

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

# THE BOOKSTORE SISTERS

A SHORT STORY



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Alice Hoffman

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THE  
BOOKSTORE  
SISTERS

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**T**he letter to Isabel Gibson arrived on a Tuesday, which had always been the unluckiest day of the week. Tuesdays were meant for accidents, disappointments, and bad news. Long ago, the day was considered to belong to Mars, the god of war and blood. Now it just meant trouble—it meant that your past could come back to haunt you. Isabel stuffed the letter, which was postmarked from Brinkley’s Island, into her pocket without looking at it, since no news was good news as far as she was concerned, then she promptly forgot about it. She was good at forgetting; she had practiced for years, and it was now a skill at which she excelled. When she tried, she was able to forget not only Brinkley’s Island, which held her worst childhood memories, but the entire state of Maine, where she had spent her first eighteen years. She could forget she was divorced, after five unhappy years; she could forget she was thirty-two and ate most of her meals alone in her apartment on Eighteenth Street, where the stove was temperamental and often refused to light. She could even forget that she had once been considered the girl most likely to become somebody, when she’d turned out to be nobody in particular. When Isabel really tried, she could block out everything around her. She could even forget it was June, which had once been her favorite time of year, before everything went wrong.

Isabel was now a full-time dog walker in Manhattan, where she had lived ever since finishing art school twelve years earlier. She’d had promise back then—all her teachers had told her so—but promise can disappear if you leave it to flounder, and now she had five dogs to walk on a daily basis, a troupe that included a well-behaved Labrador retriever who was left alone in his apartment for ten hours each day, a Jack Russell terrier who didn’t listen to a word she said, two standard poodles who barely looked at her and only related to each other, and a sheepdog who liked to nip whenever he had the chance. Isabel didn’t think about the letter that had arrived until she was sitting in the Madison Square dog park. She had already delivered four of her dogs to their homes and was alone with the Labrador retriever, named Hank. She usually

had Hank for most of the day even though she was only paid for three of those hours; she couldn't bear to bring him home to an empty apartment. Every time she did, she could hear him howling as she walked down the hallway, and it nearly broke her heart, something she didn't even think she had anymore. Forgetting you had one could nearly make it so.

Isabel took the envelope from the pocket of her spring coat, bought on sale at Saks when she was still married and using Roger's credit cards as often as possible. Roger had said that even though she had married him, she had never made a real commitment and had always neglected him. He blamed her for all that had gone wrong between them, and she might have believed him if she hadn't discovered a scrap of paper in his jacket with script that was girlish and unfamiliar. *This morning was heaven.* As it turned out, when Roger went out running early in the day, he was also having an affair, so that was the end of that. Any possibility of a commitment was over.

Before the divorce was official, Isabel charged purchases she didn't need or want at Burberry and Coach and Saks at a mad pace, all on Roger's cards. For a while, she bought two of everything, and sent the doubles to her sister, Sophie, but she never received a thank-you note. For all she knew, her sister had thrown the expensive purses and sweaters in the trash or had given them to the jumble sale that was held at the community center each summer. It seemed it was impossible for them to be sisters again, and if the letter that had arrived was from Sophie, as Isabel suspected it was, it was likely to be full of anger and blame over the huge falling-out they'd had the last time they'd been together.

No matter what, the craggy landscape of Brinkley's Island had managed to surface in all Isabel's paintings. She could be at the Hudson River sketching out an urban river scene only to wind up with a painting of the rocky beach at the harbor or the meadow behind the house where she'd grown up, so filled with lupines that the whole world turned blue and pink and white. Isabel had sold off the last of her paintings for twenty-

five dollars apiece at the flea market in Chelsea, so that she could continue to forget. Mostly she tried to forget her own bad behavior the last time she'd seen her sister. Born two years apart, she and Sophie had been best friends, but that was long ago. They had grown up in the cottage attached to the Once upon a Time Bookshop, a place locals treated as if it were their personal library. People brought the books home, then returned them once they'd been read, without bothering to pay, with the margins filled with cheerful remarks and blasting critiques. Isabel's father, Shaun Gibson, was beloved on the island and always encouraged people to read as much as they wished to, but that didn't mean he was financially adept, and money was always a struggle; in the end there was no money at all.

When Shaun died, during Isabel's last year of school in New York, she wanted to sell the bookstore, but Sophie said they'd be dismantling their heritage and destroying their past, which was exactly the point as far as Isabel could see. Their past was miserable, wasn't it? Their mother had passed away when Isabel was ten and Sophie twelve, after two terrible years of an illness that had caused their beautiful mother to remain in bed with the curtains drawn. Isabel had spent most of those two years escaping into books. When their mother stopped baking, her favorite thing to do, and they knew how bad it was, Isabel stopped reading. There was no longer any way to escape what was happening to them. Afterward, their father was out most nights at the tavern, drowning his pain, until Sophie ran to get him and bring him home. That was what Isabel wished to forget most of all. The sorrow she felt when she'd been alone in her room and had heard her sister crying late at night when she thought no one could hear. That was when she began to plan her escape from the island.

As for the bookstore, she'd been convinced it would only land them in bankruptcy once their father had passed on, the year after Isabel had moved to New York. He'd had an emotional attachment to a place that was failing, and Sophie had inherited that trait. When the sisters had argued, Sophie had hired a lawyer and won, although Isabel didn't know what

exactly her sister had won, other than outstanding debt and a store filled with dusty editions that were piled to the ceiling. The back room, which had once been Isabel's favorite place to read, had stacks of myths, fairy tales, novels, and histories, along with books of maps, their father's favorites, for he had always planned to travel the world someday. That day had never come, and he'd gone exactly nowhere. The idea of going nowhere haunted Isabel; she had taken a few trips, to Mexico and California, but each time she had she'd thought, *What am I doing here all alone?*

The case between the sisters was heard at the small white courthouse on Main Street, where fifty of Shaun Gibson's closest friends came to testify that the bookstore must remain and was, in fact, a historical site, for the building had been put up in 1670. The attached house was known as Red Rose Cottage, and the roses that grew there could not be found anywhere else in Maine and were thought to have been brought over from England when the first settlers arrived. A botanical expert was asked to testify and called the roses a national treasure.

The day at the courthouse had been a huge show of support for the bookstore, since there were only sixty people living on the island year round, and it seemed all of them had shown up. The island was a well-known summer place where the population swelled in June, July, and August. The summer people came and went and were considered outsiders even if they were second-generation visitors. The year-rounders all knew each other, and they knew they wanted a bookstore, and that was that, case closed. Afterward, Isabel and Sophie had never spoken again. They vowed they would never see one another, but then Sophie suffered a tragedy that Isabel couldn't ignore.

Sophie's new husband, a fisherman named Matt Hawley who the sisters had grown up with, had drowned during a storm. Although Isabel hadn't been invited to the wedding, as soon as she heard the news of his passing, she'd left for home. She'd sped along the highway in a panic throughout the seven-

hour drive, fearing she would be late, managing to get the last ferry of the day across. Matt had been a quiet lovely boy who'd grown up to be a quiet lovely man, and there had never been any question that Sophie would marry him one day. He'd had her name tattooed on his arm when he was all of seventeen, off on a tear with the other island boys to Boston. And that was as good as an engagement ring, better, Sophie always said, because you could lose a ring, but a tattoo was part of you, yours forever, yours for life.

Isabel had arrived late, just as she'd feared, entering the church in the middle of the service, the old oak door squeaking and giving her away. She hadn't thought about clothes, and while everyone else wore solemn black, she had on a spring dress patterned with flowers. She hadn't even bothered to comb her hair, and she looked a mess, as if she were a tourist who had mistakenly stumbled onto a local tragedy. Everyone spied the latecomer, and no one was surprised to see it was Isabel, who was thought of as selfish, a real New Yorker. Sophie had turned to see her sister, and after one look, she'd turned away. At the close of the service, Isabel went up to her sister, waiting in line with the other mourners. "Are you serious?" Sophie said when at last they were face to face. "You can't even be on time to Matt's funeral?"

"I tried," Isabel found herself saying. She sounded pathetic even to herself.

"You shouldn't have to try," Sophie said. "That's what you've never understood."

After that, Isabel was far too embarrassed to gather with the other mourners in the parlor of her parents' house, where Sophie now lived. Instead, she'd wound up at the Black Horse Tavern, where she drank far too much and forgot just about everything. It was the sort of evening when she knew she was making a mistake while it was happening. She danced with men she barely knew and those she knew too well, and she couldn't remember how she'd made it up to her rented room above the bar. In the morning, Isabel woke with a headache and a huge desire never to return to Maine. She quickly



packed her bag and went downstairs, hoping to escape before anyone took notice of her, but there was Sophie, having a coffee at the bar. Sophie had always been the calm, logical sister, but now she looked distraught. And there was something Isabel hadn't noticed at the church. Sophie was pregnant.

"You're deserting me," Sophie said. "Once again. Dad went to the bar, you locked yourself away with your books, and I had to take care of everything."

"I'm not deserting anyone. Mom and Dad are gone, and the bookstore is as good as ruined. Why would I stay?"

"Because we promised we would take over the bookstore," Sophie reminded her. "We told Dad we would."

They had said so, true enough, but they'd been children, two sad girls, who had lost their mother. Books had been Isabel's salvation and her escape. She'd spent evenings in the fairy-tale section reading her way through the stacks of books, always preferring Andrew Lang's color-coded fairy books. Sophie had favored biographies and history, the stories of women who had survived despite all odds. The island had seemed enchanted then, and when the moon was full, they sneaked outside to read by its light. Sometimes their father would find them asleep in the grass in the morning, their books still open. Sometimes Matt would come by to read books about sailing, as if he were predicting his future with stories of drowned men and the women who waited for them on the shore. Matt and Sophie were fated to be together even back then, but fate can turn dark when you least expect it to, and there you are alone and in mourning with no one to help you raise the child you're about to bring into the world.

"You think I should stay on this island because of a promise I made when I was ten years old?" Isabel asked her sister. "Should I only have peanut butter sandwiches for lunch because that's what I ate then?"

"Are you my sister or aren't you?" Sophie's face was pale; her black hair was knotted. She looked wild-eyed, and ready to

snap.

“Of course I am.” Was she being asked to forget her apartment, her job, her own life? “I can stay with you until you get over Matt.” It was the absolute worst thing to say. Isabel knew that it was as soon as she blurted it out, but words that have been said cannot be unspoken, and Sophie was hurt beyond measure.

“Is that what you think happens when you lose someone you love? You get over them? You forget them and go on as if they never existed? Go on then, leave. You’ve always done as you pleased, just like you did last night. You should be more careful about who you sleep with, Izzy. Everyone on the island is talking about it.”

Isabel had been drunk the night before and only now remembered that she’d spent most of her time with a man she couldn’t quite remember. She only recalled that he was tall and dark and familiar. It was true, they had almost wound up in bed—she remembered that now—but after kissing madly outside the door to her room above the bar, the fellow had said something like, “I don’t think you’re in a state to make this decision. Why don’t I come back in the morning?”

But in the morning, she was gone. Sophie had left the tavern through the front door, and Isabel left out the back, and if the man in the hallway ever had returned, he certainly didn’t find her there waiting. Instead, she’d gone down to the docks, where she’d pleaded with one of the fishermen to give her a ride across the harbor, not wanting to wait for the ferry. She’d turned and looked at the island as they sped across the bay, and if she wasn’t mistaken, her sister was there on the shore. That had been the last time they’d seen each other, for in the years that had passed, they’d forgotten how much they had loved each other. They had tried hard to forget, and they had nearly succeeded, and so it had remained, until this Tuesday.

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Now, on this day in the park, Isabel discovered there was a white card inside the envelope. One word had been hastily written in black marker. *Help*. Isabel wondered how a single

word could have such a great effect, but she burst into tears, there in Madison Square Park, upsetting Hank the Labrador, who had a sensitive nature and now did his best to sit on her lap even though he weighed close to eighty pounds. At the bottom of the card, there was a line of typed print. *Take the two o'clock ferry on Wednesday.* If it was Sophie, something must have gone terribly wrong for her to contact Isabel after more than a decade. Despite all that had happened, Isabel had to go.

When you stop forgetting, the effects can be overwhelming. You think of the time when you imagined you would always live in a world of books, when in truth Isabel hadn't read a book in years. She'd given them up. She didn't even believe in them anymore. When she read, she remembered dancing on the beach on the first snowy night of the year when they could hear whales calling in the distance. She remembered the night they were told that their mother had passed away. She remembered Sophie crying in her room and her father standing out in the yard sobbing and her own decision not to feel things anymore.

Isabel brought Hank back to his owner's apartment on Greenwich Avenue, but the dog stopped on the corner and refused to go forward. "Sometimes you have no choice," Isabel always told him about the hours he spent in an empty apartment waiting for his owner to arrive, but today he simply would not budge, and Isabel didn't have the patience or the heart to leave him.

She took Hank home, packed a bag, phoned everyone on her dog-walking list to regretfully inform them she would be out of town, briefly, she hoped. She left a message for Hank's owner, who happened to be her divorce lawyer, not to expect him back. She was bringing Hank with her, that much was certain. He was already sitting on top of her suitcase.

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Isabel rented a car in the morning and drove straight through, only briefly stopping in Portland to pick up a sandwich to go and some coffee and run into a pet store where they only sold

extra-large bags of dog food weighing forty pounds. She headed north and east, turning off the highway and taking the twisting road along the shore. Things kept looking familiar so that forgetting was becoming more difficult with every mile. The dog kept his head out the window, even though the day was misty and cold. June was like that in Maine, the damp constant, until brilliant sunlight broke the sky open and the gray world turned blue and green in equal measure. When she got to the small town of Hensley, where the ferry to the island docked, she remembered all the times in high school when she'd tried to escape from the island.

“Can’t you just wait to grow up before you leave?” her father told Isabel the last time the ferry captain caught her stowing away and brought her back. “Time goes faster than you think.”

“Not fast enough,” Isabel answered, but as it turned out, her father was right. Suddenly, here she was in her thirties, with no family and no one to love, and she’d begun, only rarely and at odd hours, to think she’d made a terrible mistake.

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A girl was pacing the dock as the ferry pulled in. She wore a black dress and black boots even though the mist had burned off and the day was now sunny, warm enough so that jeans and a T-shirt would have been more fitting. The girl had a pretty, intelligent face, though she was pale, with dark circles under her eyes. She was holding up a sign so that everyone who was walking off the ferry could see it clearly. *Help*. Isabel stood on the ferry, in shock. It wasn’t Sophie who had written to her but this girl with a sour expression, who looked annoyed every time someone disembarked from the ferry and passed her by.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” the ferryman said to her.

Perhaps she had. The girl looked exactly like Sophie had at her age, except while Sophie had been light and cheerful, the girl on the dock looked bitter and suspicious.

“You don’t remember me.” The ferryman sounded disappointed. He’d noticed her staring at the girl on the dock. “Maybe we’re all ghosts to you.”

The light was bright, forcing Isabel to shield her eyes in order to see him more clearly. Her newfound companion was tall with black hair, unshaven and in need of a haircut, with eyes so dark they burned through her. He was also quite familiar, although everyone on the island would likely be someone she once knew. Isabel was so practiced at forgetting, she couldn’t recall his name.

“We used to run away together,” he told her.

And there it was. Isabel remembered going off to hide in the marshes with him. *No one will ever find us*, she used to tell him. *Good*, he always answered. *We don’t need anyone else*.

“Johnny Lenox,” Isabel said.

They’d been at school together, and he’d been handsome and daring, always getting into trouble once he was a teenager. All the girls were mad for him, but he never seemed to settle down. He just followed Isabel around until she left. “I can’t remember the last time I saw you,” Isabel said.

“I can. I brought you up to your room on the night of Matt’s funeral.” When Isabel flushed with embarrassment, Johnny added, “Don’t worry, I was a gentleman. I could tell you didn’t know who the hell I was. Anyway, it was years ago.” He nodded to the girl with the sign on the dock. “It was before Violet was born.”

An older man was peering at them. “John, I need you. And not in five minutes when the lady’s gone.”

“My father,” Johnny said of the older man. “You don’t want to cross him even though I’m the one who’s supposedly in charge now.”

The old captain had been her enemy once upon a time, always catching her when she stowed away and reporting back to Isabel’s father. “Hey, Mr. Lenox,” Isabel called. “Remember me?”

The older Mr. Lenox didn't seem to remember her, or maybe he did; either way he looked displeased. Isabel had always believed that people on the island resented anyone who wanted more.

"Get going, Miss," Mr. Lenox called to her. "We've docked."

"You always wanted to get out of here," Johnny said. "You kept running away until you succeeded. I haven't forgotten you one bit, Isabel." He gave her a sidelong look. "But it appears you've forgotten me even after what transpired after Matt died."

"What transpired?" Isabel asked, uncertain and feeling a fool.

"You fell in love with me," Johnny said.

Isabel laughed out loud, then covered her mouth. "Sorry."

"I'm not making it up. That's what you told me."

"If I did, you should know I'm well known to be a liar."

"I knew you pretty well, and you were never a liar." He nodded to the girl on the dock, who'd caught sight of Isabel and was now waving. As it turned out, Isabel was the last person to disembark. "Your niece seems to be waiting for you, but it looks like you don't notice that sort of thing."

The older Mr. Lenox called out to ask what the hell Johnny thought he was doing when they were due back across the bay in half an hour.

"He still thinks he's the captain," Johnny said as he turned from Isabel. "Just like you still think you'll be happier if you run away."

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Passengers leaving the island had already begun to board when Isabel made her way off the ferry.

"Violet?" Isabel said when she reached the dock. Staring at the girl was like seeing her sister in black-and-white, unlike Sophie who had always been so bright. *Sunlight*, their father

used to call her. *Then what am I?* Isabel had once said, wounded by how he seemed to favor Sophie. *Oh, you're moonlight,* he'd said. *Harder to see, but there for those who look.*

"It took you long enough," Violet said. "You're the last person off."

Violet was eleven, but she seemed older, just as Sophie always had. When their mother became ill, Sophie took over the house. She made their dinners, washed up, hung the laundry out on the line. Sometimes Isabel noticed that her sister was crying at the sink, and instead of standing beside her and drying the dishes, Isabel would run out and head for the marshes. She would watch the seagulls and the herons and wish she could fly away.

Hank bounded over, pulling his leash free from Isabel's hands, delighted to be free on an island that smelled of the sea. When he leaped to lick Violet's face, the dog was almost as tall as she. Her bleak expression vanished, and she began to laugh, but soon enough she turned to Isabel and brutally assessed her. "You don't look anything like my mother."

"You do," Isabel said.

"I'm nothing like her," Violet said. "But you wouldn't know since you don't know the first thing about me. I found your address on an old envelope in my mother's night table drawer. I didn't know if you'd really come, but now that you're here, maybe you can help for once in your life. Just don't expect me to like you."

"Fine," Isabel said—that was just as well with her. "Don't expect me to like you either."

Once they reached Shore Road, Isabel unclasped Hank's leash. And after one wild foray into the marsh, where he frightened the geese into taking to the air, honking and squawking, he returned to follow Violet, who appeared to pay him no attention, although she petted his head once or twice.

“My mother’s been in the hospital in Portland,” Violet told Isabel. “She fell down the stairs and broke her leg and had to have surgery, and she can’t walk for six more weeks, and so she can’t run the shop.”

“I don’t care about the shop,” Isabel said, but she was shocked to hear the news about her sister. “How is her leg?”

“She’s improving, but we’ve been closed for a month.” Violet threw Isabel a look of contempt. “That’s why I wrote to you. I thought you owed her something. I hope you can cook, because I can’t. And there’s a week’s worth of laundry. My mother always did all of that, but I guess you knew that. She told me she did that for you, too, when you didn’t have a mother.”

Isabel felt her heart beating too fast, but Violet didn’t stop charging forward, and Isabel had no choice but to hurry to catch up with her, dragging along her suitcase and the ridiculously large bag of dog food. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know,” she said.

“You should have known, but I can already tell you don’t care about those sorts of things.”

“What sorts of things?” They were passing by the landscape Isabel had painted time and time again in New York City. The marsh was so green and familiar it made her feel like crying, something she hadn’t done for years.

“Things like family and loyalty,” Violet said. “You’re probably dishonest as well.”

“You’re pretty rude,” Isabel said. “Maybe you inherited that from me.”

“I doubt it,” Violet said. “I’m nothing like you.”

They went on in silence along the marsh. Isabel remembered walking along this road with her mother and sister, looking for sea lavender to twist into wreaths. She remembered climbing a tree with Sophie in a hidden grove in the marsh so they could sit in a heron’s nest and pretend they



were birds. *This place is secret*, Sophie had told Isabel. *You can only show it to someone you love.*

At last, they reached Main Street, passing the post office and the market and the Cricket Shop, which sold clothes that were only slightly out of fashion, finally turning the corner onto Center Street, and there was the bookstore. The front door was still blue, and the roses that had no name still bloomed in early June. All the same, the bookstore beside the cottage looked dark and haunted. The curtains were drawn, and flies were caught behind the screens. They went into the cottage, with Hank running on ahead, plowing through the door and racing into the parlor. The house was definitely smaller than Isabel had remembered.

“What on earth is going on?” she heard her sister shout, and then there was a peal of laughter when Hank raced ahead of them. By the time Isabel and Violet entered the room, Hank was sitting on the couch beside Sophie. She was delighted with him, even though her leg was in a huge cast, her foot propped up on a stool.

“Where did you find this beast?” Sophie said warmly as she scratched the dog’s head. When she glanced up and saw Isabel, she stopped talking.

“Are you calling me a beast?” Isabel joked, but the joke fell flat.

“She’s come to help,” Violet explained.

“She would never come and help,” Sophie said.

“Well, I wrote to her,” Violet said. “And now she’s here.”

“You should never have done that,” Sophie told her daughter. “You know we don’t speak.”

They were talking about Isabel as if she weren’t even in the room, and Isabel supposed she deserved that. She’d been something of a ghost all these years, so she couldn’t quite expect to be treated like a person.

Sophie was still beautiful, but she was wearing a gray nightgown Isabel thought she recognized from their youth, and she seemed twenty pounds lighter, so thin her eyes appeared even larger and darker than usual. "I hate to tell you this," Sophie said to her daughter, "but you can't make things that have gone wrong right again."

"Actually, that's not true," Violet contradicted. "If you couldn't, then nobody would go to a doctor or have surgery, and you've done so, and you'll be right again in six weeks." Violet looked back and forth at the way the sisters were staring at each other, as if they were strangers. "I see," Violet said, now understanding her mother's meaning. "You mean Isabel can't be made right again."

It was bad enough to be judged by one person, and somewhat overwhelming to be judged by two, especially when one wasn't much more than eleven.

"I guess you were a lousy sister," Violet said. "I'm a lousy person, but I'm a great daughter."

Sophie grinned, and anyone could see who the light of her life was. "You are not lousy at anything."

"Isabel is staying," Violet said. "Lousy or not, we need her."

"I'll sleep in my old room," Isabel suggested. She had the rising desire to prove her niece wrong.

"That's Violet's room now," Sophie said.

"Then I'll sleep in the attic."

"We have bats," Sophie said stiffly. "Quite a lot of them."

"Dad's room," Isabel said.

"It was also Mom's room, no matter how much you want to pretend she never existed."

"I never pretended that," Isabel said.

"You wouldn't even walk into the room during her last week."

Isabel remembered now. That was when she had begun plotting out her getaway. Back when every day seemed dark as night and even books couldn't help. All she wanted was to get to a place where every road and lane wouldn't remind her of her mother and all she had lost.

"I went into her room when I was with you," she said to Sophie, suddenly remembering their mother's last day and how they'd stood there together, holding hands.

"I remember," Sophie said. "I just didn't think you did."

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Isabel was restless up in her parents' old room. Knowing she'd never sleep, she went downstairs to the bookstore. It was indeed a mess, and she did her best to begin cleaning up. The front room merely needed to be vacuumed, but the back room was a disaster, with piles of dusty books everywhere, the paper suffering from the damp. It looked as if what they called the Fairy-Tale Room had sat undisturbed for years. Isabel began to divide the piles into fiction and nonfiction, fairy tales and cookbooks. While rummaging around she found something unexpected in a drawer in a bureau. There, behind the unpaid bills and the check stubs, was the cardboard box of index cards that her mother called her baking library.

Susan Gibson had been an amazing baker, and even though Isabel had never baked, she took her mother's recipes and went up to the kitchen. She remembered the You'll Feel Better in the Morning Cupcakes, the ones her mother had baked to cheer them during times of chicken pox or poison ivy or snowstorms. The cupcakes were made of golden cake and vanilla icing, dotted with cheerful gumdrops. Isabel checked the cabinets for flour and baking powder and vanilla. There was butter and milk in the fridge, but there were no gumdrops, so Isabel made do by chopping up a yellow lollipop she found on a counter.

"What do you think you're doing?" Violet said when she came downstairs early in the morning, sleepy eyed. It was a Saturday, and she could have slept late if she hadn't heard someone tinkering around in the kitchen. Hank was right

behind her, having slept on her bed. The Labrador likely had to go out, but when he saw the cupcakes, he, too, was riveted.

“I’m baking,” Isabel answered. She remembered when her mother had mixed up a batch of You’ll Feel Better in the Morning Cupcakes, served with mugs of sugary tea, when Isabel and Sophie had the flu one winter.

“You don’t seem the type.” Violet let Hank out in the backyard, where he raced around like a madman set free.

“What type is that?” Isabel dared to say.

Violet looked at her and raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure you want me to say?”

“Go ahead,” Isabel said.

“I always thought only good-hearted people baked,” Violet said.

“Well, I guess you were wrong.” Isabel shrugged, even though Violet was likely right. Since this was her first attempt, the results might be wretched. It was time to find out, so Isabel took the cupcakes from the counter. The frosting was a bit sloppy, and the lemon candy pieces had fallen off, but they actually smelled delicious. “Have one,” she said.

“What are they supposed to be?”

“They’re made from your grandmother’s recipe. Try it.”

They stared at one another; then Violet took a dainty, suspicious bite.

“What do you think?” Isabel said.

Violet gave her a look, devoured the cupcake, then wiped her mouth with her sleeve. “Not bad,” she granted. “My mother could be talked into having some toast and tea if you know how to make that.”

Embarrassed she hadn’t thought of bringing her sister breakfast, Isabel put on the kettle, toasted the last two slices of bread, then brought a tray upstairs. She knocked on Sophie’s door, and when there was no answer, opened it anyway.

“I don’t eat breakfast,” Sophie said when she saw the tray. She’d been crying, so she turned her head away. She’d had so many losses, and now, with her leg in a cast, she clearly couldn’t even manage her everyday tasks.

Isabel placed the tray on the night table. To give her sister a bit of privacy while she wiped her eyes, Isabel gazed out the window that overlooked the bookstore path. Violet was out there with a plate of cupcakes and a tin box. “What could she be doing?” Isabel wondered.

Sophie sat up in bed. “She seems to be selling something.”

“I made cupcakes,” Isabel admitted.

The look on Sophie’s face changed. “Did you?”

“You’ll Feel Better in the Mornings.”

“I made those for you every week,” Sophie told her.

After their mother was gone, Sophie had begun to bake in earnest, and those cupcakes had been Isabel’s favorite, even though she never did feel better in the morning.

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When Isabel went outside, Violet informed her that she had started off selling the cupcakes for a dollar apiece, but had raised the price to two after seeing people’s enthusiasm. “What else can you make?” she asked Isabel.

“I’m not sure.”

“Well, find out, because we’re going to sell them in the bookstore.”

“Are we?”

“It will bring people in, and then it won’t matter if they buy books.”

“Of course it will matter. It’s a bookstore.”

“It doesn’t matter to me,” Violet said. “I don’t read. It’s a waste of time. It’s just for people who want to escape real life.”

Isabel remembered what books had meant to her so long ago, and she suddenly had a longing for all those fictional worlds that had helped her through the worst years of her life.

They went inside and were passing by the back room. “What a mess,” Violet said, which certainly was true enough.

Isabel looked through the piles of children’s books and chose one that had been a favorite of hers. *Half Magic*. Edward Eager. A summer day, a found coin, magic that thwarts four children and must be tamed, a book wherein there were endless possibilities.

“Even if you don’t read, try this one,” Isabel said.

Violet stuck out her hand. “Fine,” she said, taking the novel. “Don’t blame me if I hate it.”

Violet sat in the kitchen reading while Isabel made a list of ingredients for some of her mother’s most beloved baked goods. Never Get Lost Oatmeal Cookies, great for hikes or adventures. Orange You Glad Cake, an orange loaf with buttercream icing, certain to cheer up the day. Sin No More Cinnamon Rolls, delicious and sticky, good for both the well behaved and the unruly. Fall in Love Fruitcake, rich with raisins and apricots and a secret ingredient Isabel had never managed to figure out. At the end of the recipe, her mother had written *Add the thing you want most of all*.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Violet said as she peered at the list. “A million dollars? A yacht? A bookstore that sells books?”

“I’ll figure it out,” Isabel said.

“I doubt it,” Violet said as she shared the last cupcake with Hank. The sugar rush may have caused Hank to race off, out the door and down the road.

Isabel dashed upstairs to borrow one of her sister’s dresses, hoping to look somewhat presentable when she went into town looking for Hank.

“The dog that doesn’t belong to me is missing,” she told her sister.

“Of course he’s not yours,” Sophie said. “That would be a commitment.”

“You sound like my ex,” Isabel said.

“I never liked your ex,” Sophie said, which made Isabel laugh out loud.

“That’s one thing we can agree on,” she said.

“The dog has a better personality,” Sophie granted.

“I’m going to get him a tag with his current address on it so he can be returned if found. That’s a commitment.”

When she opened the closet, Isabel discovered all the bags and clothing she’d charged on her ex’s card piled up, still in their wrapping paper. At least Sophie hadn’t thrown them away.

“I had no use for them,” Sophie explained, sheepish, for she had neither thanked Isabel nor returned the gifts.

“Yes, you do,” Isabel said. “I’m listing them for sale, and from the money we earn, we can have new bookshelves made.”

They looked at one another because they’d both heard the most important word Isabel had said, one that had not been spoken for more than twelve years. *We*.

“Fine,” Sophie said. “We should do that.”

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Isabel walked to the hardware store on Main Street to buy Hank a new collar and a tag that was engraved with the address of Red Rose Cottage. The air was fresher here—that much was true. There was birdsong everywhere.

“I heard you were back,” Mr. Hawley said. He was Matt’s father, and Violet’s grandfather, and he didn’t say anything about Isabel’s past bad behavior. He’d run the store longer than Isabel had been alive and used to play poker with her

father on Friday evenings in their kitchen. He used to bring licorice for Isabel and Sophie, and even though neither girl could stomach the candy, they always made certain to thank him.

“I’m not back,” Isabel said.

“And that you’ve got a dog that’s running all over town.”

“He’s not my dog.”

“I heard he was over at the inn sitting on the porch.” Mr. Hawley held up the finished dog tag. “This is for your nonexistent dog,”

“I’m sorry about Matt,” she said.

“We’re all sorry about Matt,” Mr. Hawley responded. After Isabel had paid and thanked him, he called, “A lot of people don’t know what to do about grief. I don’t blame you for a thing.”

Isabel turned back to him, as grateful as she’d ever been. “My sister does,” she said.

“It’s likely she loves you more than she blames you,” Mr. Hawley said. “The worst part is when you blame yourself.”

Isabel went on to the market. She tried to forget how lovely it was to have neighbors who knew you and cared for you, but all she could think of was what a good man Mr. Hawley was. She filled two large paper sacks with flour, sugar, several pounds of butter, vanilla, raisins, dried fruit, and blocks of dark chocolate, remembering at the last minute to pick up some noodles and fresh asparagus for supper. Isabel was heading back, struggling with the weight of the grocery sacks, when a truck slowed down on Shore Road. The driver was Johnny Lenox, and he was grinning behind the steering wheel. “I think you forgot something,” he called out the window.

“Really?” Isabel said. “Did I forget we got engaged that night when nothing happened?”



“Something happened—you’re just choosing to forget it.”

“I remember,” Isabel shot back. “I’m madly in love with you.”

“Now you’ve got it. But you did forget your dog.” Hank was in the passenger seat, happy as could be, head out the window. “He was over at the inn. Get in. I’ll give you a ride. It looks like you’re weighted down.”

Isabel went around and got in on the passenger side, so that the dog was between them. She put the groceries by her feet and attached the new tag to Hank’s collar. “There,” she said to the dog. “Now everyone will know where to return you.”

“I thought he didn’t belong to you,” Johnny said.

“He doesn’t,” Isabel insisted. “But his owner is a jerk. He was my divorce lawyer.”

“I see,” Johnny said, staring right at her.

“Fifty percent of marriages end in divorce.” Isabel was touchy when it came to this matter, as if divorce and failure meant the same thing.

As they headed to the bookstore, Johnny said, “I’m not married if that’s what you want to know.”

Isabel laughed. “Did I ask?”

“I already knew you were divorced, so I thought you should know what my marital status was. It’s only fair.”

Isabel gave him a look. “How would you know?”

Johnny was staring straight ahead at the road. He was too handsome; that had always been his problem. Or one of them. He’d gone off to California for a while and had been in the navy, if she remembered correctly, and had come home when his father had called him back to take over the ferry.

“Your sister hired your divorce lawyer,” Johnny said.

“She did not. I got my own terrible lawyer all by myself.”

“Well, she paid for him. She thought you couldn’t afford a decent lawyer. I took her over to Hensley to meet with him at the diner. She cried over you.”

“She did not.” Isabel lifted her eyes to meet Johnny’s stare. “Did she?”

“You’re very dense,” Johnny said. “Are you still a painter?”

“No. I gave it up.”

“Too bad. I remember that you were good even back in school. But probably someone with your lack of sensitivity shouldn’t be an artist. Too much emotional stress.”

“Stop acting like you know me,” Isabel said.

“Well, you for sure do not know me. I’m not the person I used to be,” Johnny said.

“We’re always the people we used to be,” Isabel said.

“Then I must still be in love with you.” When Isabel turned to him, Johnny added, “It happened in sixth grade. Believe me, it was nothing I wanted. You used to make me run away with you and hide in the marshes.”

“I didn’t have to force you.”

“No,” Johnny said. “You didn’t.”

Isabel didn’t know how to respond to that remark. She looked at him and felt something she hadn’t expected. She remembered the night in the hallway of the tavern and the kisses outside her door. She remembered him following her along the road on a snowy day, too shy to say anything. She remembered how they’d always run away together. That stopped soon after her mother had died, when Isabel had decided to turn and ask, “Why are you here?” and he’d responded by saying, “Because you need me.” Isabel had left him there and run all the way home, her heart pounding. She’d run because it was true. She’d never gone into the marshes with him again, even though there was something she had wanted to show him that last day.

“Can you help me?” Isabel asked when they pulled up in front of the cottage. She had decided they had to move Sophie to the first floor so she wouldn’t be so isolated. The staircase was crooked and uneven, and the only way to do it was to have her carried down.

“Johnny Lenox,” Sophie said when she saw him in the doorway of her room. She glanced at her sister, then back at Johnny. “Shouldn’t you be on the ferry?” What she really meant was clear. *Shouldn’t you stay far away from my sister?*

“I should be, and my father will be having a fit, but I’m here to transport you.”

He carried her down to the couch in the parlor, carefully, making certain not to bang her leg against the railings. Johnny was surprisingly gentle, which upset Isabel. Apparently, she didn’t know him at all, and he certainly didn’t know her, even though they had spent so much time together. The couch was old and sagging but very comfortable. Johnny stood back and surveyed the sisters. He was a cousin of Matt’s and had been there for Sophie when she was at her worst before Violet was born. “Maybe you’ll both be who you always were if you’re given time.”

“I don’t think that’s happening, Johnny,” Sophie said. “Some things stay lost.”

Johnny nodded to the Labrador retriever snoozing on the rug. “He didn’t.”

When Johnny left, Isabel sat and faced her sister. “Violet doesn’t read?”

“She thinks the bookstore brought us bad luck. She’s just like you.”

“No, she isn’t. She can’t be.”

“When was the last time you were in a bookstore? When did you last read a novel?”

“I used to read,” Isabel said. “And Violet will too. I gave her *Half Magic* today.”

Sophie burst into tears.

“Was I not supposed to?” Isabel asked.

Sophie shook her head. “It was exactly what you were supposed to do.”

They both thought that over. “Did you pay for my divorce lawyer?”

Sophie shrugged. “It was money you would have gotten if we’d sold the bookstore.”

Hank was on the floor between them, exhausted from running around the island. He looked extremely happy.

“Do you think we can keep the bookstore open?” Sophie had always been the one to make the decisions, but that time seemed to have passed.

“We can try,” Isabel said.

That was what their father had always said. They left out the part that came next, though they both remembered how it went. *The worst we can do is fail.*

They spent the rest of that glorious June in the overheated kitchen, with Sophie’s leg propped up on a stool. Violet and Isabel got the bookstore ready to open at the end of the month, once the bakery was finished. Johnny Lenox and his father made a lovely bakery case, which they installed, and Mr. Hawley donated a small refrigerator and a rather complicated coffee maker. On the week of the opening, Sophie went to the clinic and had her cast removed. Isabel went with her, and afterward, they did a dance in the parking lot, just a few small joyful steps.

Two days before the opening, while the I Must Be in Heaven Chocolate Brownies were baking, Isabel couldn’t find Violet anywhere. As it turned out, she was in the meadow reading *Mary Poppins*.

“What happened to Edward Eager?” Isabel asked.

Violet shrugged. “Finished. I read all seven. He should have written more.”

“Well, there are eight *Mary Poppins* books, so they should keep you busy for a while. The author P. L. Travers once said, ‘A writer is, after all, only half his book. The other half is the reader and from the reader the writer learns.’”

“Are we supposed to believe Mary Poppins arrives on the west wind?”

“It’s magic.”

“There was a west wind when you arrived,” Violet said thoughtfully.

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“You’re right,” Isabel said to her sister that night. The sisters were sitting on the porch drinking iced tea and testing the brownies. Isabel had been rereading *Half Magic*, and she’d been remembering how wonderful a book could be. “She is like me.”

“I told you so.” Sophie started to cry.

“Should I be insulted?” Isabel asked.

“Not at all,” Sophie said, wiping her eyes. “It’s just that you are very dense.”

“That’s what Johnny said.”

“Of course he would. You’ve been dense about him your whole life long.”

“He told me I was in love with him,” Isabel said.

“Let me guess. You didn’t believe him.”

“I don’t think I’m the smart sister,” Isabel said.

“You are,” Sophie told her. “You just have a lot to learn.”

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The next day Isabel went out to the garage and found some old wood and paint cans and got to work on a sign for outside the bookstore. It was only supposed to say *grand opening*, but then she decided to add the marshes and the lupines and

everything she had made herself forget about Maine that she now remembered. She brought the sign outside and leaned it against an old lawn chair. It was early in the morning, and there were starlings in the trees, and the marsh was thick with green reeds. She remembered that Johnny once told her he would never stop following her unless she ran away. She remembered where the Lenoxes lived, and found that she knew the route by heart. Their house was out on the point, beyond the marshes. There Johnny was, hanging up laundry on the line.

“Don’t you have a dryer?” Isabel said.

“It’s better when it dries outside. It smells like the marsh.”

“Do you want to see what I never showed you that day I ran away?” Isabel asked.

She’d forgotten her shoes, and she now realized she was in paint-splattered pajamas that had belonged to her father, but she was done forgetting now. She was remembering everything about the way she used to feel.

“I do,” Johnny said.

He put on high boots and loaned her a pair, and they headed through the marsh, which was so muddy a person could sink to their knees if they weren’t careful. Once or twice, Johnny grasped Isabel’s arm when it seemed that she might be sinking. She brought him to the hidden rookery of the herons where she and Sophie and their mother used to go, their secret place.

“How did I never see this before?” he asked.

As it turned out, Isabel remembered how to climb a tree. She went into the huge nest of reeds first, then reached out her hand and Johnny caught it and climbed into the nest as well. You could see to the ocean from here. You could see Main Street and the ferry building and the fields of lupines.

“If you had brought me here instead of running away after you lost your mother, our whole lives would have been different,” Johnny said, and Isabel really couldn’t disagree.

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Isabel went into the bookstore early on opening day, just to make certain everything was perfect. Or near to perfect. Or just terrifically good. She set out the cups and spoons and plates that had belonged to their mother, and looked over at the books now in neat rows on the new shelves Mr. Hawley had recently built. There were chairs to sit in when you paged through books you might want to buy, and in the small room in back was the younger readers' section. It was practically perfect, but it needed something more. Before the morning light had broken, Isabel painted the walls and turned them into marshes, and the tables and chairs were turned into pieces of the ocean, with starfish and sharks and seals.

One hundred and thirty-three people attended the opening, along with six dogs, not including Hank. Violet kept count. Some were neighbors; some were summer people—all of them bought something. The cupcakes and brownies and slices of cake went quickly, and Sophie was stationed at the espresso machine, and everyone was delighted to see her, for she'd been hidden away for weeks. Johnny bought six Robert Parker mysteries, and his father bought an old book of maps of New England, and people seemed to realize they had to pay for the books they wanted rather than just borrow them.

“We're not exactly rich,” Violet said at the end of the day. “But we're getting there.”

Isabel had noticed that her niece had hidden away Andrew Lang's fairy books, for she planned to read them when she was done with *Mary Poppins*. Once she began reading an author, she didn't like to stop, a trait she may well have inherited from her aunt, who had read those same fairy books one summer, one after the other, still wishing for more when she was through.

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That night, when Isabel went to tidy up, she noticed a last pile of books on the floor behind a chair, likely left there from her father's time. He had loved the store so. It had saved him when the girls' mother died, and if he hadn't paid much attention to finances, well, who could blame him? Isabel

moved the books and saw that there on the wall was a hinge that had been obscured by the books, and a very small door that she'd never seen before. She crouched down to open it. Inside, there was a small blue notebook, and when she peered in, she found a page meant for both sisters. Isabel recognized the handwriting, even though it had been years since she'd seen it. Their mother's.

### **How Much Do I Love You?**

**I love you more than pancakes, more than ice cream, more than pickles, more than my life. I love you more than dogs or cats or diamonds or gold, more than anyone else in the world. I loved brushing your hair every night and walking you to school. I told you every story you knew.**

**I want you to remember our last day. I read you a story about two sisters who could find their way through the woods even if it was dark. I want you to remember the last evening we had. We drank tea made of roses. We baked a peach pie. We had spaghetti with butter for supper. We looked at the stars with your father, sitting high up on the roof, and then I took you inside. I kissed you both good night.**

**I hope you remember everything.**

**Someday you will find this and you'll know that to the very end I thought about you. There is no ending to that. You still hold my heart in your hands. I loved you girls more than a fish loves a river, more than a bird loves the sky.**

**Remember that. Remember me.**

When Isabel went into the kitchen, she made the Fall in Love Fruitcake even though it was very late, almost morning. She used her mother's mixing bowls and her cake tins. She'd decided it was a good time to finally bake this cake. She knew what the secret ingredient was now. When the fruitcake was



done, she went up to her sister's room and got into bed beside her.

“What's wrong?” Sophie asked, half-asleep.

“Nothing,” Isabel said. “Everything is absolutely right.”

She was thinking about the way a fish loved a river, and a bird loved the sky, and a mother loved her daughters. She was remembering everything. How love could change a person, how it could cause you the greatest sorrow or shelter you from harm. There were moths hitting against the windowpanes. A night heron called in the marshland as if its heart were breaking.

Isabel remembered how it felt to walk up the path to the cottage, how bright the stars were at night, how many books she could read in a week, how it felt to sit in the marsh and be so quiet the herons didn't know she was there, how her sister had always been there for her, even in that terrible year. She remembered that Johnny used to come to the house at night after she had stopped talking to him, just waiting for her to recognize what they were to each other. Isabel went to the window and looked out, and there he was. She gave her sister the notebook their mother had left for them, and then she went downstairs. By the time she did, he was waiting at the door.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



*Photo © 2017 Deborah Feingold*

Alice Hoffman is the *New York Times* bestselling author of more than thirty novels, including the Practical Magic series, *The Dovekeepers*, and *The World That We Knew*. Her works have been translated into more than twenty languages, nominated for multiple awards, and adapted for the screen. She lives in Boston.

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