve had been the one who’d called. *What if Mr. Butler decided to whip out his threats again? What if he directed them toward Isabella?*

Abruptly, Isabella shoved open the passenger door and stepped out onto the grass.

“Isabella!” Steve cried. “Get back in the truck.”

Laura had been right not to get deeper involved in the terrors of Mr. Butler. Steve needed to get Isabella back home; he needed to lock the door tight.

But Isabella was acting strange. Her entire body had begun to shake. Steve stepped out of the truck, prepared to throw her back in himself, when Rina cried, “Steve! Look!”

Steve hurried around the truck and then froze with shock at the sight. There, on the other side of their stretch of the fence, a figure staggered from the house. He directed himself toward Steve’s truck, his steps labored. Isabella hurried to the fence to grab the bars as she screamed out, “Rhett!” Her voice echoed across the grounds.

Already, the two cops had returned to their vehicles, and the ambulance had begun to wheel away. But Steve knew something was terribly wrong. With all the power he could muster, he sprinted toward the cops and waved his hands wildly. Although the ambulance began to wheel away, the policemen paused. One of them stepped out of his car and called out, “Are you Steve Montgomery?”

Steve gasped for a breath and flailed his hand toward the young man approaching the fence. As Rhett drew nearer to Isabella, he hunched forward and clutched his stomach.

“There’s something wrong with that young man,” Steve called. “He’s injured!”

The cop took a step toward Isabella and Rhett, his eyes widening. At that point, Rhett staggered the rest of the way to the fence and clutched the bars as he gasped. Isabella gripped his hands and spoke to him very quietly as Rhett began to shake with tears.

“He’s bleeding!” Rina called from the fence. “We need the ambulance! Now!”

The cop rushed toward the ambulance, which had stalled to see what the fuss was about. Immediately, the EMT workers reversed back toward the gate, where the guard stood, flabbergasted. He looked toward Rhett with disbelief.

Steve hurried back toward Rhett and Isabella. Too exhausted, Rhett collapsed at the base of the fence yet continued to hold onto as many of Isabella’s fingers as he could. His eyes were glazed.

And just as Rina had reported, his belly was slick with blood.

“Rhett, what happened?” Steve asked. His voice sounded very strange, as though it didn’t belong to him.

Rhett sputtered, and his eyes searched the sky for a moment before he answered. “She’s okay. She’s still okay.”

Chapter Twenty

Isabella remained at the fence and watched helplessly as the color drained from Rhett's face. He shook and occasionally managed words, yet mostly his strength went to holding her hand and keeping his eyes open. The blood that soaked his shirt seemed monumental yet also fake, as though Isabella's mind couldn't fully comprehend it and therefore made up a fictional story instead. "Come on, Rhett. You're going to be okay. You have to be okay."

"What's taking them so long?" Rina demanded about the ambulance workers and the police.

"The guard is being difficult," Steve explained angrily. "Typical loyalty to Mr. Butler."

"What did you say about a woman being okay?" Isabella whispered to Rhett. "Was it Mandy? Did you find Mandy?"

At the gate, the police arrested the guard, and finally, the gate burst open to allow the ambulance to race down the driveway and come to a stop on the perfectly manicured grass. At no point did Isabella think she was experiencing real life.

The EMT workers paraded toward Rhett with a stretcher. Isabella watched in horror as they cut open his shirt with a pair of scissors to reveal the multiple gashes beneath. *Who would do this to sweet Rhett?*

"Please, back away from the fence!" one of the EMT workers instructed angrily.

"Rhett, tell them what you told me! Is someone else inside?" Isabella called through the bars.

Rhett blinked blearily. The EMT workers looked at Isabella, incredulous.

“Is someone else injured?” one of them asked.

With the last of his strength, Rhett lifted his arm and pointed toward the guest house. “She’s there,” he explained very softly. “Someone, please. Go help her.”

Isabella felt Rina’s hand on her shoulder, drawing her back toward the truck. One of the EMT workers hurried back to discuss what they’d learned with a policeman, who nodded and pressed his earpiece, presumably to call backup. Directly on the other side of the fence, the remaining EMT worker pressed on Rhett’s wound and spoke to him in short and simple language.

“Can I go with him in the ambulance?” Isabella called through the fence.

Beside her, Rina shook her head. “You’re not family, honey. Just let them do what they need to do.”

Isabella crossed her arms hard over her chest and watched as the EMT workers carried Rhett to the ambulance. Once he was safely inside, they snapped the doors closed, clambered into the front seat, and then drove through the grass once more. In a flash, they were back on the road and headed toward the hospital. Their sirens burned through Isabella’s ears.

A sharp wind ripped through them. “Let’s get back in the truck,” Steve instructed.

Isabella forced herself back into the vehicle, but continued to peer through the glass. It was difficult to see much from this distance. Based on what Rhett had told them, the cops hurried toward the guest house and disappeared. Not long after that, another two ambulances wailed toward the house, followed by an army of police cars. They barreled through the now-open gates and gathered around the main house and the guest house without any care for Mr. Butler’s garden aesthetic. Isabella took several photographs of the scene, wishing she could share them with her mother.

“He’d lost so much blood,” Isabella heard herself say quietly. They were the first words anyone had said in over twenty minutes.

Steve took Isabella’s hand, and Isabella turned to lock eyes with her father. In his gaze, she found strength, love, and safety alongside a tremendous fear. As a child, she’d assumed her father could protect her from anything: the monsters under her bed or the bullies at school or the witches she felt sure would come to kidnap her. Now, she understood that Steve was human; he was fallible. But as her father, he would do whatever he could to help her through this life.

“He’s at the hospital now,” Steve assured her. “But he’s only there because you trusted your instincts, Isabella. You knew something was wrong.”

Isabella nodded, not wanting to state the obvious: that maybe, it was too late.

“Oh my gosh. Look.” Rina leaned up from the backseat to point at the guest house, where EMT workers carried another stretcher.

It was impossible to understand what had happened.

After the second ambulance tore out of the driveway, the cops set up a perimeter. They wrapped yellow tape around the guest house and the main house, taking this idealistic “estate” and transforming it into a crime scene. Meanwhile, the workers in the main house streamed out in droves. The police directed them toward a side area, where several officers took initial statements.

“I’ll go find out what they know so far,” Rina said. “I can’t take it anymore.”

Isabella and Steve turned to nod back at her. She looked resolute. She then bounded from the back of the truck and walked toward the open gate as the March wind cut through her bob.

“What a day,” Steve muttered and rubbed his temples.

Isabella watched closely as Rina entered the gates and approached two officers. They greeted her with somber

expressions, yet seemed to know who she was and why she was there. As they spoke, another ambulance crept down the driveway and exited the grounds, yet didn't bother with a siren as it disappeared.

Rina spoke with the officers for approximately five minutes before she shook both of their hands, turned away from them, and placed her phone against her ear. As she walked toward the truck, there were tears in her eyes. Isabella's heart raced.

"That's right," Rina said as she got close enough to the truck to be heard. "You should get in your car right now and get over here. I'm sure she'll want to see you first thing."

Rina hung up the phone and heaved herself into the back of the truck. For a moment, she was very silent. When Isabella turned around, Rina's cheeks were stained with tears, and her eyes were closed with exhaustion.

"Rina? Who were you talking to on the phone?" Isabella asked.

Rina sniffed and wiped her tears with her sleeves. "That was Mandy Dolores' father. It was the very best phone call I've ever been allowed to make."

Steve's eyes widened. "She's okay? She's safe?"

Rina nodded and rubbed her eyes, smearing her eye makeup across her cheeks. "Let's get out of here. I'll explain everything. But I need a cup of coffee and a glass of water, pronto."

"Aye, aye, captain." Steve's smile was enormous. He turned the key in the ignition and thrust them back on the road, where he picked up speed and went way over the limit as they headed toward town. Isabella opened the truck windows, and that same breeze whipped over her face.

Was it really over? Was Mandy really safe? Isabella's head swam with fear and disbelief as, in the backseat, Rina continued to cry. Isabella knew she would remember this afternoon for the rest of her life.

* * *

Steve parked outside a local Oak Bluffs diner, shut the engine off, then led Isabella and Rina inside. The diner was average size, just what the doctor ordered, with plastic menus that advertised breakfast all day and unlimited coffee. A jukebox in the corner played a Carpenters tune, which felt bizarrely upbeat given the strangeness of their day.

It was the middle of the afternoon, and the diner was empty save for an older man with a newspaper and a woman who was reading a book as her baby slept in a carrier beside her. The server approached and smiled as she placed coasters in front of them. It was clear the gossip from Mr. Butler's estate hadn't reached Oak Bluffs yet. When it did, every diner, bar, and restaurant in town would be full and vibrant with conversation. Isabella was certain everyone would say they "always knew Mr. Butler was bad news" because everyone always had to be right.

The waitress returned with coffee and water, then took their orders of pancakes, bacon, eggs, and grilled cheese sandwiches—a worthy feast for such a strange day. Luckily, servers weren't typically judgemental.

"I can't take it anymore," Isabella admitted, eyeing Rina. "You have to tell us what happened!"

Rina blushed and sipped her coffee. "I'm still trying to wrap my mind around it."

"So, Mandy was in that guest house?" Steve asked.

Rina nodded. "Yep. The police don't know much yet, and they didn't want to ask Mandy too many questions before she was ready."

"Did they take her away in an ambulance?" Isabella demanded.

"The third one," Rina reported. "The second one was for Mr. Butler."

"That one seemed like an emergency," Steve remembered.

Rina locked eyes with Isabella. “It seems like there was some kind of fight between Rhett and Mr. Butler. The police’s initial assessment is that Mr. Butler discovered Rhett with Mandy in the guest house, and when Rhett tried to do something about it or get Mandy out of there, Mr. Butler attacked him. Unfortunately for Mr. Butler, Rhett is a twenty-something with a good deal of muscle— and Mr. Butler is in his late fifties. Rhett got away and managed to limp all the way to the fence, thank goodness. If he hadn’t, I’m not sure we would have been able to convince the police to enter the property, and none of this would have ever happened.”

Isabella’s mouth was very dry. She sipped her water, unsure of what to make of any of this.

“But what was Mandy doing in that house?” Isabella whispered.

Rina shook her head. “We still don’t know. All the police told me was that she’s safe. She’s uninjured. And I don’t think I’ve ever heard more relief over the phone than when I called her father to tell him.”

Steve nodded. His eyes were far away. “It seems like an impossible thing.”

“Your friend was very brave,” Rina said to Isabella. “Don’t get me wrong, though. The plan was very, very stupid, and Rhett could have lost his life.”

Isabella’s heart lifted. “The police said they think he’ll be okay?”

“His injuries were serious,” Rina told her. “But initial thought is he’ll make it through.”

“And Mr. Butler?” Isabella asked.

Rina sipped her coffee. “They think he’ll make it, too. But I can’t imagine he’ll be too pleased about his life after his hospital stay. These could be his final days of freedom.”

After they finished their mid-afternoon lunch, their coffees, and their waters, Steve, Rina, and Isabella could think of nothing to do but walk the streets. They wandered along the wharf, stepped into tourist shops, tried on hats that said “The

Vineyard,” and ate ice cream as the temperatures plummeted. It didn’t seem right to go home and wait to hear more news. They needed to feel a part of the world after what they’d witnessed.

When evening came, Isabella, Steve, and Rina entered a dive bar. It was the same one Rina and Steve had gone to together the first time Isabella had spied on them. As they slid into their booth, Isabella recounted the story, saying, “I saw you guys through that window over there on Saturday. You both were cracking each other up.”

Rina and Steve caught one another’s eyes over the table, and the air between the three of them shifted. Momentarily, Isabella regretted bringing it up.

Around them, the dive bar came alive in a symphony of gossip. This, Isabella realized, was the reason she’d wanted to come inside. A television that hung over the bar spoke of a “MAJOR CRIMINAL EVENT” at the Butler Estate, and islanders gathered beneath the television and peered up, aghast. Steve got on the phone and called Jonathon, who arrived only ten minutes later, breathless.

“Is it true? They found Mandy Dolores at Mr. Butler’s?” Jonathon staggered into the booth and eyed Rina curiously.

“And it’s all thanks to Isabella,” Steve said proudly.

“It’s actually thanks to Mom’s diary,” Isabella affirmed.

Jonathon smacked his hands on the table like an excited kid. “Who would have thought Mom would solve a serious crime even after her death? I knew she was a genius, but this takes the cake.”

Everyone at the table chuckled, even Rina. Jonathon waved the server over to take his beer order, and Isabella placed her head on her brother’s shoulder and allowed herself to fully relax for the first time in months. The events of the day had exhausted her— but they’d given her hope for a better future.

Maybe, just maybe, the world wasn’t such a bad place after all. Maybe the bad guys really did lose eventually. Maybe

good always defeated evil.

Chapter Twenty-One

It had only been two days since the incident at the Butler Estate, but already, information about Mr. Butler had begun to seep to the surface.

Isabella and Lexi sat on Grandma Kerry's couch in the Montgomery house with mugs of hot cocoa and watched the "unfolding investigation" with rapt attention. At some point, it was difficult for Isabella to remember she'd been very much involved with the investigation itself. Safe in the warmth of Grandma Kerry and Grandpa Trevor's home, as spring light streamed in through the windows, it was hard to force herself to remember Rhett's injuries and Mr. Butler's cruelty and Rina's face after she'd called Mandy's father to tell him the news.

Suddenly, a familiar face appeared on the screen. It was Rina. With her shining bob and her chic suit, she looked sharp and intellectual, and she spoke to the camera with poise. Under her name, the news had labeled her: "detective." Isabella shivered with pride.

"According to recent evidence, we have reason to believe Franklin Butler was involved in the 1995 disappearance of Felicity Rodgers here on the island of Martha's Vineyard. Based on what we've learned about Mandy Dolores' case, we feel the cases are incredibly similar and hope that as we dig deeper into Butler's mechanisms, new information about Felicity Rodgers will come out."

"Goodness." Grandma Kerry hustled around the living room nervously. "I just can't believe your mother ever worked

for that horrible man.”

“She knew he was horrible,” Isabella pointed out. “And now, the rest of the world knows, too.”

Grandma Kerry paused and nibbled at the edge of the cookie, listening as Rina continued to speak about the Mandy Dolores case, which the journalist on the news broadcast pushed her for. Although everyone knew Mandy was safe, there was still an aura of mystery around what had happened. Rina hadn’t even told Steve or Isabella what she’d learned yet.

“I’ve been in conversation with Mandy Dolores,” Rina explained, “And she’s told me nothing is off-limits, as she prays nothing like this will happen to a young woman like her again.

“According to Mandy, Franklin Butler reached out to her about six months ago via email. He’d read her first novel of historical fiction, which was set here, on the island of Martha’s Vineyard. In what Mandy calls a ‘thoughtful email,’ he explained how much he enjoyed her writing style and her character development yet told her he believed there were ‘holes’ in her work about Martha’s Vineyard.

“Naturally, this raised alarm for Mandy. She’d only published one novel, and now, she was frightened she was a hack, that she couldn’t actually make it in the historical fiction world, and that people like Mr. Butler could see all the way through her. It was a writer’s worst nightmare.

“Mandy wrote Franklin Butler back to ask a range of questions about the island and its history. She explained she was working on a second book and that her agent was interested in it— but that now, she had second thoughts about whether or not she was getting everything right. Mr. Butler wrote back immediately, saying he’d be happy to help. He was a writer himself, he explained, and had unlimited resources on historical texts and artifacts here on Martha’s Vineyard. This pleased Mandy to no end. Not only did someone seem to ‘get’ her writing, but he wanted to help her push it. Beyond that, Mandy had researched Franklin Butler to learn he was one of

the wealthiest men on Martha's Vineyard. He'd begun to drop hints about his wealth, describing the vacations he'd been on and asking her if she'd ever considered writing historical texts in Paris or Rome.

“As their correspondence continued, Mr. Butler wrote differently, more earnestly, and with a touch of romanticism. Mandy Dolores tells me she was so wrapped up in their correspondence, that she began to fantasize about coming to Martha's Vineyard to see Franklin Butler in real life. She said her online relationship with Franklin Butler began to feel like the only real thing she knew.

“As we now understand, Franklin Butler used manipulation tactics to make Mandy Dolores think he was the only person she needed in the world. When she sent him samples of her current historical fiction project, he ridiculed her and told her she would never get it quite right if she didn't come to the Vineyard so that he could help her every single day.

“Mandy's fantasies about coming to the island to write books with Franklin Butler and even marry him one day became too enormous to bear, and so she arranged to come to the Vineyard, telling her parents and her boyfriend she needed to do research.

“When Mandy reached the Vineyard, she realized there was something very wrong with her relationship with Franklin Butler. He was very possessive of her, of her writing, and of her time, so much so that he often turned off her phone when they were together and demanded she stay in his estate for days at a time without contact with the outside world. Eventually, of course, he didn't give her phone back to her at all. He told her this was healthy for her and good for her career and their relationship. At this point, Mandy was emotionally damaged by him and unable to see any other reality. We often see this in abusive relationships. The victims involved no longer see themselves as victims. They feel their abusers know them better than anyone and therefore know what they need more than anyone.

“Franklin Butler kept Mandy in the basement of the guest house of his enormous estate and told her she was not to leave without him. If she left, he explained, it meant she was disrespecting him. He also kept her meals regimented, so much so that she lost twenty pounds since her arrival to the island.”

On-screen, Rina allowed her face to fall with sorrow. She clutched the handle of her microphone and swallowed, struggling to go on.

“What happened to Mandy happens all over the United States and the world in varying degrees every single day,” Rina continued. “Franklin Butler thought he was too big, too powerful, and too rich for anyone to catch on to what he was doing. But when Rhett Barley, who was previously accused of having something to do with Mandy’s disappearance, broke into the guest house and discovered Mandy, who was malnourished and suffering a sort of psychosis, he did what anyone would have done. He tried to get Mandy out of there. At that point, Franklin Butler attacked Rhett with a butcher knife, and Barley barely managed his escape.”

“My gosh.” Grandma Kerry collapsed on the couch next to Isabella and took her hand. “That poor girl.”

The news broadcast went to a commercial break, and Isabella, Lexi, and Grandma Kerry sat for a while, dumbfounded.

“It’s weird, isn’t it?” Lexi began. “I mean, she came here on her own. She went to his estate on her own. She seemed to give him everything because he told her she should. In some ways, she was never ‘missing.’ She disappeared herself.”

“I’m not sure it works that way,” Isabella countered. “He brainwashed her. I don’t think she understood what she wanted anymore.”

Grandma Kerry nodded and took another cookie from the platter on the table. “The brain is a tricky thing, isn’t it? But what that detective lady said is right— this sort of thing has always been common, at least in varying degrees. Back when I was growing up and even into my adulthood, women were

expected to obey their husbands above all things. I knew plenty of women whose husbands hit them sometimes.”

Lexi and Isabella looked at their grandmother, complete shock marring their faces.

“Some men want power above all else,” Grandma Kerry continued. “They get high off of it. I imagine that’s all this was for Franklin Butler. He used Mandy Dolores, destroyed her ego and her psyche, all to feed off of her.”

Isabella frowned, at a loss. “I wonder if that’s what he did to Felicity Rodgers, too.”

Grandma Kerry shook her head. “It’s been so long since anyone saw Felicity Rodgers. Who knows what happened to her?”

* * *

Later that afternoon, Isabella and Lexi went to Lexi’s second-hand boutique to collect Mandy’s cherry-colored dress. They folded it neatly in a big gift box and walked over to the beautiful vacation apartments near the harbor, where Rina waited for them in a long and regal spring coat.

“I think Mandy will be very pleased to have this back,” Rina said as she took the box. “It sounds like the hotel took a lot of her stuff to the boutique before anyone knew she was missing. Getting the dress back to her will hopefully allow her to heal a little bit.”

“She can come to the boutique any time to go through the rest of the clothes,” Lexi offered. “Maybe she can find the rest of her things.”

“She isn’t up for a lot right now,” Rina explained. “She and her parents are laying low and making plans to head back to Pittsburgh. Although it’s beautiful here, I can’t imagine she wants to stay for long.”

Isabella nodded. “How is she doing?”

“It’s going to be a long road to unlearn what he did to her,” Rina said. She then stiffened her jaw to add, “I know I’m not your mother, but I need to say this. You don’t owe men anything. You don’t owe them your time or your intelligence or your sense of self-worth.”

Rina’s eyes glinted with sorrow. For the first time since Rina had entered their lives, Isabella wondered what sorts of pain Rina had gone through in the past. In her forties, with no husband and no children, it was clear something had happened. Someone had broken her heart.

“We know,” Lexi said.

“We do,” Isabella agreed.

Rina shook her head and remained quiet for a moment. “Have you seen Rhett yet?”

“The hospital said I can visit him tomorrow,” Isabella explained.

“Good. Good.” Rina seemed depleted. She stared at the ground for a moment, and Isabella wondered when she’d last slept.

“You should go back to the Sunrise Cove,” Isabella insisted. “Mandy’s safe. Mr. Butler’s in custody. You did everything you needed to do.”

Suddenly, Rina’s phone began to buzz in her hand. She lifted it at an angle that allowed Isabella to read the name.

It said: **STEVE**.

Isabella’s heart pattered quickly. Rina looked at her as though she was a frightened child.

“You should get that,” Isabella said with a smile.

“We’re just friends,” Rina said hurriedly. “I completely respect that he’s not ready. I don’t think I would be ready, either.”

Isabella nodded, grateful for Rina’s understanding. “Thank you for understanding. He needs as many friends as he can get.”

Rina's cheeks were crimson. Quickly, she turned away from Isabella and answered the phone, her voice like honey. "Hi, Steve. Did you still want to grab dinner?"

On the walk back to the boutique, Lexi and Isabella bought Diet Coke and chatted easily about simple things. It felt remarkable to talk about sailing, beach picnics, and Lexi's newest crush. It occurred to Isabella that she hadn't thought she'd be allowed to say anything normal again after what had happened. Still, time always had a way of pressing forward.

"Do you think Rhett will stay on the island?" Lexi asked contemplatively.

"Would you?" Isabella asked.

"I don't know. I'm not sure if there's anywhere else in the world I'd rather be."

Isabella sipped her Diet Coke and remained quiet. Again, she considered where she might have been or what she might have been doing had she made it to New York City. But soon, the imaginary images slipped away from her mind, taken away on a Vineyard breeze.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Isabella was nervous about going to see Rhett. Her stomach fluttered with butterflies as though this was their second date, and she changed her outfit several times and fine-tuned her eyeliner with a hand that wouldn't quit shaking. After a spritz of perfume, she turned toward her bedside table to find the stack of diaries from her mother. There were so many years she hadn't read through yet— still so much to learn about her mother. She looked forward to it.

To bring her mother's voice back into her head before this "mock date," Isabella searched for the year 1999 and soon found herself immersed in a world of Laura, toddler Jonathon, and baby Isabella.

October 22, 1999

It was warm today, and I convinced Steve to abandon the auto shop so we could bring Isabella and Jonathon to the beach for the last picnic of the year. Together, Steve and I lay on a blanket across the sand as Jonathon raced up and down the beach, using the power of his growing lungs to cry out whatever words came to his mind first. Meanwhile, baby Isabella slept peacefully, with her long eyelashes so long and black against her doll-like face.

I suppose anyone can see how enamored I am with my children. Lately, I've wondered if I love them too much. I hope I don't become one of those mothers who can't stand to be

apart from them, so much so that they don't know how to grow up. They don't deserve that kind of life.

I expressed this fear to Steve, and he laughed and kissed me. He said my instincts are perfect and that I'll know how to let them go when the time is right. I teased him and said he was still too attached to his mother, and he laughed and said that was probably true. "But Kerry Montgomery is tough. She won't let me go."

Of course, this year, we've had significant sorrows, just as every year. It's been a few years since Steve's Aunt Anna passed away in that horrific boating accident, and the Sheridan and Montgomery families have reeled ever since. On top of that, Steve's brother, Andy, abandoned the family and took off—seemingly with a wish never to speak to any of us again. Steve's heartbroken about that. He keeps saying all he wanted was to play baseball in the backyard with his little brother till he was old and gray.

There is no reason we've had such good luck in our lives—in the same breath, there's no reason anything bad has happened. I pray I'll be allowed to be with my children for as long as they need me, that nothing will happen—that I won't get into a stupid accident or choke on a meatball or any number of other horrible things that can happen to someone. Then again, I know I don't have full control over that. Well, maybe I can make sure I chew my food all the way through, but that's about it.

I'll end the journal entry like this.

My entire body, soul, and mind live for the love I have for my babies and my husband. I am grateful for every minute I'm able to spend with them. I know it isn't forever—that nothing is. But right now, it's the only thing I know, and I am at peace.

* * *

Isabella stopped at Aunt Claire's to buy flowers and chocolates for Rhett. Claire created a beautiful bouquet filled with lilies

and baby's breath and tied a bow around it with artful finesse, then passed it over the counter. "No charge," she insisted.

"Do you think it's stupid I'm bringing a boy some flowers?" Isabella asked nervously.

Claire laughed. "Did God put flowers on earth just for us girls? I don't think so. Any man who says he doesn't appreciate flowers is not right in the head."

Isabella thanked Claire and walked the rest of the way to the hospital with the bouquet in her hands. She got several strange glances from tourists, who eyed the flowers and her pretty floral dress and probably assumed she was headed to a party or a wedding. Unsure of what to do, Isabella smiled at them nervously, considering what they would have said had she told them the truth. "They're for this guy I sort of have a crush on. He was in jail last week, and now he's in the hospital, but he's also a hero, which is really something." They would have assumed she was crazy.

As Isabella mounted the stairs to get to Rhett's hospital unit, a thought struck her with powerful force. *What if she had kids with this guy?* She had never in her life considered this with anyone—and the idea nearly knocked her to her knees. *Was this a premonition? Or was she just a silly girl with a big heart and big emotions and nowhere to put them?*

Rhett sat up in his hospital bed so that his black curls cascaded across his pillow. Although he looked sleepy, his smile widened as Isabella entered, and a shiver of fear raced up her spine. Even in his hospital gown, he was devilishly handsome.

"Hi," he said gently.

"Hi." Goodness, she sounded nervous. For a moment, she hovered beside his bed with a stupid grin on her face, then said, "I brought you flowers."

"They're beautiful." Rhett reached out to take them, and his thumb grazed Isabella's fingers.

It occurred to Isabella that she hadn't seen Rhett at all since he'd been bleeding out in front of her. The light had left

his eyes. Oh, she'd never thought she would see him alive again. How terrible.

"How are you feeling?" Isabella asked.

"Like I got stabbed," Rhett said with a laugh.

Isabella winced and stepped closer to the bed. Her instinct was to crawl into bed with him and cuddle beneath the sheets.

"They bandaged me up pretty good," Rhett continued. "And told me I have to lay low for a few months. But all told, old Mr. Butler didn't do as much damage as he wanted to."

Isabella winced at Mr. Butler's name.

"By the way." Rhett's smile waned. "I'm sorry I was such an idiot for trusting that guy. You must have no respect for me after all this."

"What? No. You have it all wrong," Isabella corrected him. "He was well-respected across the entire island. Why would you have thought any differently?"

Rhett shook his head. After a pause, he said, "When I walked into the guest room basement and found Mandy there, I knew something was really wrong. She looked at me like a caged animal. But the thing was, there was no lock on the door. She could have left at any time."

"She's been very sick," Isabella whispered.

"Mr. Butler's the kind of freak who likes making people that sick, I guess," Rhett breathed. "I've had a lot of time to think in this hospital bed. And I've worried so much about how I might have ended up if I'd worked for him longer. Would he have manipulated me even more? Turned me into some twisted freak?"

"You shouldn't think like that," Isabella said.

Rhett sighed. "I like to think I would have seen through it at some point."

"You would have," Isabella told him. "Because you're inherently good."

Rhett lifted his eyes to hers. “I hope you’re right,” he said. “If you’re not, I’ll try to be, at least.” He then reached up to tuck her hair behind her ear tenderly. Isabella hadn’t realized how close she’d gotten to him, as though there was a magnet between them.

“Do you think you’ll stay on the island?” Isabella asked.

Rhett considered this. “I talked to my brother on the phone. He asked me to come to stay with him for a while.”

Isabella nodded. “Of course.”

Rhett’s eyes twinkled. “But the thing is, I keep hearing how amazing summers on Martha’s Vineyard are. How could I miss my first one?”

As Isabella shimmered with excitement and searched for something to say, one of the nurses on Rhett’s floor hustled in.

“You have to watch the news!” the nurse cried as she turned the television on.

Rhett and Isabella lifted their eyes to the screen, where a banner read: BREAKING NEWS.

The same journalist who’d interviewed Rina the day before appeared on-screen. She was stationed outside of Oak Bluffs harbor, and as she spoke, she was animated and incredulous. The nurse turned up the sound so they could hear.

“This afternoon, we received word about an open case from the nineties, one expected to be tied to the Mandy Dolores case,” the journalist said.

“Oh my gosh,” Isabella breathed.

“This morning in the Florida Keys, a woman stepped into her local police station and told authorities she was once called Felicity Rodgers,” the journalist continued. “Rodgers, who has gone by Violet Summers since 1996, has given a statement.”

Suddenly, the screen switched to show a traditional newsroom. There, a woman in her forties or fifties sat primly, her long legs crossed. Despite her sleek dress and her perfectly styled and beautiful blond hair, she looked skittish, as though

she knew where all the exits were. Beneath her face, the station had written: ‘Violet Summers: “I used to be Felicity Rodgers.”’

To Isabella, who’d researched Felicity online after reading her mother’s diary, this woman looked very much like Felicity Rodgers from the nineties. The ages seemed to match, as did the facial features.

Still, it was incredible. It was almost beyond belief.

“Hello, Violet. Thank you for coming in today to tell your side of the story,” the journalist in the Florida Keys said. She was clearly very pleased to break this story to the entire world.

“Thank you for having me.” The woman who was maybe Felicity’s voice wavered. “You can call me Felicity, I suppose.”

“Yes. Felicity.” The journalist furrowed her brow. “Would you like to tell me what you told the police this morning when you entered the station here in the Florida Keys?”

Felicity took a deep breath. “Okay. Well, back in 1994, I began an affair with a married man named Franklin Butler. At the time, I was married and living in Newark, New Jersey, but I was terribly unhappy with my life. I had always been a beauty queen, an actress, and a model, but I was aging, as we all do, and I’d begun to get fewer and fewer offers. This took a toll not only on my self-esteem, but also on my marriage, as I no longer felt wanted. I suppose that’s how I would put it.”

The journalist continued to nod. “That’s understandable.”

“I met Mr. Butler at a function for models,” Felicity continued. “And meeting him was one of the single most electric moments of my life. I swear, I thought to myself, ‘I’m going to marry this man’ as soon as he shook my hand. My girlfriend was with me, and she noticed the spark between us, too. She told me to be careful. I was married, which I knew, but I was also reckless, which she knew, too. She also told me not to get involved with very rich and powerful men, which I found ridiculous at the time. Franklin Butler was giving me the

kind of attention I felt I deserved. What sane woman would have refused it?"

Felicity's eyes darkened. "I began to visit him on Martha's Vineyard. He rented expensive villas and beautiful hotel rooms, and I found myself wrapped up in him. Anything I wanted, he gave to me. We took trips to France, Italy, and Los Angeles. When I was on his arm, all eyes were upon us. We were important.

"At some point, Franklin spoke about my career in a way that, to me, seemed kind and open-hearted. He wanted to help, he said. He wanted to get me back into the film industry; he wanted to get me more modeling contracts. All at once, he was my agent, my acting coach, my boyfriend, my everything. I could not eat a peanut without telling him.

"Because I was so in love with him and so enmeshed, I didn't notice how strange it was at first. He gave me everything—and my career was suddenly something he wanted to enliven, which pleased me. I wanted that, too. The first time he hit me was when I didn't secure a modeling contract he'd wanted for me. He insisted I hadn't done everything he'd told me to, and I was pretty sure I hadn't. I apologized, and we continued.

"But things got even worse after that. My husband, of course, knew I was having an affair, but I no longer cared about him and told him I planned to leave him. I never saw my parents or friends. The girlfriend who'd warned me about Franklin stopped calling; she'd had a baby at that point and was no longer interested in my glitz and glam. Oh, but Franklin and I had the world.

"And then, the beatings became more routine. I found myself hiding bruises on my neck and cheeks before auditions. I lost weight, so much of it that I started to get modeling contracts again. But it had gone on too long. I was like a feral animal.

"I knew I had to run to save myself. It wasn't ever about him. It was about the person I'd become with him. So, one afternoon when he was playing golf, I walked leisurely

through the grounds, which is something I never, ever did because he didn't like it. When I reached the gate, I found myself flirting with the guard, asking him questions. Nobody suspected anything strange. He told me he wasn't usually allowed to open the gate until Mr. Butler had instructed him specifically, but I asked him if I could leave the grounds momentarily to go birdwatching in the forest across the road. The guard was an avid birder, and he instructed me exactly where to go to see the birds I wanted to see.

“When I got out of the gate, I walked into the woods for a very long time. I felt out of my mind and terrified. Nearly every part of me told me to go back to the grounds and return to the safety of Franklin Butler. Instead, I collapsed in the middle of the woods and woke up after dark. I realized I'd been gone too long at that point, that Franklin would hurt me badly if I returned now. So that was that. I had to get away from him. I had to go where he would never be able to track me down. And I had to start a new life.”

The journalist was captivated. For a moment, she didn't know what to say.

“Why didn't you go to the police?” she asked finally.

Felicity scoffed, but not unkindly. “What could I have told them? That I was so in love with my boyfriend that it was making me crazy? That I couldn't do anything without asking him first? No. My story is one of a hopeless romantic gone wrong. All I wanted in the world was love, but what I got was a very twisted, demented version.”

The journalist nodded. “I imagine it was difficult for you to hear what happened to Mandy Dolores.”

“I hate that this happened to her, and I'm so glad that young man discovered her and took matters into his own hands. Now that Franklin is in custody, I'm free,” Felicity whispered. “It's been twenty-seven years since I felt that way. I can't translate how wonderful it feels. I can finally breathe again.”

After the broadcast cut to a commercial, Isabella turned very slowly to lock eyes with Rhett. He looked just as

flabbergasted as she felt.

And then, he said something perfect. “I wish your mother was here to see this.”

Isabella’s eyes filled with tears as she strung her fingers through his. “I feel like she is, in a way.”

Rhett smiled. “My life has been upside down since I met you.”

“Mine, too,” Isabella said.

“Do you think we’ll find a way to turn our lives upright again?”

“I wonder if we’ll get bored with normality.” Isabella laughed gently.

“Naw. I think a little normality could be good for us,” Rhett countered. “In fact, I think it’s about time I took you out for our second date. What do you say?”

Chapter Twenty-Three

It was the first day of April, a Saturday. Steve was at the auto shop, finishing up a tire rotation as spring sunlight and fresh air filtered through the smog of the garage. In the office, Isabella typed at the computer as Rhett sat on a plastic chair with a book open on his lap. The book, a gift from Steve, was called: *Mechanics For Beginners*, and already, the young man had torn through it, making notes to himself in the margins. Steve's recent admission that he "needed some help around the garage" had been enough to light a fire under him.

"You always wanted me to take over the garage," Jonathon had joked when he'd heard about this. "And Isabella is head over heels for him already. Maybe you can keep the place in the family, after all."

Steve's client came not long after to collect his vehicle and pay up. Steve followed him in and talked with him about baseball season and the approaching warm weather, and Rhett even stood up to join the conversation, wincing slightly from his wounds. Sometimes, Rhett's profound bravery knocked Steve back. *Had Rhett really gone after Mr. Butler like that? Had he really saved that young woman's life?*

It was difficult to comprehend.

After the client drove his car away, Isabella announced, "Grandma Kerry wants a spontaneous family party today."

Steve laughed and grabbed a diet soda from under the counter. "Your grandmother can find any reason for a party."

Rhett laughed. “Now that I’ve tried her cooking, I think there aren’t enough family parties.”

“If you want Grandma to feed you more often, you just have to go over there and ask,” Isabella joked. “She already dotes on you more than anyone else.”

Rhett laughed and hugged Isabella from the side, which made Steve look away. Although he liked Rhett and liked the two of them together, he would never get over the sheer fact that his daughter had had to grow up. *Who had allowed that?*

His mother texted him, which was a welcome distraction from the love birds.

MOM: Party today. Three p.m. sharp. Make sure you bring your detective friend with you.

Steve’s cheeks burned with embarrassment. Despite the fact he’d told his mother over and over again he and Rina were just friends, she poked and prodded the issue almost constantly. Isabella had said, “She’s just fascinated with Rina ever since she saw her on the news.” More than that, though, Steve knew nobody wanted him to be alone.

His friendship with Rina had grown more beautiful and more nuanced since the incident at the Butler Estate. They went for walks, ate dinners, shared beers, and chatted about anything that came to mind. Often, their conversations opened Steve up to the world in surprising ways, as though he hadn’t realized how closed off he’d been since Laura’s death. Or maybe, because Rina was a very different person from Laura, with very different stories and opinions, Steve was just learning and developing new parts of himself, which was a remarkable thing.

Rina still had a flight to California booked for April 3rd, and she’d told him she didn’t plan to miss it. There was another case she wanted to get home for. There was a life she had to get back to. Steve understood, and he wasn’t even really disappointed. He genuinely wasn’t ready for whatever romance brewed between them.

Still, there was an air of mystery surrounding what they could be for one another in the future. This kept Steve hoping. Laura would have wanted that.

Outside the auto shop, Steve called Rina and asked if she was willing to go to his parents' place for a small family gathering. Although she said yes, her voice was hesitant. Later, she would tell him she was terrified to get too attached to his family, as she'd already begun to like him so much, but right now, Steve worried she didn't want to go. Rina assured him she wouldn't miss it for the world. She would meet him there at three.

Steve, Rhett, and Isabella arrived a few minutes before three to find most of the Montgomerys already scattered across the backyard, stationed in the kitchen, or drinking iced tea on the porch. Kerry bustled from the kitchen to hug Isabella, then Rhett, and then Steve, and she doted on them even more than the others, perhaps because of all the worry she'd gone through after the events at the Butler Estate. "If I had known you were going to that terrible place, I would have fallen apart at the seams," she liked to say.

Jonathon and Steve's father sat on the back porch with domestic beers and watched Jonathon's kids play in the grass with Lexi, Rachel, Gail, and Abby. It was remarkable to see the four female cousins so grown up— in their late teens and early twenties. Steve still remembered when a Montgomery Family Party meant screaming kids in every direction: hours of spilled milk, cries, ecstatic yelling, and the exaltation of nap time. It had been exhausting. *How had he and Laura managed it?*

"Hey, Dad!" Jonathon stood and hugged his father, as did Trevor. Trevor then grabbed a domestic beer from the cooler and passed it to Steve as he said, "Rumor has it you have a lady friend coming by."

Steve rolled his eyes and cracked his beer. "Just a friend."

"That's what I said. Lady. Friend." Trevor smiled.

"When will the Montgomery family stop meddling in each other's business?" Steve laughed.

“I guess when hell freezes over,” Jonathon said.

“Did you hear Franklin Butler tried to get Susan Sheridan to be his defense attorney?” Steve’s father asked.

“What? No. I hadn’t heard that,” Steve said.

“Yep. His people approached her and offered a big number to do it,” Trevor continued. “But she refused. She said she was too close to the case.”

“Wow. I guess he thought she was his only hope,” Steve said.

“Even if Susan had been his attorney, that guy’s going away for a while,” Trevor affirmed. “Firstly, he hurt our Rhett, which is a no-go. But secondly, the police finally dug into his paperwork and did not find it to be above board in the slightest. The man has been manipulating the system for years.”

Steve sighed. He’d known that since the nineties. It was old news.

“Hello?” Kerry appeared at the porch door and wore a mysterious smile. “Steve, your guest is here.”

Kerry led Rina out onto the back porch, and Steve stood abruptly to greet her. To his surprise, Rina had exchanged her normal business casual for a floral dress, and she’d styled her hair so that it curled beautifully around her ears. She blushed nervously and handed Kerry a bottle of wine.

“I brought this,” she said. “I hope it’s okay.”

“Oh! A California red,” Kerry said, impressed. “We have a California lady in our midst, Trevor. Let’s be on our best behavior, okay?”

“She’s always telling me to be on my best behavior,” Trevor said as he stood to greet Rina. “I’m starting to think she has a problem with me.”

“I don’t have a problem with you,” Kerry corrected. “I love you to pieces. I just know you can put your foot in your mouth sometimes.” She then walked from the porch with the

air of a woman who had full control over the family, whether you liked it or not.

“Thanks for coming,” Steve said to Rina.

“It’s my pleasure,” Rina told him quietly. “On the drive over here, I was thinking about what you said about the sun. How, in California, we take it for granted because we always have it.”

Steve nodded, remembering the conversation.

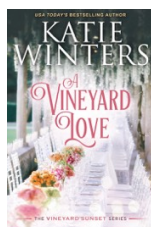
“I get it,” Rina said tenderly. “After those blustery and chilly days of March, the sun and warmth today feel miraculous. I genuinely feel like a new person.”

“She gets it!” Trevor said from the table with a smile.

Steve laughed, blushing as Rina gazed up at him with those big, beautiful eyes. Very soon, Kerry would holler that dinner was ready— that everyone was needed with clean hands at the table. They would gather, say grace, and feast on a glorious meal there beneath that warm April sun. Somehow, he, Isabella, Rhett, and Rina had gotten through the horrific events of the previous few weeks. Now, there was finally a reason to celebrate and give thanks for the tremendous gifts they’d been given.

The best-made plans of mice and men often go awry. But that was okay, sometimes. You had to find a way to enjoy the ride.

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