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# KATIE WINTERS

MISTLETOE

*& Mischief*

A *Frosty Season* SERIES

# Mistletoe & Mischief

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A Frosty Season Series

Katie Winters

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# Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Coming Next in the Frosty Season Series](#)

[Other Books by Katie Winters](#)

[Connect with Katie Winters](#)

# Chapter One

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Maya had always been a foodie. As a child, she'd gazed through the windows of restaurants her adopted parents hadn't been able to afford, watching beautiful women spin their forks through pasta or slice through succulent steaks, tossing their heads with laughter or leaning across their table, listening intently. An orphan, Maya had assumed these women were a different species, that they'd been chosen for grandeur and beauty at an early age, and that whatever they spoke about was far more intelligent and interesting than anything her adopted parents spoke about. She imagined they discussed books and films and philosophy, that they loved the men on the other side of the table, that they were nourished and happy. These fantasies kept her warm at night.

Maya was now forty-eight years old—lifetimes away from childhood. But food was still her gravitational force, her reason for celebration, her greatest joy. Her food blog, “A Taste Above The Rest,” led her to all the boroughs of New York City on a quest to find the very best of everything: greasy burgers, spaghetti with clams, seven-dollar donuts with sea salt and nougat—and write about them in a way that excited New Yorkers and dared them to try something new. If there was anything in life she loved, it was an invigorating flavor. That, and the anticipation you felt before trying a new restaurant. Somehow, for the past five years of her life, she'd made writing about that a career.

The only problem was that until recently, she'd been the top food critic at *Food & Drink* magazine. That had brought

her the majority of her income and readership. When costs were cut at the magazine, her editor had said they were letting her go. “Please, reach out if you want freelance work,” her editor had said, flashing that New Yorker smile. Basically, this meant they were no longer willing to pay Maya a living wage or offer health insurance, but they’d pick up her writing if it was “good enough for them at that time” or fit the theme of the current issue. It wasn’t promising.

Since then, Maya had thrown full focus into her own blog, but without the magazine’s advertisement help, her readership hadn’t exactly skyrocketed. Making a profit seemed about as likely as fish flying. Her boyfriend, a chef named Nick Collins, had told her to keep chipping away at it, to keep writing until the blog stuck. But as she made final notes to herself in a Spanish tapas restaurant in the Lower East Side, her head pounded with self-doubt.

“How did you like the croquettes?” One of the restaurant owners smiled as she removed the empty plate, which shone with grease.

“They were delicious.” Maya clicked the end of her pen. “Do I taste a hint of pistachio in there?”

The woman beamed. “Yes! You have an incredible palate. You know, I used to read your column in *Food & Drink* all the time. In a way, you helped my husband and me decide on the menu of this place. We’ve been going strong for about three years now.”

“I’m so happy to hear that.” Maya swallowed.

“And when can we expect our restaurant to appear in the magazine?”

Maya’s heart thudded. “Unfortunately, this article won’t be appearing in *Food & Drink*.”

The woman’s face fell. “I see.”

Maya scrambled for an explanation. She couldn’t explain how “unnecessary” food critics were in the current economy. This woman didn’t care about that. It certainly didn’t make

sense to Maya, who still found food criticism to be a high art. She loved contributing to it.

“But it’s going up on my blog,” Maya hurried to add. “It’s called ‘A Taste About The Rest.’”

“A blog?” The woman looked doubtful. “Okay. Well, I’m looking forward to it.” She turned on her heel and disappeared into the kitchen.

After Maya finished the last of her tapas and red wine, she donned her black pea coat, paid her bill, and returned to the sharp cold of the mid-November afternoon. She was miles away from her apartment on the Upper East Side, but she didn’t feel like slipping into a cab just yet. She wanted to watch the people and admire shop window displays— some of which, she was sorry to see, were already decorated for Christmas. She rolled her eyes. Why did everyone feel the need to get a head-start on Christmas these days? The holiday was already full-on enough— music everywhere; Starbucks changing their cup designs; people being especially “nice” because they felt they had to be. Maya couldn’t wait for it to be over. The relief she felt in January was akin to waking up from a nightmare.

Maya reached her apartment building at three-thirty. The doorman, Calvin, whose face was gentle and warm, said, “Afternoon, Maya! Did you have another scrumptious meal today?”

“I did.” Maya smiled.

“I can’t wait to read about it.”

Maya considered reminding him that she was no longer published with *Food & Drink*— that he would have to find her blog if he wanted to read about it. But she kept her lips shut.

When Maya had first moved into Nick’s apartment building four years ago, she’d imagined she would never get used to how ornate and elegant it was. Even now, as she paused at the mailboxes, she admired the gorgeous carvings in the wood, the old-fashioned golden mirrors hanging on the walls, and the floor that looked taken from a Roman cathedral.

“I can’t believe you live here,” she’d told Nick early on. And he’d said, “You live here, too. Remember?” She’d swooned.

Maya collected their mail and rode the elevator to the twelfth floor. Nick wasn’t home yet; he would probably return around nine after the rush was over at the restaurant, and then he could slip away from his chef duties, leaving the sous chefs to do the rest. He worked at an exclusive restaurant on the Upper West Side and was listed amongst the “best chefs in Manhattan.” That was how Maya had met him; she’d been sent to review his food by *Food & Drink* magazine. After her glowing review, he’d called her and asked her out. “I remember you from the restaurant,” he’d explained on the phone. “You’re beautiful.” Maya’s first thought, at the time, was that he’d mistaken her for someone else. It wasn’t that she was bad-looking. Back then, she’d been forty-three, trim from daily runs in Central Park, with shoulder-length dark brown hair and big brown eyes. But she wasn’t memorable, either. She’d been around the block enough times to know that.

Maya changed into a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt and sat cross-legged on the couch, going through the mail. It was mostly bills and magazines, save for one envelope that was embossed and addressed to her. Since she’d lost her job, she’d hardly gotten anything of interest in the mail. She opened it with an official letter opener, which Nick had received from an old boss of his.

As Maya read the letter, she stood from the couch with surprise. Her heart thudded. When she finished it, she stared out the window in disbelief. Was someone playing a trick on her?

The letter was from a lawyer named Thaddeus DeWitt, who was located in Hollygrove, New York. A quick Google search told Maya that Hollygrove was a four-hour drive away from the city, somewhere upstate. A population of only ten thousand people. That was nothing compared to New York City. The lawyer explained that Maya’s Aunt Veronica Albright was currently in a nursing home in Hollygrove and very ill. Due to the nature of her sickness, Veronica suggested



that Maya be contacted now, rather than after her death, in order to receive her inheritance.

The word rang in Maya's head, and she read it over and over again. *Inheritance?* It was laughable. As a child, she and her parents hadn't had more than a few coins to rub together. After her mother and father died when she was six, she'd been taken in by a neighbor and raised in borderline poverty. She'd gone to bed hungry frequently. It didn't make any sense.

Albright was her mother's maiden name, but Maya had never heard of anyone named Veronica. Where had she been after Maya's parents' death? Why was this letter—acknowledging their relationship—coming when Maya was forty-eight years old? Questions swirled in her mind. She felt crazy.

On top of it all, the lawyer said her inheritance, which included a Victorian mansion worth four million dollars, wouldn't just be given to her, as easy as pie. Rather, Maya had to "earn it." "It's really best if you come to Hollygrove in person and hear the stipulations of the inheritance," Mr. DeWitt wrote. "Please contact my secretary and let me know when you plan to arrive. I'm looking forward to meeting you, as is my client, Veronica."

A four-million-dollar mansion. An inheritance. An aunt she'd never known about. It all seemed taken from a storybook. Again, Maya wondered if it was some kind of scam. Maybe, if she drove to where Hollygrove supposedly was located, she would find nothing but a gas station and a phone booth.

Maya put the letter to the side for a while, deciding to chat to Nick about it when he got home. She needed to think. To distract herself, she vacuumed the living room, mopped the kitchen, and even considered polishing the silverware. Nick hated when she did stuff like that; he paid a maid for a reason, he said. But cleaning was meditative for Maya.

As the kitchen floor dried, Maya pulled up Phoebe's number and tried her. Phoebe lived in Philadelphia with her husband, Henry, but Maya and Phoebe spoke on the phone

almost every day. Like the supportive and loving daughter she was, Phoebe answered on the second ring.

“Mom! You’ll never guess what I’m doing.”

Maya’s heart lifted at the sound of her voice. “You’re right. I won’t.”

Phoebe laughed. “Henry and I are apartment hunting.”

Maya stuttered with surprise. “Oh! I thought you loved your apartment.”

“Yes,” Phoebe said, “but we need something bigger, you know.”

Maya’s cheeks ached from smiling. If Phoebe and Henry wanted something bigger, it meant they planned to add to their family. “I won’t keep you,” Maya assured her. “Happy apartment hunting.”

“I’ll call you later! Love you, Mom.”

Just as Maya hung up the phone, the front door of the apartment screamed open, and Nick bolted through. His face was blotchy, and his hair was a wild black bush behind him. Sometimes, when Maya saw him like this, she was intimidated by the fire in him; sometimes, she hardly recognized him as the man she loved and slept next to every night.

“Hi?” Maya felt tentative. Nick was home early, which probably wasn’t a good thing. Maybe something had gone wrong at the restaurant.

Nick’s eyes were poisonous green. He stared at her and then turned his gaze to the kitchen floor. “You mopped again?”

Maya shivered with fear. There was nothing she liked less than when Nick stormed back home after a bad shift at the restaurant. It took him nearly twenty-four hours to become himself again. Maybe she could tell him about the Victorian mansion and her surprise aunt tomorrow. Or the next day.

Maya hurried to pour Nick a glass of water. He took it but didn’t drink it.

“Are you okay?” Maya asked softly.

Nick’s eyes bugged out. She knew it was the wrong question to ask; he was obviously not okay. But she couldn’t think of any other way to start this conversation.

“I’ll leave you alone,” Maya said, making a beeline for her writing office. She could hole up there for the evening and watch a movie. She could skip dinner.

“No.” Nick’s voice was authoritative. “I need to talk to you.”

Maya’s cheek twitched. She stopped walking and crossed her arms over her chest. The letter from Hollygrove was now the furthest thing from her mind. “Okay?”

Nick palmed the back of his neck. “I don’t know how to say this.”

Maya felt on the verge of throwing up. It wasn’t like Nick not to know what to say. He was often the most garrulous person at a party, the one quickest with a joke or an anecdote.

“Did something happen at work?” Maya asked, wanting to guide the conversation in another direction. She’d begun to see the life she and Nick had shared flash before her eyes. When she’d met him, she’d thought her romantic life was about to skyrocket; Nick had swept her off her feet. He’d reminded her of the beauty of the unknown world.

And now, he hit her with the horrific truth.

“I met someone,” Nick said softly.

Maya’s knees felt like Jell-O. She thought she was going to crumple to the ground. Miraculously, she remained upright, her dignity mostly intact, at least for now. She stared at him, alternating between shock and, admittedly, a lack of surprise. Nick was an attractive, remarkably successful chef in Manhattan. Women admired him left and right. Frequently, they’d asked Maya if she ever feared he would leave her for someone younger, beautiful, or more successful. She’d always said what you were supposed to say— that they loved each other. That they respected and trusted each other.

That was obviously not true. Not on his end, anyway.

“It just happened,” Nick sputtered.

Maya remained speechless. If she really forced herself to, she could probably narrow down the list of names and figure out who it was. Nick spoke about women at work all the time. One of his sous chefs was twenty-five and very bouncy and beautiful. Maya had once looked the other way when Nick had hugged a pretty waitress for a little too long. She’d tried to reason it with thinking that he just needed to support his staff members. He had to show them how much he cared. She’d been a fool.

Finally, Maya forced herself to say: “And you’re sure?”

Nick frowned. “What do you mean?”

“You’re sure you want to blow up our life for this other person?” Maya was surprised at how confident she sounded.

Nick rubbed his beard and said what she’d suspected. “I’ve been thinking about it for a while. And besides. We weren’t really happy, you and me. Were we?”

Maya knew enough about men to realize that this line—about “them both” not being happy— was purely a manipulation tactic; it was gaslighting. If she was honest with herself, there had been no noticeable change in their relationship. Presumably, he’d begun this affair many months ago. But since then, Nick had taken Maya to Paris twice; they’d scoured Rome for the best pasta; they’d discussed planning a trip to Hawaii to study its cuisine. They’d said “I love you” hundreds of times.

Nick had reached the end of the line with her. But he’d only just decided that now. Today. And there was no making sense of it.

“I got you a hotel room,” Nick said, his eyes shining. He looked like a little boy who’d just been caught doing something wrong. “It’s a suite. Completely gorgeous, floor-to-ceiling windows with a view of Fifth Avenue. You can stay there for a little while until you get on your feet.”

Maya wanted to scream at him then. She wanted to remind him that “getting on your feet” wasn’t exactly an easy feat as a food critic. But if she did that, she’d have to acknowledge a painful truth— that her career had fumbled, that she wasn’t the lively intellectual she’d once thought herself to be. She was washed up. And now, her boyfriend was kicking her out. To Fifth Avenue, apparently. He didn’t care where she ended up after that as long as she was gone. How wonderful for him. They’d never married. They could make a clean break.

And Maya would be left all alone. Again.

## Chapter Two

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One week after Nick broke the news of his affair, Phoebe came up from Philadelphia and appeared at the hotel on Fifth Avenue— her jaw clenched with rage. Maya threw her arms around her in the doorway of the hotel, inhaling sharply. Internally, she begged herself not to cry. She didn't want her daughter to think she was so hung up on this man that she was going to let her world fall apart.

Phoebe's face was marred with worry. She looked on the brink of peppering Maya with questions— probably about whether she was eating and getting enough sleep. Maya led her into the hotel and sat at the edge of the luxury couch. On television, she played a Netflix dating show, season five. She'd gotten so immersed in the characters that she'd forgotten about the rest of the world. And she hadn't updated her blog since the breakup— not that anyone in the world was waiting for her next post.

"It's a pretty place," Phoebe said reticently. She walked across the living area and whipped the curtains to either side. Snow fluttered through the gray sky. Maya hadn't been outside in four days. She'd told herself she was hatching a plan for the next stage of her life from the hotel room— but she was lost.

Phoebe had come to help Maya get the rest of her things from Nick's place, move them into a storage facility, and look for an affordable apartment. Over the phone, Phoebe had suggested that Maya come to Philadelphia to be closer to her and start a new life, but Maya had said, "I already started a

new life. Five years ago. I don't want to start all over again. Besides, my food writing career is here."

Phoebe and Maya took a cab to the old apartment while Nick was at the restaurant. Calvin, the doorman, greeted Maya warmly, but his eyes glinted knowingly. He looked like he pitied her. He'd obviously met Nick's new girlfriend.

Upstairs, Maya led Phoebe to the bedroom closet, the writing office, and the bookshelves, indicating what belonged to her. Even in her own ears, there didn't seem to be much. It was as though Maya had never fully settled in here, as though she'd been a guest who'd just brought a few too many things over. Within an hour, they had all of Maya's things packed in suitcases. They were finished.

"Wait a minute." Maya suddenly remembered the letter she'd gotten from her Aunt Veronica's lawyer on the day Nick had broken up with her. In her grief, she'd forgotten it. She hunted through the mail on the side table of the foyer, then dove through the desk to find it. Eventually, she discovered it in the recycling bin and handed it to Phoebe, her eyes sparkling. "I forgot to tell you about this."

As Phoebe read the letter, her mouth hung ajar. "What in the world? Mom!" Her eyes were illuminated. "Mom! This is it!"

Maya laughed, and it echoed strangely in the ornate apartment. "What do you mean?"

"You have to go to Hollygrove!" Phoebe said. "You have to get out of that hotel and go meet your aunt!"

"I just don't know what to think about it," Maya said. "You know how I was raised. Where was Auntie Veronica? Why is she reaching out now?"

Phoebe raised her shoulders. "Aren't you intrigued? Especially about the 'stipulations.' I mean, what will she make you do?"

"Maybe there's a treasure map," Maya joked.

Phoebe handed the letter back and gestured vaguely toward the suitcases. "Whatever it is, you owe it to yourself to

check it out. Why don't you borrow my car and head up when you feel up to it? I can fly home."

Although Maya struggled to imagine herself behind the wheel of Phoebe's car, off on a wild goose chase, Maya was touched by Phoebe's earnestness. Maybe she was right. Maybe she owed it to herself to get out of the city for a while and explore this strange, otherworldly scenario. She certainly owed it to herself to get out from under Nick's shadow as soon as possible.

That night, Maya took Phoebe to a hole-in-the-wall Italian restaurant with truffle pasta. Maya was disappointed, slightly, that Phoebe ordered wine with dinner. It meant she wasn't pregnant, not yet. But soon, Maya and Phoebe fell into a comfortable and warm conversation, one that brought Maya back into her body again.

"I never liked him," Phoebe said of Nick, then smacked her hand over her mouth.

"What?" Maya laughed. "You never told me that!"

"You were so in love with him," Phoebe said. "I knew there was no talking you out of it. Besides, when you guys got together, I was only twenty-one. What did I know about the world?"

"You've always been too smart for your own good," Maya teased. "Your father and I were amazed when you started talking. It was six months too early!"

Phoebe rolled her eyes and smiled.

"How is your father doing?" Maya twisted her fork through the pasta, surprised that the question no longer felt like a knife through her heart.

"He's good! He likes his new house. It's only about forty minutes from Philly, so I go over sometimes."

Maya's stomach ached with jealousy. "And you're spending Christmas with him this year?"

Phoebe arched her eyebrow. "Like I always say, I would love to spend Christmas with you for a change. But you won't



let me.”

“You know it’s for the best,” Maya said.

“That’s what you always say.”

Maya and Steve, Phoebe’s father, had gotten divorced when Phoebe was six. It had been more or less amicable, the sort of divorce where they only needed one lawyer, and neither of them avoided signing papers. They hadn’t had much money, so there hadn’t been any arguments about who got what, either. But like all divorces, it had crushed Maya. She supposed she would never fully get over it, even though she knew it had been for the best.

Every year since the divorce, Maya had arranged for Phoebe to spend all her Christmases with her father. Maya didn’t like to decorate; she didn’t like Christmas movies or music, and she refused to bake cookies. It had been her mother’s favorite holiday, so much so that their house had been called The Christmas House on their block, and her mother had baked up a storm the entire month of December. But when she’d died— on Christmas— Maya had resisted the holiday. Even as a child, she’d locked herself in her bedroom at her adoptive parents’ house and colored pictures in the shadows.

The next day, Maya drove Phoebe to the airport and hugged her until tears dropped from her eyes.

“Let me know when you’re on your way to Hollygrove,” Phoebe said.

“I’ll leave this week,” Maya promised.

Maya had been slightly depressed enough times to know that it often felt like there were weights in your shoes. In the days after Phoebe went back to Philly, Maya wandered around the hotel, packing intermittently and thinking about Hollygrove. Just to make sure it was real, on the day after Thanksgiving, she contacted Mr. DeWitt via phone, half-praying the phone would ring and ring without an answer, thus proving this was all a farce.

Instead, a young woman answered the phone and said, “Attorney DeWitt’s office. How may I help you?”

Maya stuttered. “Hello! I recently received a letter from Mr. DeWitt regarding my Aunt Veronica Albright’s estate.”

“Oh! Wonderful. We’ve been expecting you. Are you in town?”

Maya dropped to the edge of the bed. “I’ll be there on Sunday,” she said.

“Perfect,” the secretary said. “Mr. DeWitt will be in the office that afternoon. How about four-thirty?”

With that, Maya’s fate was sealed. She was officially leaving the city.

And when she finally did check out of that hotel, thus eliminating her connection to Nick Collins forever, she felt a sense of freedom she’d forgotten was possible. She lodged her suitcase in her trunk, opened the windows of Phoebe’s car, and drove out of the city, whipping down the highway at full speed. It had been nearly a year since she’d driven a car, but her reflexes came back easily, reminding her of all the eras of her life in which she’d needed a car.

Abstractly, she thought to herself, *if I actually get that inheritance, the first thing I’ll buy is a car.*

Maya arrived in Hollygrove at two in the afternoon, which gave her two and a half hours to kill before her meeting with the lawyer. She parked on Main Street, which looked as though an entire Christmas store had exploded onto it. Garlands were hung everywhere, as were wreaths, Christmas lights, and Christmas banners. A nativity scene was set up in front of the courthouse and in front of the one-screen movie theater, and the passers-by were dressed in warm and fuzzy mittens and hats as though they’d been taken directly from a Christmas catalog. Snow drifts gripped the edges of the sidewalk and lined the rooftops. Maya walked slowly, her hands in her coat pockets, taking in everything. How was it possible her aunt had lived up here Maya’s entire life, and she hadn’t known?

“Afternoon!” A few people greeted Maya as she passed them, as though they’d known one another all their lives.

“Hi?” Maya was accustomed to the frigidity of New Yorkers, who usually greeted one another with expletives and anger.

Maya passed the post office, elementary school, high school, gymnastics, and ballet centers before she finally reached the diner. Maya’s mouth watered at the smell of grease and fried onions. She checked the time; she still had enough before the meeting.

Maya entered the diner and smiled nervously at the waitress, who refilled an older man’s coffee mug. “Grab a booth wherever, honey,” she said.

Maya sat by the window and studied the menu. It was exactly what she thought it would be, with grilled sandwiches, pancakes, egg platters, fries, burgers, and milkshakes. She imagined this was the meeting point for teenagers, as it wasn’t too expensive. The perfect date for a sixteen-year-old with a few dollars to his name.

Maya ordered a grilled cheese sandwich with tomatoes and a Diet Coke. When the waitress returned, she’d thrown in fries “on the house.” When she saw Maya’s expression, she laughed and said, “What’s that look about?”

“I’m sorry,” Maya said. “I came from New York. Nothing is free there.”

The waitress cackled. “I’ve never been to the city. I’ve heard it’s horrible.” With that, she whisked back toward the kitchen.

Maya realized she’d hardly fed herself a proper meal since Phoebe left. She was suddenly ravenously hungry, and she ate the grilled cheese quickly, trying her best to mop up the grease on her face with a napkin. The fries were delicious, crispy and home-cut. When she finished, she leaned against the cushion of the booth and gazed outside at the snowfall, feeling a tremendous sense of calm. She had the sudden desire to scrub Nick Collins from her mind. He would have made fun of this

place; he would have said it was “too cute,” too stupid. But even though the Christmas decorations annoyed her, Maya was drawn to the town’s charm. Maybe, even if the inheritance didn’t come through, she could rent a little house here, write a book about food criticism, and wait for spring.

Mr. DeWitt was waiting for Maya in his office. He was seated at his desk with Veronica Albright’s will spread out before him, and he dotted his fingers together under his chin and leaned forward. He was probably around Maya’s age—fifty or so—and he had an intensity that probably worked well for him in court. Maya sat nervously and realized too late she’d left the office door open. The secretary wasn’t in, and there was no one in the lobby. It was probably okay.

“Thank you for meeting me today,” she said.

“I was worried the letter had gotten lost,” Mr. DeWitt said.

“How did you track me down?”

Mr. DeWitt laughed as though that was a silly question. “I assume, since you’re here, you’d like to hear the stipulations surrounding your aunt’s inheritance?”

“That’s the thing,” Maya said. “I didn’t even know I had an Aunt Veronica Albright. I’ve never heard of her.”

Mr. DeWitt raised his shoulders. “Your mother was born Bethany Albright, was she not?”

It was strange to hear her mother’s name spoken by someone she’d never met before. “She was.”

“That’s Veronica Albright’s younger sister,” Mr. DeWitt said simply.

“You’re aware that my mother died?”

“Forty-two years ago,” Mr. DeWitt said. “Yes. I’m sorry for your loss.”

Maya swallowed the lump in her throat and decided this wasn’t the right time to bring up Veronica’s lack of care for her as a child. “Okay. The stipulations. I’m ready for them.”

“Very well,” Mr. DeWitt said. “I don’t know if you are aware of the traditions here in Hollygrove.”

“I’m not. Never been here before.”

“Every year, we have a Christmas Festival,” Mr. DeWitt went on. “It’s held the first weekend of December. And unfortunately for us here in Hollygrove, it’s ordinarily planned by Veronica Albright herself.”

Maya winced. She had a hunch where this was going, and she didn’t like it.

“The first task to receive your inheritance is to plan the festival,” Mr. DeWitt went on. “Veronica says your mother, her sister, was a big believer in the magic of Christmas. She suspects she passed that on to you.”

Maya wanted to laugh. She gritted her teeth and blinked at him with disbelief. “That’s the thing,” Maya stuttered. “I’m not a big believer in Christmas. I’m more of a…” She struggled to find the word. “My daughter calls me a Christmas cynic.”

Mr. DeWitt’s eyes widened as though she were a creature in the zoo he’d never seen before. “I see. Well, that makes things interesting, doesn’t it?”

“I don’t think I can do it,” Maya said. “And I’m certainly no organizer. I once planned a birthday party for myself and put the wrong date on the invitations.”

Mr. DeWitt didn’t seem one for laughter. “With the completion of the first task, you will receive the keys to the Albright Mansion and instructions for the second task. If you can’t complete the first task, her entire inheritance will be given to charity in the event of her death, and the mansion will be sold.”

Maya remembered the current state of her bank account; it was pathetic. She scrambled. “I’m sure I can figure something out. I just need a bit of help, maybe. Someone to tell me how things work at the festival. I don’t want to plan it all wrong.”

There was a knock on the doorframe. Maya jumped in her chair and turned back to find a man smiling in the doorway.

He had blond hair and a dark-blond beard, and his green eyes exuded humor and kindness.

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” he said.

“Brad,” Mr. DeWitt greeted him. “I’m just finishing up here.”

“I’m early,” Brad said. “Don’t worry about me. But I hate to admit I was eavesdropping. And you know me, Thad. I love that Christmas Festival to bits. It’s my favorite time of the year.”

Maya’s heart fluttered. What was he doing? What was this?

“Maybe I could show you the ropes,” Brad said, his eyes locked with hers. “Veronica had a firm grip on the planning, of course, but she asked for my help from time to time.”

“You have a window into the magic,” Maya said.

“Something like that,” Brad affirmed. “What do you say?”

Mr. DeWitt laughed. “This is my friend, Brad Turner,” he explained. “He’s a teacher at the local elementary school, and it sometimes feels like he doesn’t know how to stop teaching at the end of the day.”

Brad blushed. “I promise I won’t be too annoying. But my offer still stands.”

Maya smiled because she couldn’t not. The man before her was adorable—and he clearly wanted to help. “I’d like that very much, Brad,” she said. “Thank you.”

## Chapter Three

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Maya waited nervously, shifting her weight from foot to foot, as Brad convinced Thaddeus DeWitt to go ahead to the coffee shop without him; he needed to guide Maya to the best bed and breakfast in the area, where he was sure she would be most comfortable during her stay. It was curious to Maya that he wanted to help her so much; she wasn't accustomed to such generosity, not even in the small town where she and her ex-husband had raised Phoebe. She had to bite her tongue not to ask how much the bed and breakfast cost per night. She didn't want to seem like a desperate woman. Then again, she was on a Christmas scavenger hunt set by an aunt she'd never met. That was maybe the definition of desperation.

Brad, Mr. DeWitt, and Maya left the law offices together. Mr. DeWitt locked the door behind them and whistled under his breath as though pleased with his long day of work. He waved goodbye and said, "See you in a few, Brad."

"You guys are really close?" Maya asked as soon as Mr. DeWitt disappeared around the corner because she couldn't think of anything else to say. The silence between them was thick in her ears.

"We've been friends since high school," Brad said. "The guy's a genius. I know he comes off a little cold at times, but that exterior falls away pretty quickly."

Maya was surprised at how smiley Brad was. Maybe he was just friendly; maybe he wasn't flirting with her in the least. Did she want Brad to flirt with her? No, she decided. She

just wanted to sit in a room alone. She just wanted to process the previous weeks of her life.

“So, your aunt is Veronica Albright!” Brad said. “That’s really something.”

“I just found out. I thought I was basically alone in the world, save for my daughter.”

Brad arched his eyebrow, and his smile fell slightly. “You never had contact with Veronica?”

Maya shook her head. “I’m going to drive over to her nursing home later today to say hello. But I’m so nervous. My hands are all clammy.”

“Do you know why she never reached out?”

“I don’t think I’ll ask her today,” Maya said. “But I’m dying to know.”

After a short walk, they appeared before an ornate Victorian home with sharp rooftops and turquoise-painted siding. A gray-haired woman stepped out of the foyer and waved to Brad. “Are you bringing us more customers?”

Maya smiled up at Brad as they mounted the steps. Somehow, in his presence, she felt as though everything was going to be okay. Had she felt that way when she’d met Nick? She couldn’t remember anymore. Not that Brad was a romantic prospect. Although he wore no wedding ring, he probably had a girlfriend. He seemed normal. Nice. The kind of guy a small-town woman would have loved coming home to.

The Hollygrove Bed and Breakfast was owned and operated by a husband and wife named Conor and Felicity. They were both in their seventies, and they squabbled over the computer at the front desk, trying to check Maya in.

“The computer is new,” Felicity explained. “And we haven’t figured it out fully yet.”

When Felicity handed Maya the big iron key to her room, Maya turned to Brad and said, “Thank you for your help. I guess you have to run to see Thaddeus?”



Brad palmed the back of his neck. Was it her imagination, or did he not want to go? He smiled. “When should we meet to discuss the festival? We don’t have long to plan it.”

“The Christmas Festival?” Felicity’s voice brightened. “You’re planning it? I was so worried when I heard Veronica was sick.”

“It’s up to us,” Brad affirmed. “Do you think we can do it, Felicity?”

“If anyone can, it’s you, Brad.” Felicity winked. It occurred to Maya that probably, the older women around Hollygrove flirted with Brad all the time.

“Maybe tomorrow?” Maya suggested.

“Perfect,” Brad said. “I usually leave school around three-thirty or four.”

“I can meet you outside the elementary school,” Maya suggested.

“Great,” Brad said. “See you later.”

Maya went to the second floor and inserted the iron key into her bedroom lock. Inside, she found a spacious and well-lit bedroom suite with a thick queen-sized bed and a mahogany desk that was perfect for food writing if she found the time (or the creativity, which seemed dead in the water these days). There was also a clawed bathtub in the bathroom, which she planned to use later. She’d previously loved to take baths on the long nights Nick had spent at the restaurant.

It occurred to her, now, that Nick probably hadn’t been at the restaurant during some of those long nights. He’d probably been with someone— a woman, maybe even the one who’d taken him away. But this wasn’t the time to get down about that. She had to get ready and head to the nursing home. She had to meet her final link to her mother. Perhaps, standing before her, she would understand her mother and her family lineage in a way she’d never been allowed. As an orphan, a dark cloud had lurked in her mind where family details should have been.

But when Maya reached the nursing home on the outskirts of town, the woman at the front desk informed her that Veronica was far too ill to see anyone right now.

“I’m so sorry to hear that,” Maya said softly. “Do you know when she’ll be up for a visit?”

The woman folded her lips. “Why don’t you check back in next week?”

There was something doubtful about her tone, as though she wasn’t sure Veronica would ever be up to seeing another visitor again. The back of Maya’s neck was slick with nervous sweat. She couldn’t pester this woman any longer; she was clearly there to keep people like Veronica safe. Defeated, she turned back and returned to Phoebe’s car, where she sat in the fading light and considered what to do next. Felicity had said there was always dinner at the bed and breakfast for those who wanted it. “We don’t like to think of ourselves as an only-breakfast place,” she’d explained. “Everyone needs a warm meal before bed.”

Maya parked in the back lot of the bed and breakfast and walked slowly through the snow. The Victorian house looked mystical beneath the dark sky and shimmering stars; even the Christmas tree in the window didn’t look half bad to her cynical, anti-Christmas mind. When she entered, she was struck with the smell of pork chops and potatoes, and her stomach groaned.

“Someone’s hungry!” Felicity called.

Maya laughed and walked to the doorway of the kitchen. A fondness for Felicity flowed through her. “Can I help you with anything?”

“No, darling,” Felicity said. “I’m nearly finished. Why don’t you go to the living room with the others? There’s red wine and crackers.”

Maya followed the sounds of voices to the living room, where she found six other bed and breakfast guests: two couples in their fifties and sixties, a man in his thirties traveling by himself, and another woman in her late thirties or

early forties, who explained she was on a road trip across the east coast.

“By yourself?” Maya asked, sitting down tentatively beside her and crossing her ankles.

“I don’t know any other way to travel,” the woman said. She reached for the bottle of wine on the coffee table and tilted it toward Maya, who nodded. She then poured Maya a glass and passed it over. “I’m Winnie, by the way.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Winnie. I’m Maya.”

“And you’re traveling alone, too.”

Maya’s cheeks were flushed with the woman’s attention. After so many days alone in that hotel room on Fifth Avenue, Maya felt as though she’d lost all sense of social propriety. “I’m here in Hollygrove to meet my aunt for the first time,” she explained. “She wants to leave me her inheritance, apparently. But I have to perform some tasks first.”

Winnie’s eyes sparkled. The two married couples perked up, as did the thirty-something man.

“Tasks?” The thirty-something guy said. “What kind of tasks?”

Maya sipped her wine and tried to laugh at herself and her situation. “She wants me to plan the Hollygrove Christmas Festival. But I have only one week to pull it off!”

One of the older men slapped his knee. “Are you some kind of event planner? That’s what our daughter does for a living.” His wife nodded beside him, pleased.

“I’m not,” Maya said. “I’m a food critic. Well, I was. I recently lost my job at *Food & Drink* magazine.”

“I just love their recipes,” one of the older wives reported.

“Wait a minute,” Winnie said, snapping her fingers. “I think I recognize you! I adored your reviews. I used to tell my ex-boyfriend that reading your work was almost as good as dining out at the restaurants myself.”

Maya had heard this before. Her cheeks burned, and she took another long sip of wine. “I appreciate that,” she finally managed to say. “I couldn’t believe I was allowed to write about something I loved so much. And then, all at once, it was like my career was stolen from me. I’ve tried to make it work with a private blog, but monetizing it has been tricky. I’m a bit at a loss.”

“It’s happening all across the world,” the thirty-something guy said. “So many of my friends are having to change careers or go back to school. It’s frustrating.”

“What do you do?” Maya asked, wanting to throw the group’s attention elsewhere.

The thirty-something waved his hand. “I’m only thirty-four,” he began, “but I’ve already changed careers a few times. At twenty-one, I went to clown school.”

“Clown school!” Winnie and Maya burst out in unison.

He laughed. “I wanted to be an actor, but a producer told me I wasn’t good-looking enough to make it in television or film. So I tried out for clown school, which is a whole lot more pretentious than it sounds. There’s a grand tradition of clowning in France. But unfortunately, I was kicked out.”

“You were kicked out of clown school?” One of the older women looked at him as though he was a peculiar kind of beetle.

“So I went to school for accounting,” the younger man went on. “Which was lucrative for a while, but I also no longer felt excited about anything in the world. At twenty-seven, I felt like I wanted to retire. Soon. But that was seven years ago!”

“You’re not accounting anymore?” Maya asked.

“I’m working on a screenplay,” the young man said. “And accounting on the side.”

“What brings you to Hollygrove?” an older man asked.

“When I was in India recently, I fell in love with a girl from Hollygrove,” the young man explained without a hint of

embarrassment. “I lost my phone shortly thereafter, and she has no social media presence. I thought I’d come here and track her down.”

“Any luck?” Maya asked.

The young man’s eyes were shadowed. “The problem is, I only ever knew her first name.”

“What’s her name?” Felicity appeared in the living room, drying her hands on her apron and peering at the young man curiously.

“Sarah.” The man shook his head with devastation. It was the most common name in the world.

“Oh, goodness.” Felicity scratched her eyebrow. “Sarah Waters? Sarah Ferguson? Sarah Peters?”

The young man shook his head. “I don’t know,” he muttered. “I just don’t know.”

Felicity announced it was dinner time. The guests followed her to the living room, where they sat together at a long antique table heavy with pork chops, mashed potatoes, green beans, kale salad, bottles of wine, pitchers of iced tea, and pitchers of ice water with lemon. As Maya filled her plate, she imagined how she would write about this particular spread. It had been a long time since she’d eaten such homey, heart-warming food prepared by such skillful yet unassuming hands like Felicity’s. She didn’t call herself a world-renowned chef. She just wanted people to go to bed with full bellies.

“Does anyone mind if we pray?” Conor asked, reaching for Felicity’s hand.

The guests bowed their heads as Conor said a brief yet gorgeous prayer. “Bless us, oh Lord,” he began, “as we thank you for these bountiful gifts. Today, you’ve brought six marvelous people safely to our bed and breakfast. We pray that they find hope and renewal in the town of Hollygrove and that they find comfort here at the Hollygrove Bed and Breakfast with Felicity and me. Amen.”

As Maya opened her eyes again, she thought of Nick, who’d often made fun of people who prayed before they ate.

Maya was seated across from Winnie and directly next to the thirty-something, who eventually introduced himself as Tom. Tom filled his plate twice in the same amount of time it took Maya to eat one helping. He seemed to have a zest for life Maya had forgotten possible.

“Tell us more about this aunt of yours,” Tom urged Maya.

Maya raised her shoulders. “I don’t know much at all,” she said. “She’s my mother’s older sister, but I never met her. My mother died when I was six, and I was raised by my neighbors, who eventually adopted me.”

Tom frowned, and a wrinkle formed between his eyebrows. “Are you close with your adoptive parents?”

This wasn’t a question Maya had fielded in a while. She paused, her fork laden with mashed potatoes. “They had four other children,” she said softly. “I don’t think I was a burden they necessarily knew how to deal with.”

The truth, of course, was that Maya’s adoptive mother hardly called, not even on her birthday. Her adoptive father had died ten years ago, and when Maya had gone to the funeral, she’d been left out of all family meals and activities. It hadn’t felt right to force herself into their mourning rituals. And she hadn’t had many fond memories of him, anyway.

“What’s your aunt’s name, sweetie?” Felicity asked.

“Veronica Albright.”

Felicity set her fork down with a clank. Shock marred her face. “Goodness.”

Conor clucked his tongue, and a hush came over the table. Maya had the sensation that she’d said something wrong.

“That’s quite a family,” Felicity offered.

“And you’re up for the inheritance?” Conor asked.

“Only if I follow my aunt’s instructions,” Maya said. “To be honest with you, I’ve never had much money in my life. My expectation is I’ll fail my aunt’s tasks and be left with nothing. But I figured, what the heck? Coming here is an adventure. And I’d run out of luck in New York.”

Tom smiled warmly. “It never gets easier, does it?” He said it with a soft laugh.

“Life, you mean?”

Tom nodded.

“Never,” Maya agreed. “But you have to make your own fun. It’s the only real way to get through in one piece.”

“Wonderfully said.” Conor raised his glass of wine. “To making our own fun! And celebrating when we can.”

## Chapter Four

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**B**rad's alarm clock rang every morning at six, but that didn't always mean he paid attention to it. He smacked the top of the clock to stop the incessant buzzing and lay in the darkness, listening to the crash of wind against his little house. It was chilly in his bedroom, which made it easier to fall asleep but much more difficult to get up.

But then, he remembered something. Today was the day he would meet with Maya, the newcomer, to plan the Christmas festival. He whipped the comforter from his legs, headed to his dresser, donned a pair of running pants and a big sweatshirt, and was out the door in no time. His best days as a teacher (and as a person) began with a five-mile run. He thought better of himself and the world afterward— perhaps because of the endorphins. Besides, he was fifty years old. He needed the exercise.

As Brad whipped toward the riverwalk, he stretched his legs out and considered the day ahead. He'd already made a list of to-dos for the Christmas Festival, which he planned to translate to Maya later, perhaps over coffee and cake. He could take her to his favorite coffee shop and maybe ask her questions about herself between planning. She seemed like a fish out of water— nervous and jumpy in the small town Brad knew like the back of his hand. But she was beautiful. Her big, brown eyes seemed to peer all the way through his soul, and her voice sounded a bit like Scarlet Johansson, raspy but adorable. He'd felt embarrassed, taking her to the bed and breakfast like that. Did he think he was some kind of hero? Did he think he could “save” her day? Then again, that was



kind of his thing. He loved lending a helping hand. A therapist had once told him it was his way of neglecting himself and his own needs. Not long after that, he'd witnessed the therapist back her vehicle into a stop sign on accident and stayed with her for over an hour, waiting for the cops to arrive. He'd canceled a date to stay there with her, making sure she was all right. Afterward, she'd said: "*See what you're doing. You're sabotaging yourself.*" He'd suddenly seen her point.

Brad got back to his house at six-forty-five, jumped in the shower, and donned a pair of slacks and a navy button-down. He drank a cup of coffee and scarfed down a bowl of oatmeal with peanut butter and raisins, then headed out by seven-fifteen. The elementary school was just four blocks away, and he loved the walk.

Brad reached school by seven-twenty. Already, a line of big yellow buses stretched around the block, dropping off kids from the outskirts of town and the countryside beyond that. He waved to previous and present students as they scampered past, their backpacks bouncing. Before school began at eight, the kids were kept in the gym, where they played games and socialized. Some weeks, Brad was assigned morning duty, which meant he had to stand at the edge of the gym and make sure there was no funny business. He was glad today wasn't one of those days.

Brad had begun teaching at Hollygrove Elementary School at the age of twenty-three, more than half his life ago. At first, he'd been a sixth-grade teacher, then a kindergarten teacher, before he'd stopped at second grade. That was fifteen years ago now. To him, second grade was a sweet spot. Kids were still kids; they were still excited about learning, and they seemed to lack the cruelty that came in third and fourth grade — especially amongst little girls. The things he'd heard ten-year-old girls say to one another had turned his blood cold.

Brad entered through the office to check his mailbox. Principal Sally Rodgers waved from the inside of her office, where she talked on the phone. Brad waved back and strode toward the hallway, greeting the secretarial staff by name.

"Have a beautiful day, Brad!" Mrs. Quincy called.

But when Brad ducked into the hallway, he nearly stumbled directly into Rainey Michaels. His heart stopped with surprise.

“Oh! Brad! It’s you!” Rainey’s smile was enormous, showing too many of her very white teeth. Sometimes, Brad had the sensation that she wanted to eat him.

“Good morning, Ms. Michaels,” Brad said, his tone formal.

“Did you just get in?”

“I did.” Brad eyed his classroom door with longing. “I have to run. The class hamster, you know. He needs to be fed.”

Ms. Michaels giggled. “I forgot you got that thing.”

That thing? Brad’s cheek twitched with annoyance. Clifford the hamster was his classroom’s favorite little creature on earth. Students took turns feeding him and changing his water, and they often traded off weekends to take him home. Naming him had been a multi-day event of discussions, with Brad’s students writing small speeches about why they thought each name was best. Clifford had eventually won— but barely.

“Yes, well. See you later, Ms. Michaels.”

“I meant to tell you,” Rainey said, stepping in front of him again. “A few of us are going out after school gets out. The Mexican place has that deal on margaritas again.”

This wasn’t the first time Rainey had invited him for after-work margaritas. After one too many invites, Brad had eventually agreed— and he’d spent the entirety of the afternoon miserable, listening to teachers gossip about other teachers in a way that made his head spin. He’d vowed never to go again.

“I can’t make it,” Brad said. “I have plans this afternoon.”

“Maybe another day, then.”

Brad tried to match Rainey’s smile, but his lips failed him. Finally, he walked around her and called back over his shoulder, “See you at lunch duty, Ms. Michaels.” He

disappeared into his classroom, shut the door, and exhaled all the air from his lungs. He'd known for years that Rainey had a crush on him— but her advances had gotten more insistent lately. She seemed unwilling to accept that he wasn't interested in her. Maybe Brad should have been flattered; maybe he should have given her a chance. But there was a cruelty to Rainey that he couldn't ignore. He often heard her screaming at her fourth graders from down the hall. She'd been written up twice for disorderly conduct. That wasn't the type of woman he saw himself with.

Brad turned on all the lights, cleaned a few of the desks with spray and a sponge, and made sure his day's lessons were ready to go. After that, he checked on Clifford the hamster, who slept peacefully, his fuzzy belly expanding and retracting. Brad felt an inexplicable surge of affection for the little guy.

Brad's students scampered down the hall just before eight. All twenty-four of them were between the ages of seven and eight, and they were often exuberant this early in the morning. Brad often wondered why adults were so tired in the morning, why the weight of the world fell so hard on their shoulders as they aged.

“Good morning, Mr. Turner!” A little boy named Alex waved from his desk, where he removed his pencil box and sharpened his pencil with a portable sharpener.

“Good morning, Alex,” Brad said as he leaned against his desk up front. “How was your weekend?”

“It was great! We drove to the mall and met Santa!” Alex announced.

This caught the attention of several other students. Santa was a hot topic around here. This was another reason Brad treasured teaching such young children. Usually, by fourth grade, their belief in Santa Claus flew out the window.

“What did you ask him for?” Jason, the boy to Alex's left, asked.

“My mom said if you tell what you wished for, it might not come true,” Alex explained.

Jason nodded, looking more serious than ever.

“How many of you are going to go to the Hollygrove Christmas Festival this weekend?” Brad asked.

All hands rocketed through the air. Brad laughed, making a mental note to tell Maya how important their work was to twenty-four kids. They couldn’t let them down.

Brad breezed through the first few hours of school. They started with arithmetic, had a spelling test, played a spelling game, and even learned a bit of Spanish. When the bell rang for lunch, they lined up and headed toward the lunchroom quietly. They knew Brad would give them a treat after lunch if they kept quiet. It was manipulative, maybe, but Brad had told them they needed to respect each other. “I want you to know how much I appreciate your respect for me,” he’d said.

In the lunchroom, Rainey and a few of the other teachers stood along the wall, their arms folded over their chest. Like most elementary schools, Hollygrove Elementary had mostly female teachers. The only other man taught sixth grade and often made excuses to get out of lunch duty because he taught things like Science Club and Chess Club.

“It’s just like you said, Rainey,” one of the teachers, Mrs. Nelson, was saying. Her tone was breathy, but she was loud enough for Brad to hear from seven feet away. “Principal Rodgers looks insane in that sweater.”

“Right? It’s so tacky,” Rainey whispered back.

“She looks like a doily,” Mrs. Nelson snorted.

“Yes! I mean, can you imagine what her husband was thinking when she got dressed this morning?” Rainey asked.

Brad winced. He couldn’t remember what Principal Rodgers had been wearing when he’d seen her that morning. She’d smiled at him warmly; she’d come to school to do her job and serve the community and its children. Why wasn’t that enough for people like Rainey? Why did she have to pick her apart?

“Did you see it, Brad?” Rainey asked. There was that smile again. She wanted to lure him in.

“I didn’t, no,” Brad said.

Mrs. Nelson cackled. “You have to see it, Brad. Make an excuse and go to the office later.”

Brad wanted to reprimand them, to tell them gossiping was the worst possible thing to do in front of the students. But just then, a kid to his left spilled an entire carton of chocolate milk all over himself and burst into tears. Brad jumped to action, grateful to leave Rainey and Mrs. Nelson to their gossip.

In the bathroom, Brad helped the little kid clean up and returned him to the lunchroom, where Rainey and Mrs. Nelson were reprimanding a little girl in tones he felt were obscenely harsh. The little girl was pink-cheeked and embarrassed, clutching her lunch bag to her chest. He had the sudden urge to yell at Rainey, to ask her what her deal was. But he knew what it meant to get on her bad side. Rainey had it out for several other teachers at the elementary school. She’d made it so hard on Mrs. Shean that she’d asked to switch to the middle school; she’d driven Mrs. Faulkner to therapy. “Why does she still have that job?” Thaddeus DeWitt had asked once, genuinely confused. And Brad had said: “It’s hard to find teachers in such a small and rural community. We can’t afford to fire anyone. Not even someone as cruel as Rainey.”

## Chapter Five

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Maya didn't leave her room at the bed and breakfast till one. She'd missed breakfast and hadn't bothered with lunch. But the hours alone, drenched in the sunlight that poured in through the bed and breakfast windows, had done her good. Her thoughts flowed freely; she'd journaled for a bit, writing notes about food she'd eaten and cooked and gorgeous dining experiences she'd had. And she was beginning to feel that she'd officially left Nick in her rearview mirror. The distance from the city was like filling her lungs with fresh air. Was it possible that Nick— and New York City — had never been good for her, after all? It was difficult to wrap her mind around that, especially given all she'd done to make it work.

“Hey!” Tom was downstairs on a living room couch. Before him, fire licked the stones in the fireplace. He had his laptop on his lap, and his hair was wild and ruffled, as though he tugged on it as he concentrated.

“Hey there. Are you working on your screenplay?”

Tom shook his head. “I was. But now, I'm doing a deep search into the history of Hollygrove. I want to figure out who Sarah's family is. Maybe they can help me find her.”

“You're a romantic, Tom,” Maya said with a smile. Secretly, she hoped Sarah wouldn't think Tom was too creepy for going to such dramatic ends to find her. Tom seemed innocent and charming. She didn't want the cruelty of the world to affect him just yet.

“Felicity said there’s food for you in the kitchen,” Tom announced. “She didn’t want to bother you.”

Maya thanked Tom and entered the kitchen to find fresh croissants with jam and camembert cheese, fresh fruit, and oatmeal if she wanted it. Felicity had left a note on the kitchen table that said: “Feel free to make yourself some eggs and bacon, honey. Everything is in the left drawer in the refrigerator.”

Maya opted for a croissant with jam and camembert— an indulgence she ordinarily didn’t allow herself— and made a few notes in her journal about the texture of the bread, the tartness of the jam, and the rankness of the cheese: “the stinkier the cheese, the better.” She then leaned against the kitchen counter and called Phoebe, whom she caught on her way back from a run.

“How is it?” Phoebe was breathless and excited.

“It’s nice. The bed and breakfast feels like it’s from a storybook. And the tiny town is really adorable.” Maya went on to explain Veronica’s will and Maya’s challenge to plan the Hollygrove Christmas Festival in less than a week. “It’s Monday,” she said, “and we have to have everything ready by Saturday.”

Phoebe stuttered. “Christmas Festival? Really?”

“I know.”

“I mean, did you tell them you don’t even celebrate Christmas?”

“The lawyer didn’t seem to care,” Maya said with a laugh. “I either plan the festival and get the inheritance, or I don’t plan the festival and don’t get the inheritance. It’s pretty simple.”

“I see.” Phoebe sounded worried.

“I have help,” Maya went on. “An elementary school teacher overheard my conundrum and stepped in.”

“Oh? Why does she want to help so much?” Phoebe sounded wary.

“I don’t think he’s after my inheritance or anything,” Maya said.

“Oh! A male elementary school teacher. How intriguing.”

Maya rolled her eyes as her lips twisted into a smile. She was glad Phoebe couldn’t see her; she would have called her out. “He’s a friend of the lawyer. Just a helpful guy. Community-minded, you know.”

“Well, keep me updated,” Phoebe urged. After a small pause, she added, “You sound happy, Mom. Just so you know.”

Maya’s heartbeat quickened. “I don’t always feel very happy,” she said. “But getting out of the city was a good thing. At least for now.”

For a little while, Maya sat in the living room with Tom, typing the first draft of an article for “A Taste Above The Rest.” She wanted to capture the iconic flavors of this little town, and the pork chop dinner from last night and today’s croissant, camembert, and jam were perfect jumping-off points. Occasionally, Tom interrupted her to tell her things he’d learned about the town on his deep dive to find Sarah.

“You said your aunt’s name is Veronica Albright?”

“That’s right.”

Tom raised both eyebrows. “That family is rich with a capital R.”

Maya cackled and set her laptop aside. Tom whipped his around to show an old photograph of Veronica. Maya was caught off-guard. She’d never seen her before. Remarkably, Veronica looked a little bit like Maya, with her big brown eyes, her dark hair, and her high cheekbones. The associated article had been written twenty-five years ago, and it discussed Veronica’s recent divorce from a hedge fund manager. She’d forced him to sign a prenup. Because he’d cheated on her, the article stated he would get nothing.

“Wow,” Maya breathed. “She sounds scary.”



“I don’t know,” Tom said, shaking his head. “In another article, it says she worked as an elementary school teacher at Hollygrove Elementary for ten years.”

“Really?”

“Crazy, right? She never had to work a day in her life. But she’s quoted as saying, ‘The young people are our future. I want to be a part of shaping that future.’”

Maya furrowed her brow. Maya had been away in Pennsylvania— penniless, sleeping in a bedroom with an adoptive sister who’d hated her and frequently complained that Maya made their lives more difficult. “You’re the reason we get fewer Christmas presents,” she’d said. “You’re the reason we don’t have as much to eat.” Why hadn’t Aunt Veronica thought to “shape the future” with Maya by her side?

Maya suddenly noticed the time and popped up. “I have to run,” she said. “That Christmas Festival won’t plan itself.”

“Yeah, Maya! Go get that inheritance!” Tom said, clapping his hands.

Maya laughed, grabbed her coat, gloves, and hat and sped out the door. The elementary school was just five blocks away — in a town where everything seemed so close— and as she strode, she caught herself admiring the Christmas lights, the thick wreaths, and the Christmas trees that filled nearly every window. It was three-thirty, and the light was already dimming. Gray clouds hovered low, and snowflakes peppered the air.

When Maya reached the elementary school, there was a line of big yellow buses out front. Brad was on the sidewalk, making sure the rest of the students boarded safely. He bent to speak to each of them individually, giving them the respect of looking them in the eye. Maya stopped short on the sidewalk, only about fifteen feet away from him, and admired him at work. It struck her, again, that he was too handsome for such a small town, that he was too good to while away at a little elementary school like this, teaching kids. But then again, wasn’t this exactly the kind of man who should have been

leading the next generation? He didn't think of himself as "too good" to lend each of the children his ear.

Brad caught her eye and waved, and Maya's stomach tied into knots. It was too late to turn back. She hurried toward him and waved timidly just as another teacher swept across the sidewalk and tapped on Brad's shoulder. Brad flinched and turned to look at her. The other teacher spoke quietly so that Brad had to bend down to hear. Maya stalled and took stock of this woman, of her beautiful, heart-shaped face and blond hair. She had a gorgeous figure, probably from Pilates or yoga, and she gazed at Brad adoringly. Was this the woman he was dating? It made sense. Teachers often dated teachers.

"Maya, hello!" Brad half-interrupted the female teacher. "Welcome to Hollygrove Elementary."

"Hey!" Maya's voice wavered.

"Brad, who's your friend?"

Brad kept his smile professional. "Ms. Michaels, this is Maya. She's brand-new to Hollygrove."

"You can call me Rainey."

Maya shook Rainey's hand. "Pleasure to meet you."

"And you!" Rainey's smile was enormous; she looked like an ex-cheerleader. "What brings you to Hollygrove?"

"I have to plan the Christmas Festival," Maya said with a shrug. "It's a long story."

"I have time," Rainey said.

Brad's face was suddenly stony, as though he wanted Rainey to leave them alone. What was going on?

"My Aunt Veronica normally plans it," Maya went on. "But she's ill. She wants me to plan the Christmas Festival as a sort of test, I guess."

"A test?" Rainey raised a single eyebrow. "Don't tell me it's for her inheritance?"

Maya laughed, and her heartbeat intensified. There was something strange about the glint in Rainey's eyes. "It's all so

strange, honestly. But Brad has graciously volunteered to help me plan the festival, which is incredible because I don't normally celebrate Christmas. I hardly know the first thing about it."

Brad's eyes widened with shock. "You don't celebrate Christmas?"

Maya waved her hand. "It's a long story."

"Well. Aren't you something special," Rainey said, crossing her arms over her chest.

"We'd better head out," Brad said. "I'll see you tomorrow, Ms. Michaels. Thanks again for your help with bus duty."

Brad walked at a quick pace, leading Maya away from the elementary school. He wore a small, dark-blue backpack as though he were yet another, much larger student at Hollygrove Elementary, and he had a few marker stains on his fingers, presumably from helping his students draw or write. Maya's heart flipped over. She wanted to ask if he was dating Rainey. She wanted to ask him why he— a clear catch— wasn't married.

*Snap out of it, Maya.*

"I was thinking we could get some coffee. And cake?" Brad suggested, opening the door to a quaint coffee shop a few blocks from the elementary school. "I don't know if you like cake."

"Who doesn't like cake?"

Brad's smile widened.

Behind the counter was a blond woman in her twenties who greeted them with a chipper hello. "Brad, we have your favorite. Carrot cheesecake!"

"Oh, no. Cynthia, you're going to kill me!" Brad glanced at Maya. "Maybe we should share one?"

But Maya was bent on experiencing as many flavors in this small town as she could, if only for the sake of her blog. "No way. Let's each get a different kind."

Brad laughed. “I can’t refuse.”

Maya and Brad carried their platters of carrot cheesecake and a chocolate tart to the table by the window. Soon after, Cynthia appeared with their lattes and then sped back behind the counter. Maya glanced around the ornate little coffee shop, which had been lovingly decorated with paintings by local artists, clay sculptures, and funny photographs of coffee shop regulars. It didn’t take long to find the photograph of Brad and Mr. DeWitt, in which their arms were slung around each other’s shoulders.

“Wow,” Maya said. “You’re famous.”

“It doesn’t take a lot to be famous in Hollygrove,” Brad said. “I’m sure you’ll be famous by the end of the week. You’re Veronica Albright’s niece!”

Maya wrinkled her nose and tore her fork through the chocolate tart. “I wasn’t able to meet her yesterday. All my ideas of her are based on a few articles on the internet.” She took a small bite of chocolate tart, which was gooey with decadent chocolate and punctuated with sharp dots of salt. “Did you know she taught at the elementary school?”

Brad blushed. “She was my second-grade teacher, actually.”

Maya set down her fork in surprise. “Everyone really does know each other around here!”

Brad took a bite of his cheesecake and closed his eyes. Maya understood this; the fact that he needed to take a pause and acknowledge the overwhelming flavors and textures. Nick had done this, too. Then again— Nick had often detested everyone else’s cooking except for his own.

“She was one of the main reasons I got into teaching in the first place,” Brad said, opening his eyes. “She had this way about her. Of acknowledging all of us kids as people, even though we were only eight years old. She was probably thirty when I had her, but that didn’t mean I didn’t have a huge crush on her.”

Maya laughed openly. “I read she only taught for about ten years?”

“I think she got into some kind of dispute with the school board,” Brad said. “That’s the rumor, anyway. But she never needed to be a teacher, as you know. And it sounds like she traveled the world, lending a hand to those in need. I don’t think she liked her husband very much.”

“I read about how he got nothing after the divorce.”

“He cheated on her with her friend,” Brad went on, then blushed. “My gosh. I’m more of a gossip than I thought.”

“No! I really love hearing about her,” Maya said. “It’s hard to believe I’m just a few miles away from her, and I can’t even meet her. It hurts.”

Brad took another bite of cheesecake and leaned further over the table as though he wanted to be as close to Maya as possible. “Did they say anything about her health?”

“They hope she’ll be up for visitors by next week,” Maya explained. “I hope, by then, I’ll be able to tell her I put on a brilliant festival.”

“You will,” Brad assured her. He bent down to unzip his backpack and procured a big notebook, where he’d written a list of to-dos for the Christmas Festival. “Let’s get into it,” he said, rubbing his palms together. “Normally, the festival goes from Saturday to Sunday. It begins at noon on both days and features food stalls and trucks, wine and beer tents, and three stages where local bands, theater groups, and choirs perform Christmas-themed shows. On Sunday, there’s a parade from one end of the town to the other. Normally, the marching band and the ballet are involved, as are several companies, who drive cars and floats behind the band.”

Maya’s head spun. “This sounds like a lot.”

“Don’t worry,” Brad said. “I already called a few of the companies today to check-in. All four of them had already started on the decorations for their floats. Well, one of them just still has the float from last year in their garage, so they’re going to repurpose it.”

Maya laughed. “That’s easy.”

“Isn’t it? See, the thing about the Christmas Festival is that it’s just a time to bring all the residents together,” Brad explained. “It doesn’t have to be too special or too fancy. It just has to happen.”

Maya took several notes on her phone, deciding to call the marching band and ballet directors that evening, approach a few businesses tomorrow, and make sure the theater troupe was still up for a Charlie Brown Christmas performance, which they apparently performed every year.

“Everything will fall into place,” Brad assured her. “We just have to hustle.”

Maya had never been spoken to with such tenderness before, not by any man in her life. She set down her phone and took a tentative bite of her chocolate tart. Outside, the light had fallen away completely, casting them in the inky night. The streetlamps glowed from here all the way down Main Street, and Christmas lights were strung from one building to the next. She checked the time. It was, impossibly, seven. The coffee shop was about to close.

“Where did the time go?” Maya asked.

“I don’t know, honestly.” Brad laughed.

Maya held the silence for a moment. Her chest thrummed with expectation.

“Should we meet tomorrow to go over what you manage to finish tomorrow?” Brad asked.

“Yes!” Maya winced at how excited she sounded. “I mean, that sounds good. Really good.”

Brad smiled. “Wonderful. Now, let’s get out of here before Cynthia kicks us to the curb.”

Brad paid Cynthia for their cakes and coffee, leaving a twenty-five percent tip. Nick had only ever left fifteen, tops. Maya forced herself not to swoon.

## Chapter Six

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Maya's first meeting the following morning was with the marching band director of the local high school. The man was in his late fifties and wore a polo shirt with the words "Hollygrove Marching Irish" stitched into the left breast. As soon as she entered his office, he handed her a big donut heavy with vanilla cream, filled a large mug with coffee, and said, "We've been practicing Christmas marches for weeks. I was terrified we'd have to throw a parade ourselves. The kids look forward to it every year."

Maya laughed. "I'm so glad you're in!" She took an enormous bite of donut, coating her lips with powdered sugar. Vanilla cream burst across her tongue. As soon as she chewed and swallowed, she managed, "You're making my life so much easier. Tell me. Do you always start from the same location every year?"

"We do. We lead the rest of the parade," he explained. "From the courthouse, through downtown. We always make a loop near the high school, march past the elementary school, and return via Hollygrove Way. The entire parade lasts about two hours." He rifled through a folder on the desk to procure a map and a list of typical parade attendees. "If you like, I can make a few phone calls this morning," he said, "just to confirm to them that the parade is on. Since we do it every year, it's like pressing 'play' and letting it roll."

Maya's heart swelled with appreciation. "You'd really do that?"

The band director closed his folder and beamed at her. “You look a little like your aunt, you know that? I mean, you look the way I remember her looking when I was a boy. She’s gotten older, like the rest of us.”

Maya’s cheeks burned. She didn’t feel up to telling anyone else that she’d never met Veronica before. It was too embarrassing.

“She’s been the heart and soul of the Christmas Festival for decades,” the band director continued. “As you know, she’s an accomplished musician. She’s helped me time and again during orchestra season. She even wrote a few pieces for us a couple of years back.” He clucked his tongue sadly. “When I heard how sick she was, it broke my heart. You’re doing a good thing here, stepping in to help her out.”

Maya filled her mouth with bitter coffee. She hadn’t known her aunt was a musician, but it didn’t surprise her. It seemed she was related to a powerhouse human, the sort of woman who could do anything. She’d even kicked her cheating husband to the curb without a dime to his name. The story felt impossible to Maya, who currently had no money—and had been kicked to the curb by her own cheating boyfriend. It felt as though Veronica had learned a secret about the world that Maya had never been allowed to know.

The rest of the morning continued in the same vein. Maya streamed in and out of businesses, dance studios, and community groups, delivering relevant information about the festival and parade and receiving, in turn, more memories of her Aunt Veronica. The owner of the grocery store, who’d decided to sell pies again at the festival this year, said that Aunt Veronica once operated the grocery store for an entire month when he had surgery on his leg. The principal of the middle school said that Veronica had donated so much money for a brand-new swimming pool that they’d tried to name the swimming pool after her—but she hadn’t allowed them to. The theater troupe organizer imparted a story about Veronica’s playwriting capabilities, telling Maya that Veronica could have made it big in London or New York if she’d wanted to. “But she wanted to stay here, in Hollygrove.”



As the day wore on, the Christmas Festival took form. Maya kept in constant contact with Brad, texting him after each of her successful meetings.

MAYA: I can't believe how easy everyone in Hollygrove is to work with.

MAYA: It's like they've never even heard of Manhattan and all the angry people who live there.

BRAD: Hollygrove folks will be the first to tell you that they're nothing like city folks.

BRAD: Glad to hear it's going well! I figured it would come into place easily.

BRAD: I'm sure your aunt knew it would, too.

BRAD: Maybe she just wanted to show off how amazing Hollygrove is. :)

By five that evening, Maya was back at the Hollygrove Bed and Breakfast. Her feet were slightly swollen and aching after scouting up and around downtown, ducking in and out of businesses, and she had them up on a couch cushion as she made notes to herself on her computer. Her new friend, the solo female traveler named Winnie, entered the living room, followed closely by Tom. After only two days together, Maya had begun to think of them as an extension of her family. She supposed that came from being an orphan— and hoping to find a connection wherever she was.

“How did it go today?” Tom asked breezily.

“Really well,” Maya said, setting her computer to the side. “I can't believe how friendly people are here.”

Winnie nodded and collapsed on the couch on the other side of Maya's feet. “I got lost in the woods on a hike,” she said, wincing. “Three men discovered me on a rock, crying my heart out. They gave me some snacks and led me back to the road. You won't believe how close we were. It was about ten minutes away.” Winnie cackled to herself. “I always think I'm

so independent until I really need someone. And then, all my confidence falls away.”

“I think you’re doing really well for yourself,” Maya said. “You couldn’t force me into the woods alone.”

Tom sat on the couch opposite them and gazed into the fire longingly.

“Tom and I ran into each other at the coffee shop,” Winnie explained. “He saw me just after my breakdown.”

“And you saw me in the midst of mine,” Tom said with a laugh.

“Still no Sarah?” Maya asked.

Tom shook his head, and his dark hair dropped over his ears. “I’m starting to think I imagined our entire romance.”

Maya understood what he meant. Just that day, as she’d scoured the streets of Hollygrove and jumped from one nourishing conversation to the next, she’d begun to think that Nick and New York City were two monstrosities she’d simply made up in her mind. Perhaps she was masochistic. Perhaps, somewhere in her mind, she didn’t want to allow herself any happiness.

Was that why she’d refused to celebrate Christmas for all these years?

There was a knock at the door. Felicity breezed from the kitchen, bringing with her a wave of nourishing smells—roasting chicken and carrots. She smiled at her guests and opened the door to produce Brad Turner, who stomped his boots of snow and grinned. Maya had to force herself not to leap from the couch with excitement. She didn’t want to seem so keen.

“Evening, everyone!” Brad greeted Felicity with a hug and waved into the living room before he removed his boots.

“Two visits in one week,” Felicity chirped. “I don’t know what we did to deserve that, Bradley.”

Brad laughed and entered the living room to shake first Tom’s, then Winnie’s hands. Maya introduced Brad. “He’s

helping me with the Christmas Festival, thank goodness. I don't know how I could have managed it without him."

Of course, she now knew that wasn't fully true. The entire town had jumped at the chance to help her, making phone calls, decorating Christmas floats, and donating funds. But she still didn't want Brad to step aside and let her work alone. Perhaps a more manipulative woman would have made up a problem to force Brad to stick around. But Maya wasn't the sort to do that.

"Winnie was just telling us about her epic hiking adventure today," Maya explained to Brad.

"Epic isn't the word for it," Winnie said. "Pathetic is. I got lost."

"I've gotten lost in those woods more times than I can count," Brad assured her. "And I was born and raised here. If you want, I can recommend a few hiking trails that are clearly marked."

Winnie brightened. "That would be fantastic. I don't want to give up just yet."

"And Tom is here to track down his missed love connection," Maya said.

"When I was in India, I met and fell in love with a girl from Hollygrove," Tom admitted wistfully. "I came here to find her. But I don't know her last name."

Brad's forehead crinkled from his concentration. "I see. Lost love is a difficult thing. How old are you, Tom?"

"I'm thirty-four." Tom winced as he said it, as though thirty-four was monstrously old in his world.

*Wait till you're forty-eight,* Maya thought to herself.

"So that means you were born in 1989?" Brad said.

"Yep."

Brad rubbed his chin, making a light scratching sound against his five o'clock shadow. "I might have had your lost

connection in class at the elementary school. What's her name?"

Tom's jaw dropped. "Her name is Sarah. She has dark brown hair and big blue eyes. You can't forget those eyes."

Brad was unable to suppress his smile. Maya understood it: there was something intoxicating about Tom's pure, unquestioned love.

"She's got to be Sarah Sanderson. I will never forget those eyes."

"Sanderson?" Tom looked as though he'd just stumbled on treasure.

"Her parents live a few blocks from here," Brad went on. "I run into them from time to time, and they tell me about all her adventures around the world. She's quite a traveler."

Tom's eyes glistened with the light of the fire. "Do you know if she's home?"

"She always comes home for Christmas," Brad explained. "I imagine if she's not back yet, she'll be here in a couple of weeks."

Tom sputtered with disbelief, collected his things, and retreated upstairs to his bedroom. Winnie, Brad, and Maya waited until they heard the click of his door before giggling quietly. Maya's heart felt like a balloon, apt to float out of her body.

"You're our Christmas cupid. When will you find my Christmas date?" Winnie teased—her eyes illuminated in a way that made it clear she found Brad very attractive. Maya ached with jealousy.

But Brad regarded her no differently and instead tilted his body toward Maya. "There are plenty of single folks in Hollygrove," he said. "And most of them are kind, good-hearted people. I can't recommend living in this small town enough."

And then—impossibly—he winked. At Maya. Or had she imagined it? It had happened so quickly, just a flash. Maya's

stomach flipped over just as Winnie asked Brad again about the hiking trails. Brad began to recite the trail names to Winnie as she typed them in a notes folder on her phone. Maya had the sudden instinct to run into the bathroom, call Phoebe, and wail with love for this new man. But that was obviously unhinged. Brad was just a kind, good-hearted man, like so many others in Hollygrove. She couldn't jump to conclusions. She was too old for that.

Eventually, Felicity came to collect everyone in the Hollygrove Bed and Breakfast for dinner. Brad was caught in the swell and sat beside Maya at the dining room table, nodding along to Tom as he talked about his memories of Sarah back in India. It occurred to Maya that love was a marvelous and dangerous drug and that the influx of associated hormones could make you do insane things, like travel to Hollygrove without knowing someone's last name. Was it ever worth it?

“Brad, would you do the honors?” Felicity suggested, taking Conor's hand.

Maya bowed her head, and her heart blasted against her ribcage with such force that she felt sure the table shook.

“Dear Lord,” Brad began tenderly, “thank you for bringing us together here in the warmth of the Hollygrove Bed and Breakfast. Thank you for the marvelous gifts of Felicity's cooking, for the friendliness of Hollygrove folks, and for the roofs over our heads. We thank you for eventually bringing Tom and Sarah back together after months apart and for Winnie embarking into the woods and finding her way out again. And we thank you, oh Lord, for Maya's persistence this week as she works under a formidable deadline— and for the entire town coming together to help her. Amen.”

## Chapter Seven

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**B**rad made the mistake of promising Maya twenty dozen Christmas cookies for the Christmas festival. He felt the words roll off his tongue easily, along with, “I love teaching my kids at school to bake. I can’t say they’ll be frosted beautifully, but Hollygrove folks love messily decorated Christmas cookies from the local kids.”

Maya clasped her hands together, her eyes gleaming. They were out on the front porch of the Hollygrove Bed and Breakfast as soft snow fell through the darkness. Brad had the sudden instinct to close the distance between them, wrap his arms around her, and kiss her. But just as soon as he considered it, he banished the thought. He hadn’t kissed anyone in more than ten years. It now seemed like a complicated procedure—two sets of lips upon one another, moving around. Where would he put his head? He tried to remember the last romantic scene he’d watched in a film, but the memory of it made his stomach curdle. He was overthinking this. Probably, Maya had a boyfriend back in the city. She was only here to claim her inheritance. She probably thought Hollygrove and its population were hokey and lame.

“You can come by to see us in action if you want,” Brad went on stupidly. “We’ll do the baking on Thursday and the frosting on Friday so the cookies aren’t too stale by Saturday.”

“I’d like that very much.” Maya sounded wistful, although perhaps that was just in Brad’s imagination.

Brad walked home with his hands shoved deep in his pockets, playing over the events of the evening in his mind.

He, Winnie, Tom, Felicity, Conor, and Maya had stayed up late, pouring glasses of wine and swapping stories. Well, most everyone had told stories, except for Maya. She seemed content to listen and ask questions, to allow everyone else's personalities to sizzle while she remained secretive. Still, every time she glanced Brad's way, a shiver ran up his spine. He dared to imagine what it would be like to wake up next to her as the light spilled through his bedroom window. He dared to imagine laughing with her, perhaps over pancakes. She'd called herself a "foodie," and he'd said, "I just eat anything I come across. Does that make me a foodie?" And she'd laughed as though he'd said the funniest thing in the world.

It was now Thursday morning. Brad had purchased everything necessary for the big Christmas baking session, and the kids in his class were lined up in front of the bathrooms to scrub their hands with soap and water. They'd been told there would be no spelling test and no math test today, and they were euphoric, speaking a little too loudly.

"What's all the commotion?" Rainey stepped out of her classroom and put her hands on her hips.

Brad's heart sank.

"We're baking cookies!" One of his children explained to Rainey.

"Is that so?" Rainey asked.

"For the festival!" Another of Brad's children chimed in.

Rainey cleared the distance between herself and Brad and muttered under her breath. "I don't suppose you want to join forces? My kids are unruly today. I wanted to do an activity with them, but I haven't been able to think of anything fun."

Brad's mouth was dry with surprise. It was true that the activity area he'd set up for his children was big enough for both his and Rainey's classrooms, and it was also true that Rainey's fourth graders would probably be big helps to his second graders, who often got distracted and were apt to spill flour everywhere. Still, agreeing to this meant spending many hours with Rainey—which he didn't adore.

Then again, saying no might pit him against Rainey. And he needed to keep her on his good side. She was dangerous.

Brad led his kids to the activities room, where they rolled up their sleeves and listened intently to Brad's instructions. Brad wanted to use today to talk briefly about the science of baking—in a very limited sense, of course. He wanted them to understand that they could thank science for the ultimate joy of eating cookies. But before he could get started, Rainey's class appeared, tearing through the silence of his students and making them boisterous again.

"Everyone! Grab a second grader," Rainey announced. "Partner up!"

Brad's stomach turned with annoyance. He hurried around the long tables to give everyone large mixing bowls and measuring cups. Rainey remained at the front of the activity room, lording over them, refusing to help beyond occasionally yelling at everyone to quiet down.

"This is so much fun, Mr. Turner," a little girl named Tiffany cried, touching her leg.

This tugged on Brad's heartstrings just enough to get him excited again. "Remember, Tiffany, it's a science experiment," he said. "But one we can eat at the end!"

Brad returned to the front of the classroom, where Rainey sidled up beside him, far too close for comfort.

"Everyone," Brad began, "you should have a recipe on the table in front of you. Can anyone read me the list of ingredients?"

A sea of hands raised in front of him. Brad decided to ask a fourth grader to read the first half of the ingredients and a second grader to read the second half. The second grader stuttered through his ingredients, still unversed in reading aloud. The fourth graders were graciously respectful. Perhaps they still remembered recently having learned to read.

They got started on the first step, which involved measuring and pouring cups of flour into their mixing bowls. Rainey remained at the front of the classroom; her back was



turned so that she could look at her phone. Brad hurried around to monitor the first step, cursing himself for having allowed Rainey into the room in the first place. But wonderfully, her fourth graders were excited and eager to help their second-grade counterparts.

“Hey, Ms. Michaels?” Brad said as he strode toward the front of the classroom. “Could you help with the next step, please?”

But as Rainey turned around, her eyes buggy, one of Brad’s kids called his name.

“Mr. Turner? Do you think Santa will remember I want Legos this year?”

Brad was a sucker for Santa Claus talk. He loved thinking of his children’s hopes and dreams for the Christmas season, as it was such a brief and magical time in a person’s life— one that necessarily darkened the minute they learned Santa wasn’t real. He turned on his heel and smiled at Bobby, whose chin wiggled with nerves. His fourth-grade helper had already poured their flour, and he looked jittery, as though he no longer believed in Santa but wanted to uphold the magic for Bobby a little longer.

“Well, Bobby, Santa remembers everything,” Brad told him. “And I think you’ve been pretty good this year, haven’t you? I seem to remember you helping Maria last week with her spelling homework. And didn’t you clean the hamster cage two weeks ago?”

Bobby nodded so hard that he looked like a bobblehead. “It’s just that my daddy said maybe Santa won’t come.”

Brad’s heart darkened. He’d never met Bobby’s father; he was the sort who kept his distance and forced the mother to do everything that involved their children. Had Brad ever been a father, he would have been there every step of the way. And he certainly never would have suggested Santa wasn’t going to make it this year.

“I think you have to trust Santa,” Brad said, bowing down to look Bobby in the eye. “He always does what he says. Just

like you, Bobby. You know what it's like to trust your friends, don't you? And you know what it's like to have those friends trust you?"

Brad made a mental note to buy a small gift "from Santa" for Bobby.

Bobby's eyes glinted. Suddenly, from off to his right, another of Brad's students, Natalie, said, "What did you ask Santa for Christmas, Mr. Turner?"

Brad smiled wider. "You know I only ask Santa for one thing," he explained. "I ask him for safety and happiness for all my students!"

"You should ask him for a girlfriend," Natalie said matter-of-factly.

Brad's students and the fourth-grade students nodded earnestly as though they'd all had a meeting about Brad's love life and come to the same conclusion. It wasn't lost on Brad that the students thought it odd he didn't have a wife. They came from a world where people lived in family units, where most children had a mother and a father. Brad was an anomaly. And they were far too young to know what had happened in Brad's life.

"Or a wife," another child chimed in.

"You need a girlfriend before you can have a wife," another explained.

Behind Brad, Rainey chortled. "You're getting schooled, Brad."

Brad hated when another teacher called him Brad in front of his students. It was unprofessional. He turned and glared at Rainey, who folded her lips.

"Why don't we move on to the next step?" Brad suggested, his tone falsely bright. "Ms. Michaels, maybe you can help us fill our teaspoons with baking soda?"

For the next hour, the two classrooms painstakingly mixed together the dry and wet ingredients for cookie dough. Rainey alternated between pretending to help and staring at her phone

in secret at the front of the class. The children were too distracted to notice. That, and they made frequent mistakes and messes, which required Brad to hurry from place to place with a rag or a broom.

By the time Maya appeared in the classroom, her cheeks pink from her chilly walk from the bed and breakfast, the first baking trays were, impossibly, in the three ovens in the activity room. Brad felt breathless, as though he'd just run a half-marathon. Maya seemed like a mirage.

“Good afternoon!” She beamed across the activity room as the kids peered at her curiously.

“Who are you?” Tiffany demanded with her hands on her hips.

“This is Maya,” Brad announced proudly. “Can everyone say hello to Maya?”

The two classrooms called out, “Hello, Maya!” and blinked at this newcomer, this beautiful stranger, their mouths ajar. Many of them were covered in dough or peppered with flour. Several of them had it in their hair, giving them the look of very tiny old people.

“You’re back.” Rainey approached, sounding accusatory.

Maya continued to smile, although she looked increasingly nervous.

“Excuse me! Mr. Turner?” Tiffany called again. “Is this your wife?”

“You mean girlfriend,” another of the kids corrected.

Brad chuckled as Maya turned and gave him a look of panic.

“Maya is brand-new to Hollygrove,” Brad said. “Which means she’s my new friend. Aren’t friends nice?”

The children continued to assess her as though it was up to them to gauge if she was appropriate for Brad to date. Brad imagined a TV dating show in which his students chose his new girlfriend, then quickly shook the thought from his mind.

“You’ve been hard at work,” Maya said, her voice wavering.

“It’s been a mess,” Rainey told her, trying to step between her and Brad. “I don’t know what got into Brad’s head, thinking the kids could make cookies.”

“They’re going to be delicious,” Brad scolded Rainey. He hated when she spoke ill of the kids’ skills in front of them. It didn’t do anything for their confidence.

“I’m sure they are,” Maya said.

“You should help us frost tomorrow,” one of the kids suggested. “We’re going to need it.”

“If you want to get really messy,” Rainey said.

“I don’t mind a little mess.” Maya tucked her hair behind her ears. “The only real fear I have is that I’ll eat too many of the cookies as we frost them.”

“Not me,” Rainey said. “I hate sugar.”

Maya arched her eyebrow in surprise.

“It’s terrible for you,” Rainey went on.

“Is it? I’ve never heard that before,” Maya said.

Rainey’s eyes glinted menacingly. She’d picked up on Maya’s sarcasm— and she hated feeling foolish. Brad’s stomach tightened.

It was nearly three in the afternoon, which meant the day was nearly through. Brad and Maya helped the children clean up, which was a herculean task in and of itself. Rainey continued to shoot daggers at both Brad and Maya until she gathered her students and led them back to her classroom. When the final bell rang and the children streamed out of the activity room to fetch the bus or meet their parents at the front door, Maya removed two baking trays from the ovens and slated the next two inside.

“You don’t have to do that,” Brad said.

“Are you kidding? I haven’t baked in ages,” Maya said, clapping her hands of spare flour. “My ex-boyfriend was a

high-end chef, so baking things as silly as cookies was never an option. It always had to be a creme brûlée or an Italian meringue or something gelatinous and Korean.”

Brad laughed openly, surprised at how joyful he felt. She had an ex, and she wasn’t exactly fond of him. Every new piece of information she lent felt sacred.

“The kids are really cute.” She turned and cupped her elbows. “I always wondered how stressful it was to be a teacher. But they probably make it worth it.”

“They really do.” Brad raised his shoulders.

Maya stuttered and dropped his gaze. For a moment, she looked lost in thought. “I have to ask.”

“Sure. Anything.” Brad took a small step forward.

“Rainey,” Maya went on. “Is she your girlfriend or something? I mean, is there something between you? Gosh, I hate prying like this.”

Brad’s heart opened like a window. “No. She’s just a colleague.”

Maya’s shoulders relaxed. Around them, the air was heavy with the smell of warm cookies, and Brad felt as though he could have broken out in song.

“Do you have dinner plans tonight?” Brad began tentatively. He suddenly felt as though he didn’t want to let Maya from his sight.

Maya shook her head. “I don’t.”

“I don’t suppose you’d like to go out tonight? It’s just two days till the Christmas Festival,” Brad said. That meant they were running out of time together.

“And just three days till I hopefully get the keys to the mansion,” Maya said with a laugh. “What a strange dream this all is. But yes. Of course. I’ll go to dinner tonight. You just have to get me home at a decent hour. My stand-in mother, Felicity, doesn’t like it when I’m too late.”

## Chapter Eight

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It was the morning of the Christmas festival. Felicity chased Maya around the ground floor of the bed and breakfast, demanding that she sit for a cup of coffee and a croissant, at the very least, before she sped downtown. Maya shoved her feet in her boots and grimaced at Felicity, whose affection for Maya came off her in waves. It was a rare thing for someone to care so deeply for Maya. Although Maya was nearly late, she lapped it up, reminding herself that Felicity's love could be conditional. She was still her guest, after all.

"You're too good to me, Felicity," Maya said, taking the cup of coffee and nibbling at the croissant.

"You need your fuel," Felicity told her. "It's going to be a very long two days."

"It's just like the marching band director said. The Christmas Festival runs like a machine. I'm just here to press 'play,'" Maya explained, mostly to remind herself.

Felicity's eyes shone. "Your aunt is so proud of you."

Maya wanted to protest, to tell her that, probably, Aunt Veronica was far too ill to know what was going on in Hollygrove. But she didn't want to stomp all over the magic bubbling around them. She needed that to get through the next two days.

After Maya ate the croissant and slurped down the coffee, she hurried down the porch steps and whisked toward the courthouse. Already, the food stalls were set up along the road, with vendors heating the coals for their grills. Men and

women, bundled against the chill, were setting up their stands with arts and crafts and drinking coffee together. A large banner for the Christmas festival hung from one end of the row of downtown buildings to the other, and several shop owners stood on their stoops, chatting excitedly. Maya checked with each of the vendors to ensure they had everything they needed. Afterwards, she sped toward the nearest stage, where two members of the theater troupe needed her help to arrange the costumes for their later performance of *Charlie Brown Christmas*. By the time they finished setting up, it was noon—and festival attendees had begun to mill through downtown, ready for the magic to begin.

Maya found herself strolling through the crowd, eyeing each Hollygrove local, hunting for some sign of Brad. That morning, he'd been in charge of last-minute preparations for the festival parade floats, but he'd said he'd be downtown by mid-day. Already, the first band bounded onto the larger of the three stages and began to tune their guitars. Festival-goers gathered beneath the stage with cups of coffee and raised their chins with excitement. Toward the far end of the festival, the first of the four Santa Clauses they'd hired for the event took his place on the throne they'd rented from the neighboring mall, and a line of children approached, eager to say hello and remind Santa of how good they'd been that year. Maya felt a pang of regret, remembering that her ex-husband had taken Phoebe to do that. It had been too painful for Maya.

As though Phoebe was listening to her thoughts, Maya's phone buzzed with a text from her.

PHOEBE: Hi! Happy Christmas Festival!

PHOEBE: How does it feel to celebrate Christmas?

Maya took a moment out of frantically buzzing through the festival to text back.

MAYA: It's surprisingly lovely. This little town is so quaint. It's impossible not to get wrapped up in the magic of it all.

PHOEBE: Maybe you're not a Christmas cynic after all?

Maya felt yet another pang of regret. For so many years, Christmas had felt like a black monstrosity— a reminder of the tremendous terror and loss in her life.

Was it possible that Aunt Veronica knew that? Was it possible she'd asked her to plan the festival as a way to grapple with that loss?

“Maya! Hey!” Brad’s voice came from the crowd, and Maya pocketed her phone and bee-lined toward him. Ever since their dinner Thursday night at the nearby Mexican restaurant, where they’d shared burritos, a big basket of chips, and plenty of spicy salsa, she’d been distracted with her feelings for him. Deep into the night, she’d stared into the darkness, daring herself to visualize a gorgeous future with Brad by her side. Even still, they hadn’t shared anything more than a hug after dinner. But the hug itself had felt electric, as though every cell in Maya’s body had stood straight up.

Now, Maya wrapped her arms around Brad and burrowed her face in his chest. He smelled of coffee and fresh snow. “How did decorating go?”

“It was slightly frustrating,” Brad said with a laugh. “The bank made a papier-mâché snowman, but they accidentally left it outside last night.”

“Oh no! It must have fallen apart in the snow?”

Brad nodded, still smiling, as though nothing could get him down. “We had to scrape something else together. It won’t be the best float in the parade, but we did all we could.”

“It’s the thought that counts,” Maya said.

“Brad!” A voice rang out from behind Maya, and a chill wrapped around her neck. When she turned, she found Rainey straining through the crowd to get to them. “I thought that was you!”

“Oh, Ms. Michaels,” Brad said, his face falling. “How are you?”



“I’m wonderful. You know how much I love this festival.”

Rainey was dressed beautifully in a coat with a fur lining, a fur hat, and bright red lipstick. Maya wondered why Brad didn’t fall head over heels for her. She demonstrated her love in everything she did— including her sharp jealousy toward Maya.

“We found where the kids’ cookies were being sold,” Rainey went on, lifting a plastic baggie from her purse to show it off. Maya remembered how, when the kids had been baking up a storm, Rainey had kept to the side, refusing to help. She was pretty sure she’d even been on her phone.

“We’ll have to buy some for ourselves,” Maya said brightly.

Rainey hardly blinked at her.

“I want you to meet my dear friend, Olivia,” Rainey said, tugging another woman through the crowd to form a circle with them.

“Pleasure to meet you, Olivia,” Brad said.

Olivia was slightly taller than Maya, with brown eyes that made her look like a Disney princess, soft features, and hair that curled immaculately down her shoulders. Olivia stared brazenly at Maya. Maya wondered if Rainey had painted a horrific picture of Maya, explaining that Maya was the only thing between Rainey and Brad and their lifetime of happiness.

But Maya had no plans to give up on Brad. His kindness was a balm on what she’d previously believed to be endless pain in her life. The fact that he seemed to like her, too, seemed impossible— but she planned to cling to it for as long as she could.

“Are you from Hollygrove?” Maya asked Olivia.

Olivia tilted her head. “I was born here,” she said. “But not raised.”

“She has a complicated family story,” Rainey said. “Kind of like you, Maya.”

Maya bristled. She supposed it was obvious she was the current fodder for town gossip, but she didn't like Rainey referring to it so brazenly.

"That's right," Olivia said. "Rainey said something about an inheritance?"

"Planning the Christmas Festival is supposedly step one," Maya said, her voice wavering. "After that, the lawyer will hopefully pass on the keys to my aunt's home and reveal the next task."

"It's not just a home, though, is it?" Rainey pressed. "It's a mansion. A ballroom? A library? An endless number of bedrooms? It's spectacular."

"What a complicated situation," Olivia said icily. "Must be terrible to be on the brink of inheriting a mansion."

"You've driven past your aunt's mansion?" Rainey asked. "Haven't you?"

Maya was now terribly uncomfortable. It felt as though Rainey and Olivia were interrogating her.

"It's gorgeous," Maya admitted, her voice wavering. "I can hardly imagine walking through the front door, let alone owning it myself."

"It's one of the most historic properties in upstate New York," Brad interjected. "I hope you'll let me see the place as soon as Thaddeus hands over the keys."

Suddenly, Maya was struck with the image of herself and Brad wrapped up together in the fabulous living room of the mansion as a fire blazed before them. Rainey's face soured. Maybe she could read Maya's mind.

She seemed the sort of woman who would stop at nothing to ensure Maya didn't win.

"We'd better run," Brad said, searching Maya's face. "You were saying we need to help the theater troupe?"

"That's right," Maya lied. "It was lovely to meet you both. Hope to catch you around the festival later."

Brad and Maya sped off through the crowd and away from Rainey and Olivia's forceful glares.

"What was that about?" Maya demanded.

"Don't worry about them," Brad said.

"It looks like Rainey is planning on eating me," Maya joked.

Brad stalled near the furthest grill, where a selection of brats and hamburgers roasted, the fire flickering from beneath the coals. He reached over and tugged Maya's hat over her ears, giving her a playful smile. "Let's not worry about them, okay? You planned a gorgeous festival. Let's enjoy it."

Maya agreed to open her heart to the rest of the festival. Now that she'd pressed "play," the afternoon seemed to go off without a hitch. The band on the nearest stage performed Christmas classics, plus a selection of classic rock songs from Billy Joel, Bruce Springsteen, Supertramp, and John Mellencamp. With a mug of hot wine in her hand, Maya found herself in the center of the crowd, Brad's arm slung over her shoulder, singing "Thunder Road" at the top of her lungs. She had a vague image of her parents singing that song in the car with their hands clasped together between the seats in front. She remembered them stealing glances at one another as they whipped down a country road.

At four-thirty, the light dimmed overhead, casting the festival in shadows. Right on time, the Christmas lights were illuminated along the street, between food stalls, and around decorative Christmas trees. Even the current band on stage flipped a switch and illuminated their guitars, drum set, and piano. Maya cried out along with the others, grateful for the gorgeous display.

"Is that Maya?"

Maya turned to find Felicity and Conor weaving through the crowd, wearing happy smiles. Conor held a cup of tea while Maya clung to his right arm with both of hers. She looked as captivated as the children.

"This is really something, honey," Felicity said.

Maya blushed and thanked her. “I couldn’t have done it without your hospitality this week.”

Felicity waved her hand. “Have you seen Tom and Winnie?”

Maya followed Felicity’s pointer finger to the far end of the festival, where Tom and Winnie played a festival game with darts and balloons. As Maya watched, Winnie flung her dart, and it popped a massive blue balloon toward the center. Tom called out and high-fived Winnie.

“Still no sign of Sarah Sanderson?” Brad asked.

“She’ll be home soon,” Felicity reported. “And then, I guess we’ll see if Tom gets his happily ever after.”

The four of them were quiet for a moment. Maya was growing frightened for Tom’s future. What if Sarah rejected him? What would he do then?

The answer came a split-second later. Maya had been rejected more times than she could count. The only thing to do, in those circumstances, was keep going. You had to remind yourself there was still so much to live for.

In Maya’s case, Brad Turner had been right around the corner.

The following day of the festival went just as well as the first. The parade began at noon and traced the city streets, with the marching band leading the charge, the director keeping the band in time, walking backward expertly and conducting. When he passed Maya, he waved a hand in time to the music, careful not to distract his students. Maya smiled and clapped, leaning her cheek against the sleeve of Brad’s coat.

“Look.” Brad pointed to the approaching float, which was the papier-mâché disaster he’d helped with Saturday morning. “It doesn’t look half bad!”

Maya laughed as the wonky-looking papier-mâché snowman approached. It was true that Brad and the bankers had done what they could with the messy project, tying scarves around his neck and adding a top hat, eyes, a big fake carrot nose, and a big smile. Atop the float, several of the local

bankers stood and tossed candy to children along the street. They were dressed in Santa hats and thick winter coats; the fact that their snowman looked a little worse for wear didn't matter to them at all. They were in the midst of a Hollygrove celebration.

And it had all come together because of Maya. Her heart overflowed.

After the parade, Brad convinced Maya to grab a slice of pizza from a food stall and wander to the music stage to check out the next performance. Everywhere they went, people said hello to Maya and thanked her for what she'd done, and Maya felt as though she floated. Perhaps due to her exuberance— or a complete loss of her mind— she slipped her fingers through Brad's. Brad didn't move away. It was as though, ever since they'd met one another one week ago, something had drawn them together powerfully. It felt like fate.

“Maya! Hello!”

Maya heard her name and turned on her heel, nearly dropping her pizza. Thaddeus strained through the crowd, waving a gloved hand. He looked much happier than he had last week at the law office, and his cheeks were ruddy, either from the cold or the mulled wine or some combination of the two. He clapped Brad on the shoulder and said, “This is some festival, you two.”

Maya grinned. “I can't believe it all came together.”

“It was seamless,” Thaddeus affirmed. “I contacted your aunt's nursing home to pass along the message. She told me I'd know if you were up to the next part of the task. I'm trusting my instincts here. I think you're ready.”

Maya pressed her lips together, silent with anticipation. She had no idea what it would be.

Thaddeus procured another envelope from his coat pocket and handed it to her. It was heavy, and Maya's thumb traced what had to be an enormous iron key within.

“You can feel the key to the mansion,” Thaddeus said. “The address to the old place is listed in the letter. Although

I'm sure Brad could have shown you the way." He smiled knowingly.

Maya opened the envelope, kept the iron key inside, and tugged out the letter and an old photograph. The photograph was clearly Veronica, dressed in an elegant velvet gown with a tiara atop her head.

"She couldn't be more than twenty-five here," Maya breathed.

"See that necklace?" Thaddeus nodded at the jewelry around young Veronica's neck. It looked extraordinarily heavy, strung with emeralds. "When your Grandmother Diane left England as a young woman, she brought the necklace with her. It was in your family for centuries."

Maya furrowed her brow. Back in New York, she'd hardly dreamed of having an aunt in the world; now, suddenly, she learned of a grandmother—with a past and family across the ocean. "My grandmother..." She trailed off, hardly able to imagine such a thing.

Growing up, her adopted siblings had a grandmother named Barb. Maya had been invited to go to Barb's house, where they'd eaten cookies and played on a rusted swing set in the yard. But Barb had never treated Maya like her own granddaughter. She'd never bought her birthday presents or hung her photographs on the wall with the other grandchildren. Grandmotherly love was something other people were allowed to have—not Maya.

Yet here it was, in the form of a family heirloom. How bizarre.

"Your Aunt Veronica always loved that necklace," Thaddeus went on. "But through the years, she misplaced it somewhere in that big mansion. Your next task is to go through her belongings and find it."

Maya frowned. "That's it?" Compared to planning a Christmas festival, this felt like nothing. She imagined herself digging through a few jewelry boxes and finding it in the span of twenty-five minutes.

But something in Thaddeus' eyes gave her pause. "Veronica has turned into a loner in her old age," he explained. "I don't know the state of the old place, but I imagine she's boxed off most of her belongings and separated them all into the numerous rooms in the mansion. I can't imagine it will be easy to find."

"Sounds like a scavenger hunt," Brad said, rubbing his palms together. It was clear he wanted to lift Maya's spirits.

But Maya didn't need her spirits to be lifted. She had the key to her gorgeous new home— a mansion on the outskirts of an adorable town in upstate New York. All of her problems were miles away.

"I look forward to it, Mr. DeWitt," she announced, returning the letter and the photograph to the envelope.

"Please," Thaddeus begged, "call me Thaddeus."

Maya smiled and laced her fingers back through Brad's. As Thaddeus changed the subject, asking Brad if he'd tried the local taco stand a few stalls away, Olivia and Rainey passed by them, their dark eyes flickering. They looked at Maya as though she were fresh meat. Maya snuck the envelope deep into her pocket and reminded herself they couldn't hurt her. Rainey just had a silly crush on Brad— but Rainey was also a grown woman. She would find a way through that disappointment. Wouldn't she?

## Chapter Nine

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It was the end of the school day, and Brad was on bus duty, like always. He bent to say goodbye to each of the students individually, wishing them a safe journey back home, reminding them to study their spelling lists and finish their arithmetic. As they were only eight years old, he didn't like to expect too much of them; he didn't want them to feel he was disappointed in them when they forgot to complete their assignments. But some of them had parents who didn't care if they ever learned a thing— and he wanted to give them that extra reminder that he cared about their futures.

After the buses were filled and on the road, Brad headed back to his classroom. They'd done a messy art activity at the end of the day, one that involved clay and paint, and he laughingly cursed himself as he cleaned up with numerous sponges and towels. As he worked, he thought back to the festival the past few days, remembering how happy Maya had looked as she'd taken stock of all the work she'd done. She'd been the most gorgeous woman at the festival. And she'd taken his hand as though it were the simplest thing in the world.

As the desks dried, Brad grabbed his phone and swiped through the photographs he'd taken from the past few days. In one, Maya ate a big slice of greasy pizza, her lips shining. In another, she waved to the marching band director as though they'd been friends for decades. In another, Thaddeus, Maya, and Brad tilted their heads for a selfie, with Maya holding up the big iron key that matched the door of Veronica's Victorian mansion.



It had been years since Brad had taken photographs of anyone besides his students. It felt remarkable, wanting to record his own memories rather than let them float away.

There was a knock at the door. Brad jumped around to find Rainey leaning in the doorway, gazing at him.

“Oh. Hello, Ms. Michaels.” Brad pocketed his phone.

“The kids aren’t here, Brad. You can call me Rainey again.”

Brad swallowed the lump in his throat. He hated it when Rainey popped in like this. It always felt as though she wanted something from him.

“How was your Monday, Rainey?” Brad forced himself to ask.

Rainey stepped into his classroom slowly, moving like a cat. “I’d rather talk about the festival. Wouldn’t you?” She stopped a few feet from where he was. “You and Maya looked happy.”

“It was an amazing weekend,” Brad said, his voice wavering. “Did you and Olivia have a good time?”

Rainey’s smile widened. “We really did. What did you think of Olivia?”

Truthfully? Brad had thought Olivia seemed just as manipulative and gossipy as Rainey.

Instead, he said, “She seems nice! How do you know her?”

“She was my neighbor in college,” Maya said. “She’s a few years older than us.”

“A thirty-year-old friendship?” Brad suggested.

Maya showed too many of her teeth. “Olivia and I would do anything for one another. It’s one of those friendships, you know?”

Brad’s heartbeat intensified, although he had no idea why. “You said she’s from Hollygrove originally?”

Rainey ignored him and took another step. “Did Maya get the next step of her inheritance?”

“Thaddeus passed along the key, yes,” Brad said.

“And what’s her next task?” Rainey asked.

“Something to do with finding an old heirloom,” Brad said with a shrug. “I’m going to meet her at the house in a half-hour.”

He wanted Rainey to understand just how dedicated he was to Maya right now. He didn’t want her to think, even for a moment, that he was into Rainey.

Rainey’s eyes flickered, and it made Brad nervous. It felt as though she planned something. After a dramatic pause, Rainey’s smile widened, and she said, “Good luck to you both on finding that heirloom.” She then turned on her heel and paraded from the classroom, leaving Brad with a sour taste in his mouth.

Brad drove out to Veronica’s mansion, trying to get Rainey’s face out of his mind. As soon as he pulled into the long driveway and drove past the ornate, iron fence, upon which was carved the initial A for Albright, Rainey’s strangeness faded, and he was left only with amazement. The Victorian mansion was colossal, with a west and east wing, a ballroom with a domed ceiling that could clearly be seen from the outside, and sharp rooftops that gave it the look of a fictional haunted house.

Maya was already there. She stood on the front porch, her jaw hanging open, the iron key in her hands. As Brad approached, she turned and wrapped her arms around him, shivering with fear.

“I didn’t know how to go in alone,” she explained with a laugh. “I was terrified.”

“We can do it together,” Brad assured her.

Maya flicked away a tear and smiled up at him. “According to the letter, my aunt hasn’t lived here for over a year. But a crew of cleaning people have come every week or so to make sure it isn’t too dusty.”

“That’s a relief,” Brad said.

Maya bit her lip and turned to assess the huge door. It looked almost too heavy for such a petite woman. “Here goes nothing.”

Maya slid the iron key through the keyhole, turned until the doorknob clinked, and pressed it open. Brad followed her quietly into the foyer, where the ceiling stretched three stories high. Paintings of Albright family members hung on the east and west walls— one of a man on a horse and another of a woman on a chaise longue. Brad closed the door behind them and searched for a light switch, which he eventually found near an enormous monstera plant. Lucky for them, the chandelier above illuminated everything, making it much less frightening.

“I don’t even know where to start,” Maya whispered.

“I think we’d better find the heater,” Brad said.

Maya arched her eyebrow. “Maybe there’s a nice fireplace?”

“Great idea,” Brad said. “I’ll check it out.”

This time, Brad led the charge east, down a long hallway that he illuminated with light. Eventually, he turned into a cozy library, its bookshelves lined with what had to be hundreds of books— the entire works of Shakespeare, Dickens, plus American classics like *Moby Dick* and writing from the Beat Generation. There was an enormous stone fireplace along one wall, along with a collection of firewood. Stationed in front of it was a gorgeous dark green couch into which Brad longed to sink.

“Maybe we can make some tea, warm up, and enjoy the library for a little while,” Brad suggested. “After that, we can explore the rest of the house.”

Maya nodded. “I need to find my bravery. This place gives me the creeps.”

Brad touched her arm. “It shouldn’t,” he said. “This place is your home, now. Your family has owned it for generations. And now, it’s yours.”

The color drained from Maya's cheeks. After a dramatic pause, she stammered, "I never even had a bedroom of my own. What am I supposed to do with fifty rooms?"

Brad tried to laugh but failed, his stomach curdling. He couldn't imagine what Maya felt now, faced with the tremendous wealth of her family. She'd had nothing.

Brad and Maya padded back down the hallway to find the kitchen toward the back of the house. It was far bigger than any kitchen Brad had ever seen— even bigger than the kitchen at the elementary school, where lunch ladies made food for hundreds of kids.

"I'm trying to imagine the dinner parties they must have prepared here," Maya said, hunting through cabinets for tea.

"Like something out of a dream," Brad agreed as he fetched two mugs from another cabinet.

"Or *The Great Gatsby*," Maya said.

"Can you imagine throwing parties like that yourself?" Brad asked.

Maya gave him a funny look. "I hardly know enough people to invite over for a game of cards! I can't imagine filling the dining room table. Heck, we haven't even found the dining room yet."

Brad stepped lightly across the kitchen and pressed one of the doors open to find yet another pantry. The next revealed a long hallway, which Maya suggested had once been the servants' entrance, back when they'd been required to bring food up and down the back staircase to the rooms above.

But the fourth door Brad tried revealed the immaculate dining room. The table was long and thin and gleaming in the light that swept in through the stained-glass windows. It looked almost like a religious room.

"That makes sense," Maya said when he suggested this. "Eating can be a very religious act, don't you think? Bringing people together in prayer and reflection."

Brad closed the door to the dining room and watched as Maya returned to the pantry, where she finally selected a wide array of tea boxes— fennel, anis, and ginger. She spread them across the counter distractedly. “My ex-boyfriend would have a field day in this kitchen.” She didn’t say it as though she wished he were there. Rather, she said it off-handedly, as though she couldn’t help herself. “I’m sorry,” she added. “The breakup was so recent. He comes into my head more than I’d like. I’m still reeling.”

Brad wasn’t sure what to say. He knew what it was like being unable to get people off your mind. Memories could be sticky. He palmed the back of his neck.

Maya touched Brad’s shoulder, her eyes glinting. “I hope you know how happy I am that you’re here with me.” She stuttered. “Back in New York, I was floundering. The letter from my aunt came out of nowhere— and it changed everything. The past week has been one of the most wonderful of my life. And about seventy percent of that is because of you.”

Brad’s smile widened. There was something so earnest about her expression, as though she just couldn’t help but speak the truth.

Maya and Brad returned to the library with a tea kettle filled with piping hot water and two mugs with tea bags. As Maya sat on the green couch, Brad set the logs up in the fireplace, along with a selection of small scraps of newspaper, and lit it with a long lighter he found in a nearby drawer. As the fire chewed at the edges of the newspaper, Maya clapped.

“That was wonderful to watch,” she teased. “You’re like a mountain man.”

Brad laughed and collapsed on the couch beside her. Through the library window, he saw that light was already dimming, turning that soft blue of early winter to grays and blacks. Snow fluttered and joined the white, rolling hills outside. Maya placed her head on Brad’s shoulder and followed his gaze. Brad’s heart shifted. He had the sudden

instinct to kiss her forehead, yet held himself back. He didn't want to ruin it.

"None of it makes sense," Maya finally said softly.

"What doesn't?"

"My mother must have been raised here," she continued. "She must have known that family heirloom just as well as my Aunt Veronica. Maybe she used to wear it sometimes when she and Veronica played dress-up as girls."

Brad remained quiet. In his mind's eye, he could still see Veronica as a young woman, the thirty-year-old teacher he'd had a big crush on as a kid.

"I just can't understand why we never had any of this money," Maya continued. "Look at this place. Look at all this wealth. Look at all these empty rooms! Why did my mother and father have nothing? What happened?"

Brad placed his hand over Maya's opposite shoulder and hugged her close. She was shaking.

"They died when I was really young," Maya explained, "so it's hard for me to remember them. But I know we didn't have much, even then. My Christmas presents were beautiful, but they were normally handmade."

"Do you have any of them left?"

Maya pressed her lips together. "I have a scarf my mother made me when I was a kid. It's amongst my things back at the Hollygrove Bed and Breakfast. The first night I spent here in Hollygrove, I took it out and held it as though in touching it, I would be able to sense my mother. Of course, I felt nothing but her love. No answers."

Brad wondered if Maya's parents had died at the same time. Maybe her world had been torn apart in one fell swoop. His heart broke for the little girl, nearly half a century ago, who'd had to go on without them.

"You're a very strong woman, Maya," Brad said quietly. "I hope you know that."

Maya's chin quivered.

“We’ll find answers here in the mansion,” Brad went on. “Look at this place. It’s filled with secrets, just waiting to be discovered.”

Maya spoke so quietly that Brad could hardly hear her. “I only hope those secrets aren’t painful.”

Brad’s stomach twisted. He wasn’t entirely sure what they were after— but he had a hunch the journey wouldn’t be pretty. Something horrible had happened in Maya’s family’s past. But it was better to know than to not. As a teacher, Brad knew that better than most.

## Chapter Ten

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It was late, just past nine, and Maya realized she and Brad had made no headway whatsoever on their quest to find her family's heirloom. Instead, they'd spent hours on that lush green couch, watching the fire lick away the logs, telling each other stories about their past. It was here, as he glowed in the soft light, that Brad finally revealed his truth: that fifteen years ago, his wife died of cancer.

"I was thirty-five, and she was thirty," he explained, his hand wrapped tightly around Maya's. It was as though he felt he would float away without her. "We were trying really hard to have a baby. I'd wanted to be a dad forever, and Delilah was born to be a mother. Eventually, two months turned to six months, which then turned to over a year of trying. We went to the doctor, who conducted some tests—and found the ovarian cancer. It was already really far along. He gave her no more than two months to live."

Brad's eyes glistened, and Maya held tighter to his hand. She wanted him to know she was there for him; she wouldn't let him go.

"Miraculously, she lived more than six months after that," Brad said. "And we did everything. I took an entire year off of school, and we traveled all over the East Coast. She was terrified of flying, but we still boarded a plane to go to Rome because she'd always wanted to go."

Maya's heartbeat quickened. She'd just been to Rome with Nick, scouring those ancient streets for pasta. It wasn't hard to imagine Brad with Delilah, both trying to make sense of a



horrific situation. Perhaps they'd eaten gelato and watched the sun go down, their hearts breaking in tandem.

It was the most tragic story Maya had ever heard. And yet, it made sense. Brad was the kindest, softest man she'd ever met. When he'd first volunteered to help her with the festival, she'd assumed he had a wife or a girlfriend. She couldn't imagine why anyone would want to assist a woman from the city just out of the goodness of their heart.

"I don't know what to say, Brad," Maya whispered, wiping a tear from her cheek. "She must have been really special."

"She was!" Brad managed his first smile in ages and tried to laugh at himself. "She was too good for the world, maybe. I've tried my best to uphold her spirit since then. To be kind to everyone. To take time with every student. She was a teacher, too, and she had a special talent with the children. It was as though she could read their minds."

"It's like that with you, too," Maya reminded him. "They know they can trust you. It's beautiful to see."

Brad checked the time and abruptly jumped from the couch as though he'd just returned to his body from far away. "My goodness. I'd better get home."

Maya and Brad killed the fire and shut out the lights en route to the foyer. Although Maya now had the keys to the estate, she wasn't up to sleeping in the big mansion by herself. Not yet. Together, she and Brad walked to their cars wordlessly. Before they parted, they hugged for a long time, and Maya could feel Brad's heartbeat, strong and powerful beneath his ribcage.

"I'll come back tomorrow," Brad assured her. "If you'll have me."

"Please do," Maya said. "This big place is too much for me."

Maya drove back to the Hollygrove Bed and Breakfast with tears raining down her cheeks. When she entered, most everyone was upstairs in their rooms, save for Tom, who was hard at work on his screenplay, tugging his hair.

“What you told me about your aunt’s mansion made me so inspired,” he announced, his eyes buggy.

Maya laughed and yawned. “Can I come to the premiere of your movie?”

“Absolutely,” Tom promised. “You can have a front-row seat.”

Maya slept like a rock upstairs and awoke far later than she’d planned. Yet again, she’d missed breakfast. Felicity left her a croissant, jam, and camembert and wrote her a tiny note that said: “I hope you find what you’re looking for! XOXO, Felicity.”

Renewed with a sense of purpose, Maya drove back to the mansion by herself after lunch and charged into the house, flicking on all the lights. Based on her brief tour of the house yesterday, it seemed that “storage” was located on one of the upper floors. She gritted her teeth and strode upstairs, where a long hallway seemed to go far into the distance—far further than the house should have allowed. A part of her wondered if it was actually bigger on the inside than the outside. But that was ridiculous.

Maya peeked into the first few rooms, which seemed to be guest bedrooms, complete with four-poster beds, old-fashioned lamps, and ornate paintings hanging on the walls. Eventually, she discovered what had to be her aunt’s bedroom. It was the largest of the bunch, with enormous windows that looked out over the rolling hills and yonder blue mountains. The bed was made, and it looked freshly made, as though the maids had arranged for Maya to sleep there whenever she wanted to. She sat at the edge. The mattress was wonderful—far more comfortable than the vintage feel of the room should have allowed.

Maya tugged open the drawers of the nightstands, hoping that Veronica had slipped her necklace into one of them without remembering. Of course, that was wishful thinking. But on the fourth drawer, she discovered a very small photo album dated from seventy-five years ago. In it were photographs of two little girls—Bethany and Veronica. In

them, Veronica was five or so, while Bethany was maybe two or three. They wore dresses with poofy skirts beneath, little Mary Jane shoes, and big, exuberant smiles. They were photographed in the ballroom, the library, across the veranda, and on the rolling hills outside the house.

Maya nearly stopped breathing. Never had she seen her mother so small, so adorable. To Maya, Bethany looked so much like Phoebe when she was small. She took a photo with her phone and sent it to Phoebe with the text:

MAYA: Guess who!

PHOEBE: Oh my. She looks just like me, doesn't she?

MAYA: Yes! But it's your grandma! My mother!

Now, Maya no longer felt on a mission for the silly heirloom. Rather, she wanted to scour as many family photographs as she could. She needed to know why her mother abandoned her very rich family and moved to Pennsylvania with her father.

Maya was immersed for the next several hours, so much so that when Brad knocked on the door downstairs, she didn't realize he was there until he called her on the phone.

"I'm downstairs!"

"Wow! What time is it?"

Brad laughed. "Did you enter a time warp?"

Maya hurried downstairs to greet him, her arms laden with the photo albums she'd discovered thus far. She placed the albums on the foyer table, unlocked the door, and threw her arms around him. She was suddenly aware of how lonely she'd been in that house all day, as though the heaviness of her family's memories had fallen upon her shoulders.

"Brad," she said, her smile widening. "I need to get out of here."

"Dinner?" Brad suggested.

“I’m starving!”

Maya collected the photo albums and followed Brad into the shimmering snow. They decided to leave Phoebe’s car behind and take Brad’s back to town, where they parked in front of the local diner Maya had gone to that very first day, jumped out, and grabbed a booth in the back. It felt as though they had far more energy than their ages should have allowed, as though they were teenagers on the brink of the rest of their lives. Several Hollygrove locals waved to Maya happily, thanking her again for the festival. Although she greeted them with happy smiles, now that Maya was immersed in the world of her aunt’s mansion, she hardly remembered the festival at all.

Brad and Maya ordered milkshakes— chocolate for Brad and strawberry for Maya. After they came, Maya positioned the photo albums on the table and clambered around to Brad’s side of the booth so that they could look at them together. The heat from Brad’s body emanated from him, and she felt immediately calm.

“Look at this,” she said, gesturing vaguely toward photographs taken even before her mother’s birth. “This is my grandmother. I think these photos were taken a few weeks after my Aunt Veronica was born.”

“And that must be your grandfather?” Brad suggested, pointing at the tall and stoic man behind the woman and baby, his hands in his pockets.

“He’s not photographed often,” Maya said. “But I assume that’s him.”

“Maybe he took most of the photographs?”

“My thoughts exactly.”

“Any sign of the heirloom necklace?”

Maya nodded. “Here.” She flipped toward the back of the album to find a very old photograph of her grandmother wearing the heirloom. In her twenties, she was glamorous; her neck arched like a swan, and she stared into the camera lens provocatively as though she wasn’t afraid of anything. Of

course, the heirloom adorned her beautiful neck, glinting in a forgotten afternoon.

Just as the waiter arrived with their burgers, the door's adorning bells jangled to alert an influx of customers. Maya closed the photo album delicately and placed it to the side, then raised a fry toward Brad and smiled, wanting to thank him again for indulging her. But Brad looked stricken.

Maya followed Brad's gaze and turned toward the door, where Rainey and her friend, Olivia, stood together, their arms crossed over their chests. Rainey glared at them, while Olivia's expression was more difficult to read. This was what it was like to live in a small town, Maya realized. Everyone knew where you were at all times. There was no privacy.

"Evening, Ms. Michaels," Brad said with a nod.

Rainey put on a false smile and strode toward them. "How funny, Brad. Olivia and I were just talking about you. And Maya, of course." Again, she showed too many teeth.

Maya set down her fry and squinted up at them. Olivia's eyes were on the photo album, and Maya had the strangest instinct to protect it. It was as though Olivia wanted to steal it. But that was crazy. Wasn't it?

"So! You must have gotten the keys to the mansion," Olivia said. Her tone was surprisingly light.

"Yes," Maya said because she could see no reason to lie.

Olivia clasped her hands together. "You have to tell us how magical it is. I've always longed to go inside. It's like something out of a fairy tale."

Maya was confused. The Olivia she'd met at the Christmas Festival on Saturday had seemed stony and unwilling to have an ordinary, flowing conversation. Yet this version seemed eager, almost friendly.

"Is it really as spectacular as everyone says?" Olivia pushed it.

Maya slid her tongue over her teeth. "It's something special," she said finally.

“I must sound insane,” Olivia offered, waving her hand. “I guess I should tell you. I’m a photographer. I go around the country, photographing old, historical buildings like yours.”

Rainey gazed at Olivia with pride. “She’s really good.”

“I’d love to see your stuff,” Maya said, trying to be nice.

“I have an exhibition coming up in Manhattan,” Olivia said. “I’ll have to let you know.” Her eyes glinted. “And you know, I would love to swing by your estate and take a few photographs. It’s the oldest of all the buildings I’ve photographed so far. It would complete the show.”

Maya’s heart opened. “Oh!” She glanced at Brad for some sense of danger, but Brad looked just as surprised as she felt. “I don’t see why not.”

Olivia tugged her card from her wallet and handed it to Maya. “Just call or text that number any time it’s good for you,” she said. “I’d prefer to come over sometime this week, but if it isn’t manageable, I’m sure we can work something out.”

“This week is fine,” Maya said.

“I’d really like to be there, too,” Brad said.

Rainey snorted. “I doubt you could keep Bradley away.”

Brad glowered at Rainey.

“I’ll call you,” Maya hurried to say, hoping to wave away the strange air between Brad and Rainey. “And I can’t wait to see what magic you bring to the place. To tell you the truth, that first night, the house gave me the creeps.”

Olivia’s laugh was a little too high-pitched. “I’ll see what I can do,” she promised. “I think you’ll be surprised.”

## Chapter Eleven

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**B**rad and Maya returned to the mansion after burgers and set to work in the upstairs bedrooms, digging through drawers and looking for hiding places. Maya suggested that the heirloom necklace could be in a safe somewhere, which probably meant they needed to move aside all of the heavy furniture in the old house to check if safes were in the walls behind them.

“It’s a good point,” Brad said with a sigh, his hands on his hips. “But I don’t have the energy for that kind of moving today.”

Maya laughed and touched his bicep. His eyes dropped toward hers, and her heartbeat quickened. Not for the first time, she considered asking him if he wanted to stay the night at the mansion. The bed was already made in her Aunt Veronica’s room; they could lay together, many feet away. They could keep their distance. It just sounded so nice to sleep next to him, to know that if she awoke in the middle of the night, his strong arms were just a few feet away.

“I’d better get back home,” Brad said softly. “I have school tomorrow.”

“Of course. Me, too.”

“Do you think you’ll stay the night soon? Here at the mansion, I mean.”

Maya bit her lower lip. “I told Felicity I’d move out tomorrow, actually.” Her stomach curdled at the thought. Was it too soon?

“I’m sure she’d take you back if you don’t like being out here by yourself,” Brad said hesitantly.

Brad’s words shot through her heart like a knife. Did that mean Brad would never want to stay out here with her? Was she forcing him to hang with her too often? Or did he think because she’d just gotten out of a relationship, she wasn’t ready? Her thoughts swirled.

Maya and Brad locked up and crunched through the snow to their vehicles. Maya continued to carry the photo albums, unable to part with them for the night.

“It’s supposed to snow tomorrow night,” Brad said, jangling his keys.

Maya eyed him nervously and adjusted her photo albums. “Is that so?”

“Probably more than a foot,” Brad said. “It’ll start around five or six in the evening and go all night.”

Maya’s throat was tight. She tried to swallow it away.

“Which means that you should stock up on food and supplies if you really move out here tomorrow,” Brad said.

“Right. Thanks for the tip.”

The corner of Brad’s lips wiggled into a smile, and his dimple deepened. “Should I bring anything over? Tomorrow after school, I mean.”

Maya stuttered with surprise. “You’re still coming?”

“We have to find that heirloom,” Brad told her. “I’m not giving up just yet.”

“But the snow,” Maya hurried to remind him. “What if you can’t make it to school on time?”

Brad raised his shoulders and unlocked his car. “We’ll just have to see what happens. Right? Good night, Maya. Sleep well.”

Maya sat in the driver’s seat of her car, her heart pounding so hard that her arms and legs shook. Brad started his engine and slowly crept away. It seemed he was waiting for her, that



he wanted to guide her back to town. He wanted to make sure she was all right. Tears sprung to Maya's eyes. Nearly dropping Phoebe's car keys, she started the engine and followed Brad. Snowflakes spit down on her windshield and felt like a warning for the approaching storm. Somehow, she couldn't wait.

\* \* \*

The following morning, Maya awoke in time for breakfast with the only other guests at the bed and breakfast: Winnie and Tom. The older couples had gone back home. Felicity fussed over Winnie, Tom, and Maya adorably, making more coffee, eggs, and bacon than anyone really needed.

"There's a storm coming tonight," Felicity warned them as she zipped around. "Maya, are you sure you want to move out to the mansion today? It's possible you won't be able to get out for a while."

Maya felt as though she carried a secret. Brad was coming; it was clear he wanted to stay the night. "I'll be okay," she told Felicity.

"You'll call if anything happens?" Felicity demanded. "Conor has a snowmobile. We can come out there if need be."

"She wants to be cooped up in her mansion in the snow!" Tom announced. "I think that's romantic."

"You should write a book while you're out there," Winnie said. "Doesn't it sound romantic to be alone with your thoughts, surrounded by snow?"

"I keep looking at your food blog," Tom said sheepishly. "I love what you wrote about the burgers at the diner!"

Maya's cheeks burned with embarrassment and, admittedly, pride. It was true that she'd gotten better about updating the blog in recent days. She'd even posted an article about the Christmas Festival, featuring the numerous food stalls. Perhaps due to social media, several Hollygrove residents had discovered the posts and spread them widely,

wanting to show off their pride in their small town. Now that she'd left New York, her readership was wider than ever. That was counter-intuitive— but she'd take it.

After breakfast, Maya packed up her suitcase and slotted it into the back of Phoebe's trunk. Tom, Winnie, Felicity, and Conor waited for her in the living room and swallowed her with hugs. Felicity demanded twice that she come to town "immediately after the roads are clear" so that Felicity would know she was all right.

"Keep me updated about Sarah," Maya told Tom, giving him a final squeeze. He was just a little bit older than Phoebe, and Maya had begun to feel motherly toward him. She couldn't explain it. She was pulling for him.

Maya went to the grocery store, ready to stock up on supplies. Although she knew Rainey Michaels was at the elementary school with Brad, she half-assumed she'd run into her around every aisle, and she simmered with anxiety. Maya filled her cart with fruits, vegetables, meat, fish, pasta, ingredients to make pasta sauce, fine chocolates from Switzerland, pastries for breakfast, and plenty of bottles of red wine from various regions of France and Italy. Nick's voice was in her head frequently, reminding her of the best ingredients and how best to prepare them.

That had been the Nick she'd fallen in love with, she reminded herself. The one who knew how to prepare delicious, soul-affirming food. Perhaps she could still love those memories, even if the "real" Nick had been so cruel.

Maya drove to the mansion and carried her groceries into the kitchen, where she stored them in the fridge and shining cabinets. Due to the size of the storage, her items barely took up ten percent of the space. She imagined herself like a doll in a very big playhouse.

It was Wednesday, more than a week since Maya had gone to the nursing home. Twitching with nerves, she called the nursing home, hoping they'd tell her Aunt Veronica was ready to meet.

“She took a turn for the worse yesterday,” the nurse on duty told her. “Unfortunately, she needs her rest.”

Maya felt helpless. She retreated upstairs to another hallway and began to dig through drawers and closets, listening to podcasts in her headphones. Although she didn’t discover the heirloom, she did stumble through heaps of expensive items— old ballgowns, tuxedos, antique mirrors, gorgeous paintings, secretary desks, and antique children’s toys. One of them, a rocking horse that looked to be from the forties or fifties, forced Maya to imagine her own mother, just a toddler in such a big house, laughing and playing.

The car accident that had taken her mother’s life on Christmas Day, 1981, was difficult for Maya to remember. She’d been six years old, buckled in the backseat, listening to the radio, and singing along. Her parents had been holding hands in the front seat as her father had been driving. And then, there had been nothing but sound and light and squealing tires. There had been nothing but blistering pain.

Maya’s mother, Bethany, had died on impact. But her father had died three months later. He’d been okay for the first several days after the accident, but he’d soon fallen into a horrible coma that he never came out of. The doctors assumed it was the result of a head trauma they hadn’t clocked immediately after the accident.

Maya racked her mind for more memories of her mother. Was it possible she’d told her about this mansion? About her regal grandmother and gorgeous sister? Or had she truly left all this behind without a second thought?

Maya’s podcast stopped abruptly. She realized Brad was calling her; he’d arrived. She flung down the circular staircase and found him at the front door, beaming. Already, the snowfall from that morning had intensified. The flakes were enormous, melting across Brad’s hat.

“Come in!” she exclaimed, trying to shake off her bad memories.

Brad carried a paper bag of groceries: Oreo cookies, red wine, and a few different types of fancy cheese and crackers.

“Only the essentials,” he joked sheepishly.

It was only four-thirty, too early for dinner. But neither of them seemed keen on digging through more drawers, hunting for the heirloom. Not when they were so mesmerized with one another. Brad sliced some camembert and gouda, and Maya poured them small glasses of red. Wordlessly, they wandered to the back of the mansion, where an enclosed sunroom with a fireplace offered a gorgeous view of the snowfall. The windows were floor-to-ceiling, making it feel as though the rolling fields, woods, and mountains before them were part of a dynamic television display.

“I can’t believe it’s real,” Brad said as he piled wood into the fireplace.

As soon as the fire was roaring, Brad and Maya sat close to one another on the couch, clinked their glasses together, and sipped. The wine was woody with a slight hint of cherry, and Maya checked the label to see that it was from a local winery. She would have to write about it on her blog.

“Are you a wine snob?” Brad teased.

Maya laughed. “Not really. But I have a new angle on my food blog. I’m writing about all things upstate New York. For some reason, it’s already taking off.”

Brad was intrigued. He pulled up the blog on his phone and read the most recent article right in front of her, his eyes alight. Throughout, Maya thought she might faint with embarrassment. But when he finished, his eyes connected with hers, and he said, “This is extraordinary writing, Maya. I knew you were good, but I couldn’t have imagined this.”

Maya’s cheeks burned. The intensity of Brad’s gaze forced her eyes to the window, where snow was piling across the veranda. She imagined them here in the summertime, all the doors and windows wide open. They’d drink lemonade and read books together. Brad wouldn’t have school to go to, and they could spend long days side-by-side.

She was getting ahead of herself. She knew that. But she couldn’t stop.

When she turned back, Brad was closer to her than ever. His nose was only an inch or two away. Her heart pounded with nerves.

“Maya,” Brad whispered, touching her back. “I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you. At school, I’m so distracted. All the kids know it, too. They keep asking about you.”

Maya laughed softly. “Do they?”

“Kids always know what’s up,” he explained. “I don’t know how. Adults have lost that connection.”

“I wish we could get it back.”

Brad bowed his head. “I wish I could kiss you.”

“Why don’t you?”

Brad tilted his head. “I’m scared, I guess.”

“I’m scared, too.”

“I mean, you just got out of something serious,” Brad reminded her.

Maya laced her fingers through his. “I know. It’s fast.” She swallowed the lump in her throat. “But being here has helped me see just how poisonous that relationship always was. I want to start over. And I want to do it slowly. With you. If you’ll have me.”

She couldn’t believe how open she was with him. This had never been her style.

And then, as the soft snow piled up outside and a sharp wind crashed against the mansion, Brad pressed his lips upon her. His strong arms enveloped her, and she was cast into the warmth of this brewing love, her eyes closed, his lips opening wider. The fire cracked and spat in the fireplace, and Maya wrapped her arms around Brad as tightly as she could, frightened the violent winter winds would take him away. But when their kiss broke, they pressed their noses against one another, neither capable of speech. It was clear he wasn’t going anywhere. And Maya wasn’t sure what she’d done to deserve such a tremendous feeling. It kept her alive.

## Chapter Twelve

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**B**rad woke up at five-thirty. Curled up beside him was beautiful Maya, her cheek splayed across the pillow, and early-morning light cascading across her dark hair. Brad's heart skipped a beat. He couldn't believe it had really happened. He couldn't believe he'd actually opened himself up to new love.

As though Maya could hear his swirling thoughts, her eyes opened, and she smiled through the darkness. "Good morning," she whispered sleepily.

"Morning." Brad kissed her again, inhaling the sweet scent of her—vanilla and lavender.

"Are you getting up?" Maya asked.

"Not if I can help it." Brad laughed. "Normally, I get up at six and go running. But I have a hunch that won't be happening today."

Maya turned and peered toward the window, where snow continued to come down in a single white sheet.

"They already called off school last night," Brad explained. "I got the alert before we went to bed."

Maya cuddled closer to him, nuzzling against his chest. Brad wrapped his arms around her and kissed her gingerly on the ear. For the first time in many, many years, he had a wide-open day before him, meant only for himself and the woman he was falling in love with. It felt too good to be true.

Maya and Brad fell back asleep until nine. Brad woke up to the shuffling of Maya's feet across the hardwood, and he whipped up, blinking through the sharp light that crept in from either side of the curtains.

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean to wake you!" Maya laughed and tied up her robe.

Brad rubbed his eyes. "I haven't slept this late in decades. I feel like a teenager."

Maya hurried over and kissed him on the cheek. "I have to run to the bathroom," she said sheepishly. "I'll go downstairs and make coffee. You stay here, okay? The rest of the house is freezing."

Brad stayed in bed as he was told, watching as the final flutters of snow came down. Memories of last night flowed through him. Very late, they'd managed to cook an enormous meal together—steak, potatoes, green beans, and they'd drank wine, ate, and laughed deep into the night. Was it possible they could have many more nights like that? Was it possible this was the beginning of something?

Maya returned with a tray of hot coffee and croissants stuffed with vanilla cream.

"Is this for your food blog?" Brad asked as Maya settled in beside him carefully, positioning the tray between them.

"Everything is for the blog," Maya said. "It means I get to eat to my heart's content all the time."

Brad dunked the tip of his croissant into his coffee and took a large bite so that he found the cream on his first try. It was truly sensational.

"I found them at the bakery attached to the grocery store!" Maya said with a funny smile. "I can't believe how good they are! They rival anything in Manhattan."

"Maybe Manhattan was never good enough for your blog, anyway," Brad suggested.

Maya sipped her coffee contemplatively. "It's funny you say that. I've been wondering the same thing. Five years ago,

after Phoebe was set up at college, I asked myself what I wanted the rest of my life to be. I'd always dabbled in food writing, and I had a pretty good following on social media. When I got the gig at *Food & Drink* magazine, I thought—this is it! The rest of my life is beginning!”

“I'm sure it was exciting,” Brad said softly.

“While it lasted, yes. But when they fired me, I felt so lost.”

Brad shook his head. “I can't imagine being in a field like that. I've never been frightened of losing my job. You've met Rainey Michaels. We keep everyone at that school, even if they're terrible teachers.” He winced. “I'm sorry for saying she's terrible. I just really resent the way she treats the children sometimes. She acts like they're disposable. Or like they're not really there, paying attention to every little thing she does.”

Maya wrinkled her nose for a split second. “That woman is so in love with you.”

Brad took another bite of croissant, chewed, and swallowed. It was wonderfully easy to speak with Maya about anything that came to his mind. “Rainey is the kind of woman who always gets what she wants,” he said. “When I felt her targeting me, I panicked. I knew that if I didn't give her what she wanted, she would make my life miserable.”

Maya nodded. “And now, I'm here.”

“You're here,” Brad agreed. “And it's the first time she's really realized I might not like her. Ever since she met you, she's laid everything on extra-thick. It's suffocating.”

“She'll catch on. She has to.” Maya frowned in a way that made an adorable wrinkle form between her eyebrows. “I mean, she wants to keep her job, right?”

“I assume so. Not that she cares about the children at all.” Brad laughed. “I don't mean to say she's only there for me. She obviously isn't.”

“You're a good man, Brad,” Maya said quietly. “I understand why she loves you. She probably looks up to you,



in a way.”

Brad wasn't sure that was true, but he didn't want to say so. He took a long sip of coffee, his eyes on the glinting blue sky through the window. “We should go outside today,” he said. “Do you have snow boots?”

Maya and Brad crept around lazily that morning, in no rush to do anything besides hug and kiss one another, explore other hallways in the house, and eat whatever they got their hands on. By the time one-thirty rolled around, they were fidgety and eager to leave the house, and they donned their boots and winter layers and stepped out the back door to walk along the veranda. On high were the blue mountains, tracing their path across the horizon, and the woods just beyond the property were dense and slightly frightening. Brad imagined they were filled with wolves.

Brad stepped off the veranda and onto the “ground,” where his boot dropped over a foot into the snow. He laughed and whirled around to gaze up at Maya, who remained on the veranda. Because of the angle of the rooftop, the veranda hadn't gotten as much snow as the rest of the property.

“Are you going to disappear in there?” Maya asked.

“Help me, Maya! I'm falling in!”

Maya laughed and took a photograph of him with her phone. Brad couldn't help but smile. “You coming out?”

Maya stepped gingerly onto the snow and walked beside him, her boots crunching. “I wish Phoebe could see this,” she said softly, speaking of her daughter. “Down in Pennsylvania, we never got this much snow in winter. When we did get snow, Phoebe spent all day out in it, playing. Before the divorce, Steve and I did our best to spend as much time as we could out there. I always felt guilty for not giving her a sibling to play with.”

Brad's heart softened with every new story Maya told him. He felt her drawing him deeper into her world.

Brad and Maya surveyed the backyard, walking all the way to the edge of the woods. There, they turned back and

gazed at the massive house, which seemed to hunker down over the snow like a large animal.

“If I stay here,” Maya whispered, “I can’t be there alone.”

Brad’s heart banged in his chest. He wanted to say he’d move in immediately; he wanted to be by her side. But it felt too earnest.

“Maybe I could transform it into a bed and breakfast,” Maya suggested. “Although I don’t want to encroach on Felicity’s business.”

“Hollygrove gets plenty of tourism,” Brad told her. “You and Felicity would host very different sorts of people.”

“This would be more of a luxury vacation, I suppose,” Maya agreed. “Felicity’s bed and breakfast hosts people like me. People who embrace coziness.” She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “Thank you again for taking me there that first day. I drove to Hollygrove without a plan. Looking back, it was pretty reckless.”

Brad tugged Maya into an embrace. How could he explain what had come over him when he’d first heard her talking to Thaddeus at the law office? He’d felt an urgent desire to know her. He’d wanted to protect her, too. But she didn’t need protecting. She just needed love.

After an hour in the chill, Maya and Brad went back inside, put a kettle on, and discussed what they wanted to make for lunch. Maya announced she had ingredients for chili, and Brad leaped at it— happy to slice vegetables all afternoon long if it meant chili was the result.

As Maya gathered the ingredients across the counter, there was a loud rap at the door. Maya turned on her heel and glared at Brad. “How did anyone make it out here?”

Brad and Maya hurried to the foyer to open the front door. There on the porch was Olivia. An expensive-looking camera bag hung from her shoulder.

“Olivia!” Maya sounded mystified. “What are you doing here?”

Olivia smiled and gestured toward the snowmobile parked near Brad and Maya's snow-covered cars. "I figured you'd be home today of all days. It seemed like the perfect time to take photographs for my show. I mean, come on! Look at how gorgeous this mansion looks in the snow."

Maya hesitated and then stepped back to allow Olivia inside. Brad's heart thumped. Olivia's connection to Rainey made him nervous. Then again, her desire to photograph the mansion seemed innocent enough. And she'd been incredibly kind at the diner the other day.

Maybe he was overthinking everything. That sounded like him.

"That's quite a camera," Maya said as Olivia removed her Canon from the case.

"It's my baby," Olivia affirmed. "I take her with me everywhere, just in case I'm inspired."

Maya looked loose and happy. "Brad and I were just going to make chili. Would you like to stay for dinner?"

"Oh, I would have loved to. Unfortunately, I have plans tonight." Olivia pressed her lips together. "I really am sorry for storming in like this. I never heard from you after I gave you my card, and..."

"Don't worry about it," Maya told her. "I've been so busy the past couple of days. Everything slips my mind."

Maya told Olivia she had free reign over the property. "Brad and I haven't explored everything yet," she said. "If you find anything especially interesting, let us know."

Brad's chest was heavy as he watched Olivia head east, down the long hallway that led to the library. Was it really okay to let Olivia roam like this?

In the kitchen, Brad verbalized his fears quietly. "I mean, what if she steals something?"

Maya sliced through a yellow onion. "I don't even know what we have! If she takes something, it means she really needs it. Besides, the photo albums and family memories are

the most interesting to me. I don't know if we'll ever find that silly heirloom. Maybe it was lost decades ago."

Brad sliced a red pepper, trying to make sense of Olivia's visit. Maybe Maya was right; maybe it was innocent.

"I can go check on her," Brad suggested. "Just to make sure?"

Maya touched Brad's shoulder gently, and Brad was immediately drawn back into her eyes. His fear dissipated.

"All right," he said, kissing Maya again. "I'll stop worrying so much."

"There's nothing to be frightened about," Maya assured him. "We're here. We're together. And Olivia will be gone soon. And just think. This summer, we can go to her exhibition and see photographs of the mansion decorated in snow. They'll be the perfect records of this wonderful time of our lives."

## Chapter Thirteen

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The snowplows crept through the country roads that afternoon and evening, and Brad was unfortunately needed back at school the following morning. Maya waved as he drove away, her heart in her throat. After such an intense thirty-six hours together, his absence felt painful. She felt the way she had as a teenager when her boyfriend had dropped her off for the night. It was silly. She needed to distract herself. More photographs. More family antiques. Maybe, amongst the mess of everything, she would eventually find the heirloom.

Maya set to work on the third floor, which was a collection of bedrooms, smaller libraries, a music room with a grand piano, and a few offices with ancient-looking computers. The maids had cleaned everything, giving even the old computers the air of having recently been used. When she pressed the “ON” buttons, however, none of them started up.

It was difficult for Maya to imagine who had used them. In Maya’s lifetime, computer use had skyrocketed— and technology had changed exponentially. Had Aunt Veronica spent time in here, perhaps writing essays or novels? Or had Veronica had visitors who’d needed the computers?

In the secondary library, Maya discovered another pile of photographs. These were unorganized and kept in a shoebox, as though whoever had taken them and decided to keep them hadn’t wanted to display them in any way. Many of them were from what looked to be an Albright party. People were stationed around long outdoor tables. Men and women played

croquet or rode on horses. Children scampered along the edge of the woods, their feet bare but their clothing exquisite, proof of their wealth. It took a little bit of scouring, but Maya eventually found Veronica and her mother, Bethany, amongst the children. Their hair was long and tangled, and they held hands in many of the photographs as though they were inseparable.

Some of the photographs had been taken at Christmastime 1959. In them, Veronica and Bethany wore stylish Christmas dresses and sat in front of the Christmas tree. Bethany had a Christmas cookie in her hand, and Veronica had both of her arms flung out in front of her as though she were singing a song.

And then, Maya discovered the strangest photo of all. It was at the very bottom of the pile, and it featured a teenage girl holding a tiny baby. On the back of the photograph was the date: 1971.

Maya stared intently at the face of the teenage girl. She was ninety percent sure this was Bethany, her mother. She could have been Phoebe's twin. Maya wanted to send the photograph to Steve as a final "win" in their long-ago argument when Steve had said Phoebe took after his side of the family and not hers.

But who was the baby? Maya had seen numerous photographs of Bethany at this point— but she'd never seen a tiny baby from the year 1971. And it couldn't have been Maya. Maya had been born in 1975, four years later.

Maya did a quick calculation. Bethany was sixteen in the photograph. Her thoughts swirling, Maya kept the photograph outside the stack and went downstairs. There was only so much digging she could do per day before she fell apart.

That evening after school, Brad returned, offering a welcome distraction. They roasted chicken, drank wine, and cuddled on the couch as Brad told funny stories about the kids. Maya adored them. She was becoming addicted to hearing all the intricacies of his day, even the boring parts. She wondered

if she'd ever let Brad return home. Perhaps she could keep him at the mansion forever.

Toward the end of the night, she received a phone call. It was Phoebe.

"Mom! I've hardly heard from you!" Phoebe sounded exasperated.

"Oh, honey. I'm sorry. It's been so busy here." Maya smiled at Brad across the couch. With her daughter in her ear and Brad just a few feet away, she was floating. "How is the apartment search going?"

"It's still going," Phoebe offered. "I was thinking about coming up to Hollygrove this weekend. Henry is out of town for business, and I'd love to see that mansion of yours."

Maya thought her heart might explode. "Yes! Please, honey! Come up. Everyone would love to meet you."

"Everyone?" Phoebe laughed. "You haven't even been there two weeks yet! And there's already an entire community to meet?"

"Just come up here," Maya urged. "It's paradise."

Phoebe was set to arrive the following evening. Maya was a flurry of emotions, scampering around the mansion, trying to get everything ready. At the grocery store, she ran into Felicity, threw her arms around her, and told her how much she missed her. "My daughter is coming!" she explained. "You, Conor, Winnie, and Tom should come over for dinner."

"Oh! Really?" Felicity looked taken aback. "I haven't spent an evening away from the Hollygrove Bed and Breakfast in a long time."

"Which means you haven't had someone else cook for you in all that time," Maya reminded her.

Felicity blushed. "I can't say no! I'll tell Winnie and Tom the news."

Maya hurried back to the mansion to prepare the feast, half-cursing herself for complicating everything with her reckless invitations. Then again, she wanted Phoebe to

experience the warmth of Hollygrove; she wanted her to see how “okay” she was so soon after the breakup with Nick. It now embarrassed her that Phoebe had had to come to New York to drag her from her depression. That had been a different version of Maya altogether.

Brad arrived first with a bottle of wine and private kisses, which he said he wanted to get out of the way before everyone got there. Maya giggled and scolded him for messing up her lipstick.

“You’re going to love Phoebe,” she gushed as she scurried around the kitchen.

“You’ve told her about us?” Brad sounded nervous.

Maya hesitated. “Until a few nights ago, I didn’t know there was anything to tell. I didn’t want to get my hopes up.”

Brad’s smile widened. “I guess she’ll be able to see it plain as day.”

“She’s going to love you.” Even as Maya said it, she was surprised at how certain she felt. Phoebe had confessed to never liking Nick— but Brad was an entirely different breed. He was impossible not to love.

It was funny to Maya, now, just how the tables had turned between herself and Phoebe. Now that Phoebe was married and secure, she worried about her mother in the same way that Maya had always worried about her. It was tender and still more proof that Maya’s best friend in the world was and always would be her daughter. She was lucky.

Felicity, Conor, Tom, and Winnie arrived not long afterward, babbling happily as they approached the front door of the mansion. Maya whipped it open and embraced each of them. Tom was especially chatty and excited, ambling through the foyer with eyes as big as saucers.

“This is going to be so helpful for my screenplay,” he announced.

Winnie blushed and removed her coat. “He hit a snag in the writing process. He keeps calling tonight’s dinner his ‘breakthrough.’” She used air quotes.



“Absolutely,” Tom said without shame. “Maya, you’re my muse!”

Maya laughed and searched Tom’s face. Had he met Sarah yet? Or was he still lying in wait, writing himself silly, and hoping?

Brad led the bed and breakfast crew into the gorgeous dining room, explaining that they hadn’t yet used it. Frequently, Felicity and Winnie turned their heads to give Maya a “look,” which meant, “Wow, you and Brad have already gotten serious!” Maya just shrugged each time. Sometimes, love fell into your lap. You had to embrace it.

Phoebe arrived a little after eight. Because Maya still had her car, she’d brought up Henry’s Fiat, from which she leaped. She hurried up the walkway and swallowed Maya in a hug.

“Look at this place! It’s huge!”

Maya shook her head. “I have so much to show you, honey. But first, let’s eat.”

Phoebe shimmered with surprise at so many Hollygrove guests around the dining room. Maya made introductions, ending with Brad, whom she touched on the shoulder as he and Phoebe shook hands. Phoebe sensed the difference between Brad and the others immediately.

“It’s very nice to meet you, Brad,” Phoebe said earnestly.

“Brad helped me with the Christmas Festival,” Maya explained, pouring Phoebe a glass of red. “I would have been lost without him.”

“I just can’t believe my mother celebrated Christmas in the first place,” Phoebe said, taking the seat beside Maya. “I’ve never seen that before.”

Felicity, Conor, Winnie, and Tom exchanged worried glances.

“You don’t celebrate Christmas?” Felicity asked in a small voice.

Maya didn’t want to get into it. As she stuttered with potential explanations that had nothing to do with her dark

past, Brad came to her rescue. “Maya usually likes to keep things small and uncomplicated. The festival was certainly not that.”

Felicity smiled with relief. “It wasn’t! But Phoebe, your mother pulled it off without a hitch. The entire town fell in love with her immediately. Well, especially one of us.” She winked at Brad across the table, and he turned a bright shade of crimson.

As they dined deep into the night, sharing stories, passing around second helpings, and pouring wine, Maya couldn’t help but notice that Winnie and Tom held one another’s gaze longer than they once had. Tom’s fingers swept past Winnie’s wrist, and Winnie blushed. What was going on?

In the kitchen, Maya tried to press Felicity for information, whispering to ensure the others couldn’t hear. But Felicity just looked Maya in the eye, unwilling to gossip, and said: “Tom came here looking for love. And it looks like he found it.”

\* \* \*

The following morning, Maya brewed coffee in the kitchen and surprised Phoebe with a platter of croissants filled with pistachio cream. Phoebe was dressed in an enormous college sweatshirt and a pair of leggings, and her dark hair was a tumbleweed behind her. They sat in the back sunroom, where Maya had already built a fire when she’d woken up. Out the window, snow fluttered. Her heart felt full.

“It was wonderful to meet your friends last night,” Phoebe said softly. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone look at you the way Brad does.” She sipped her coffee. “I hope it isn’t too soon. After everything with Nick, I mean.”

Maya had expected Phoebe’s worries to rise up like this. “The thing about Brad is, I’ve been open about Nick from the start. I couldn’t help but tell him everything about myself almost immediately. I felt like I was constantly word-vomiting, but Brad didn’t seem to mind.”

Phoebe laughed.

“It was so different than with other men,” Maya went on. “Ordinarily, I tried to be whatever version of me I thought they’d like the most. But with Brad, I was just myself. And he seems okay with that. So far, at least.” She shook her head. “When we had our first kiss, I thought to myself: wow. I’m in trouble.”

“You sound so happy.” Phoebe squeezed Maya’s hand.

That afternoon, Maya drove Phoebe downtown to explore Hollygrove, eat at the diner, roam in and out of little shops, and seep up Hollygrove Christmas magic. A few of the Christmas festival stalls remained open along the sidewalk near the courthouse, selling arts and crafts, mulled wine, coffee, and sweets. Each vendor greeted Maya excitedly and shook Phoebe’s hand. “Your mother saved the day when she took over the festival,” they told her.

At the diner, Phoebe and Maya removed their thick winter coats and ordered soup and grilled sandwiches.

“Hollygrove is even smaller than Peckham,” Phoebe said conspiratorially, speaking of the small Pennsylvania town where Maya and Steve had originally settled to raise Phoebe. “I thought for sure you’d never return somewhere like that.”

“There’s something cozy about being known everywhere,” Maya said.

“Everyone knew you in Peckham,” Phoebe reminded her, “and you hated that.”

Maya’s heart darkened at her long-ago memories. “I can’t explain why I felt that way,” she said softly. “Maybe it had something to do with the divorce.”

Phoebe nodded, frowning her brow. “I didn’t mean to bring that up. I’m sorry.”

“No, honey. It’s okay.” Maya rummaged through her purse to find a large notebook, in which she now kept the photograph of her mother holding the mysterious infant. “I’m working on staring truths in the face. I don’t want to hide from my past or my feelings anymore.”

Maya removed the photo and passed it to Phoebe, whose eyes darkened with curiosity. “This is Grandma Bethany?”

“Yes. But I have no idea who that baby is.”

“Maybe a cousin?” Phoebe suggested. “Did Veronica have any children?”

“Maybe Veronica had a baby who died,” Maya said very quietly.

Phoebe glanced around the diner, which was packed to the gills on a Saturday afternoon. “This town is so small,” she said. “Why don’t you ask someone who’s been around a while?”

This was a good idea. “We should drop by the bed and breakfast on our way back to the house,” Maya said. “Felicity will know.”

With their bellies full, Maya and Phoebe decided to walk to the bed and breakfast to stretch their legs. On their way, they spotted Brad on the opposite sidewalk, wearing all black spandex, on a run. Maya had never seen him doing something so “normal,” and she laughed happily as he bounded through the snow to reach them. His face was blotchy, and it took him a moment to catch his breath.

“This is embarrassing!” he said.

“Why?” Maya cleared the distance between them and kissed him.

“You’ve been feeding me like crazy,” Brad said. “I had to work it off sometime.”

“Is that so?” Maya laughed.

“Mom is like that,” Phoebe assured him. “She’s food obsessed.”

“A woman after my own heart,” Brad said, his eyes still on Maya. “Did you do any heirloom hunting this morning?”

“No.” Maya slapped her thigh. “To tell you the truth, I’m beginning to make peace with never finding it. I’d much prefer to learn some family secrets and get to know my aunt.

Actually, we're on our way to chat with Felicity about something." She bowed her head to add, "Someone has to know who that baby in the photograph is. Secrets don't stay secret for long around here."

Brad and Maya kissed again to say goodbye, and then Brad whipped out across the sidewalk again, moving quicker than he had before.

"He's showing off," Maya joked.

"Naw," Phoebe said. "You gave him the power he needed to keep going."

When they reached the bed and breakfast, they found Tom and Winnie sharing coffee and croissants in the main room while Felicity set to work on a French-inspired stew in the kitchen. She wore her typical apron, and she flashed from counter to counter with the energy of a woman half her age. When Maya asked if they could present a "very delicate question" about the history of the Albright family, Felicity stopped short, dried her hands on her apron, and said, "What is it?" She looked nervous.

Maya removed the photograph from the notebook and placed it on the kitchen table. "This is my mother," she said. "But I don't know who the baby is."

Felicity frowned and got closer to the photograph to inspect it. "That's Bethany Albright, absolutely," she breathed. "I was a little bit younger than her. But that's the same teenager I remember traipsing up and down Main Street with her older sister, Veronica."

Maya's heartbeat quickened. She wished there had been video footage of that so she could watch Bethany and Veronica glide hand-in-hand along the sidewalk, perhaps flirting with boys or looking in shop windows.

"We were wondering if maybe this was Veronica's baby?" Maya went on. "Veronica would have been eighteen or nineteen when this photo was taken. Maybe she had a baby who died young?"

Felicity removed her glasses and rubbed her eyes. After a long pause, she sighed. "I never heard of any baby born to an Albright in 1971."

Maya felt deflated. If Felicity didn't know, it was probable that nobody in Hollygrove did.

"It could be a cousin's child?" Phoebe suggested.

Felicity shrugged. "I never knew much about the Albright cousins. It very well could be."

Phoebe and Maya made brief eye contact. Maya put the photograph away as Felicity buzzed back toward the other side of the kitchen and poured them two mugs of coffee, insisting they stay for a little while. They couldn't refuse.

In the living room, Tom peppered Maya with more questions about her hunt for the heirloom necklace. "If you can't find it, will your aunt still let you keep the mansion?"

"Mr. DeWitt said as long as I plan the Christmas Festival, I can keep the mansion," Maya said. "If I don't find the heirloom necklace, I suppose I'll have to sell the place."

"Or run it like a hotel," Phoebe said, echoing a thought Maya had already had.

"How exciting!" Felicity said. "I can show you the ropes on that."

Maya's heart fluttered. "Maybe I can get Winnie and Tom to stay in Hollygrove and work at the hotel?"

"Hollygrove is almost Hollywood," Phoebe joked.

"Very close," Tom agreed, smiling. He glanced at Winnie lovingly and added, "But Winnie and I are getting back on the road soon."

"I'm done traveling alone for a while," Winnie said wistfully. "Tom convinced me to go south for the winter."

"South for the winter; Europe for the summer," Tom affirmed, puffing his chest out.

Maya could feel Tom's memories of Sarah fading to nothing. Perhaps he and Sarah had lost track of one another for

a reason. Perhaps it had all been a part of the universe's grand plan to guide him to Winnie.

Around five, Maya and Phoebe admitted they had to head back to the mansion; they wanted to maximize their alone time together before Phoebe had to drive back to Pennsylvania tomorrow. Felicity swallowed them in hugs and wished them luck on their "quest to find the mysterious baby." But even as she heard it, Maya dismissed it. It was clear they would never find that baby. Her time in Hollygrove seemed to be about making friendships and connections rather than finding answers. And that was okay.

\* \* \*

When Maya and Phoebe pulled up in front of the mansion, they weren't alone. Across the country road were several news trucks advertising the various stations across Upstate New York. TV journalists with big hair paraded toward Maya and Phoebe, waving microphones. Maya stalled, alternating between terror and intrigue. Why were they here?

"Maya!" One woman with a helmet of blond hair called. "Can you give us a comment on your inheritance? People are saying your aunt left you a scavenger hunt!"

Maya sputtered. Who was actually interested in this?

"That's right," Maya said.

"If you complete the scavenger hunt, it's said you'll inherit upwards of fifty million," the blond journalist went on. "Can you comment on what this experience has been like for you?"

Maya eyed Phoebe nervously. "It's been a whirlwind, I suppose. I'm looking forward to meeting my aunt for the first time."

"People are calling you the Annie of Upstate New York," another journalist chimed in, referring to the musical about Orphan Annie. "What do you think about that?"

"I'm forty-eight," Maya said. "It's been a long time since I thought of myself as an orphaned child."

At that moment, she knew what she would do with the majority of the money if it came her way. She would donate it to orphaned children across the country, those who sat in rooms alone, dreaming of better lives. Those who'd been dealt a horrible hand, as she had been.

Phoebe squeezed Maya's elbow and tilted her head toward the mansion. "Let's go," she mouthed.

Maya knew her daughter was right. They couldn't stand out here in the brisk cold, talking to reporters. Maya knew so little about her family, and she couldn't wrap her mind around fifty million dollars, let alone say anything articulate about it. All she wanted, right now, was to sit before the splendid warmth of the fire with her daughter as the snow continued to flutter down outside. These people didn't deserve her honesty or her stories.



## Chapter Fourteen

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Monday morning, Brad breezed through the elementary school office, saying hello and unzipping his winter coat. The principal called after him, asking about his weekend, and Brad responded, “It was nice! Pretty low-key.” In truth, he’d spent the majority of his Sunday with Thaddeus DeWitt, gushing about his newfound love. Maya was never far from his mind. And now that Phoebe was back in Pennsylvania, Maya and Brad had dinner plans that night. He could hardly wait.

Brad entered his classroom, cleaned the desks, and checked on the empty hamster cage. It had been Benjamin’s turn to take care of the hamster that weekend, and Brad wanted to make sure the cage itself was clean and safe for the hamster’s return. He changed the water and added food pellets, whistling to himself. He wondered if anything would ever feel hard again now that he was in love.

A few minutes before the bell rang to start the school day, there was a knock on Brad’s classroom door. Brad turned to find Rainey in the doorway, wearing a black dress with a black turtleneck, her eyes lined with black charcoal. She looked slightly evil, which didn’t exactly suit the elementary school aesthetic.

“Morning, Ms. Michaels!” Brad couldn’t dislike anyone right now. “How was your weekend?”

“It was wonderful, Brad. Just wonderful.” Rainey smirked. “I saw your new girlfriend and her daughter out and about.”

Brad's stomach twitched. He did everything he could to maintain his smile. "Phoebe is a wonderful young woman," he said. "She fell in love with Hollygrove. No surprise there."

"They must be having a field day, learning about their family history," Rainey went on.

Brad wasn't sure what to say about that. He glanced at the clock and cursed it; four minutes till the bell would bring his students to him and chase Rainey away.

"I meant to ask you," Rainey continued. "How did you like Olivia's visit last week?"

"Oh. That was, um, nice?" Brad couldn't translate how little he cared about Olivia's photographs. That had been the morning after he'd first spent the night; he'd felt preoccupied by matters of the heart. "Maya said she's looking forward to the show in Manhattan."

Rainey took a step toward him. Brad had to force himself to stay in position and not move away.

"I guess she'll bring you with her, won't she?" Rainey said. "She'll show you her old stomping grounds."

Brad's throat was very tight. Why did he feel as though Rainey was threatening him?

"I can't imagine anything getting in the way of Maya's happiness," Rainey went on. "And isn't that wonderful?"

Suddenly, another teacher streamed past Brad's classroom and then backtracked to ask him a question about the upcoming Christmas break. Brad was grateful for the distraction and invited the other teacher in, which ultimately forced Rainey away. When the bell rang, Brad's neck was slick with sweat.

He couldn't help but feel Rainey was planning something. But he couldn't begin to fathom what that could be.

\* \* \*

When Brad reached the Albright mansion that evening, Maya opened the door, her face marred with shock. “Brad!” she whispered. “I can’t believe this.”

Brad hurried inside, closed the door behind him, and followed Maya to the library, where a fire crackled, casting long shadows along the shelves. Maya passed him a very old folder, her hand shaking.

“I found this on one of the bookshelves,” she said. “It was lodged between two old photo albums. I don’t think anyone’s seen it in fifty years.”

Brad opened the folder to find a yellowed Certificate of Adoption dated 1971. The birth mother was listed as Bethany Albright. The daughter she’d given up for adoption was unnamed.

“The baby in the photograph,” Brad whispered.

Maya rubbed her eyes and collapsed against him. Brad set the folder to the side and wrapped his arms around her. This news was far heavier than any heirloom. It meant Maya had a sister; it meant the Albright family, despite their tremendous wealth, had given up that sister.

“I have so many questions,” Maya whispered. “I can’t wrap my mind around any of it.”

Brad kissed the top of her head, trying to stabilize her. But what could he possibly say?

“My mother was sixteen when she was born,” Maya went on, as though listing the facts of the matter helped. “And she was twenty when I was born. Twenty-six when she died.” She rubbed her temples. “I just can’t understand why she find her daughter when she got together with my father. They were starting a real family— but she already had a child somewhere.”

“Maybe she tried,” Brad suggested. “There’s no record of that in this folder. Maybe there’s no record of that anywhere.”

Brad hated to tell her that some things were lost to time. But it was true.

Maya's chin quivered. "All my life, I felt so alone. But she was out there." Maya reached for the photograph of her mother and sister, taken in 1971, and held it up to the light. After another pause, she said, "Aunt Veronica must know. Maybe it's part of the reason she brought me here in the first place. She wanted me to know about my sister. About what happened." Maya furrowed her brow. "This inheritance is also her inheritance. We were both robbed of Albright's wealth. We were both kicked to the curb. Why am I here in this mansion without her?"

Brad was at a loss. He recognized the kindness in Maya's mission— but he had no idea how to help her. All he could do was wrap his arms around her tighter.

"As soon as Veronica is better, we'll go to the nursing home," Brad assured her. "We'll get to the bottom of this."

Maya nodded, although her eyes glinted with fear.

Eventually, Brad went to the kitchen to cook something. Maya remained by the fire, lost in thought, and Brad was bent on cooking something that would bring her out of her sorrow. But as he sliced and diced vegetables, he was fidgety with nerves. Maya's ex was a chef. Brad could not compete with that! On his phone, he pulled up "the very best recipe" for chicken cacciatore, and he followed the instructions painstakingly. He was so focused that he hardly noticed time passing.

When he finished, he carried the plates back to the library. Normally, he thought food should be eaten at the table, but tonight was strange and, therefore, special. Plus, if Maya ate on the couch, maybe she wouldn't notice how subpar his cooking was.

"I know you're a foodie," Brad said. "I hope I don't disappoint."

Maya spun some noodles onto her fork, closed her eyes, chewed, and swallowed. Brad watched her, captivated until she opened her eyes again and gazed at him with longing.

"This is extraordinary, Brad," she said.

Brad's heart lifted. "You're lying. Right?"

"No!" Maya laughed at herself, and the tension in the room loosened. "I would never lie about food. This is sensational. Really." She squeezed his hand. "You know that the way to my heart is through my stomach."

Brad scooped some chicken cacciatore onto his fork and took a bite. Immediately, a tremendous wave of flavor came over him, and he gasped with surprise. He'd never managed to make something quite this special before.

"I never knew what I was missing before," Brad said. "When you actually care about what you cook in the kitchen, you can make beautiful things."

"Let's keep making beautiful things in the kitchen," Maya said dreamily.

"I can't wait."

## Chapter Fifteen

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Maya heard Brad's alarm clock at six the next morning, turned over in bed, and swallowed him in a warm hug, nuzzling his chest. He groaned and turned off his alarm. "I don't feel like running today," he announced. "Then don't!" Maya said with a laugh. "Stay here with me."

It already felt as though they'd fallen into perfect synchronicity, as though their hearts beat as one.

But by the time six-forty-five rolled around, Brad was out of bed and moving around the space, searching for his clothes in the darkness. Maya flipped on the lamp and asked him groggily, "When is your last day of school again?"

"Friday the 15th," Brad told her. "Just three days away."

"Maybe we can spend all of your Christmas break in bed," Maya suggested.

"We'll have to trade off who cooks."

"It looks like you're the better cook of the two of us."

"You're just trying to get away with never leaving bed again," Brad said, dropping down to kiss her. "I'll call you after school today, okay?"

Maya couldn't fall back asleep after Brad left. Instead, she sat up in bed with her laptop on her thighs and wrote the first draft of a blog for "A Taste About The Rest." In it, she divulged how beautiful it had been when Brad had cooked for her last night. She spoke of his tremendous use of spices and

the way being fed by someone who really cared for you nourished you even more.

“What I realized, as I ate Brad’s chicken cacciatore, is that for the past few years, I haven’t felt properly nourished by my chef boyfriend’s cooking,” she wrote. “A bell went off in my head. It was suddenly so obvious that I’ve been allowing myself a second-rate love— when I should have been here, eating chicken cacciatore.”

The blog still needed a bit of editing, which Maya decided to do later, after coffee and breakfast. She padded downstairs, brewed a pot of coffee, and inspected what she had in the fridge. Every now and again, her mind returned to what she’d learned about her mother and the adoption— but she was beginning to get used to the idea. It was horrific; it altered the way she thought of herself and her life. But Brad was right. There was nothing she could do about it right now. She had to wait till Aunt Veronica was ready for visitors. Then, she would get to the bottom of it.

But as Maya settled in the library with a good book, a second cup of coffee, and a bowl of oatmeal with peanut butter, a text dinged in. It was Phoebe.

PHOEBE: Mom? Have you seen the news?

MAYA: No?

Phoebe sent a link, which Maya clicked on immediately. She assumed it was a story about a celebrity they both liked; maybe it was news that Jennifer Aniston had a new boyfriend or Norah Jones was coming out with an album.

She never could have imagined this.

The first image that came up was of Olivia, Rainey’s best friend. Maya blinked with alarm at that face, remembering the last time she’d seen it— in the foyer of the Albright mansion with her camera bag on her shoulder. That had been less than a week ago.

The headline read:

## **Woman Recounts Terror of Being Ostracized By Rich New York Family**

And that's when Maya realized that in the photograph, Olivia was wearing the heirloom necklace. It was impossible.

"What?" Maya said aloud, nearly spilling her coffee. She quickly put the mug to the side and read the article, feeling frantic.

Olivia recounted her history to a reporter:

*"I was put up for adoption just a few months after I was born. My adoptive parents took me in and raised me as their own until I was fifteen. At that time, my adoptive parents divorced. And in a fit of rage, my adoptive father admitted the truth— that the Albright family had paid them a significant amount to take me off their hands. After that, he left me alone with my raging alcoholic mother, lost with confusion.*

*"I begged my mother for answers. But my mother said a stipulation of taking the money from the Albright family was that we would never contact them again. I was flabbergasted. I was a member of one of the richest families in New York, but they wanted nothing to do with me. Worse than that, they were just a few towns away from me, in Hollygrove. I'd passed by their mansion numerous times on drives with my friends. I couldn't understand why they hadn't wanted me. I just can't understand why they hadn't wanted their royal line to continue.*

*"It recently came to my attention that another 'Albright' is about to receive a sizeable inheritance. I don't know how to sit with that. Shouldn't fifty percent of that inheritance belong to me? Or am I forever 'out' just because I wasn't wanted back in 1971?"*

*"Right before my adoptive mother died, she showed me this heirloom necklace, which had been passed along with me during the adoption. It's my final link to the Albright family and proof that I am every bit an Albright."*

Maya scanned back to the top of the article, genuinely flabbergasted. There, she stared at the photograph of Olivia,



remembering what she'd first thought when she'd seen her in the crowd at the festival.

She'd seen a resemblance. She'd seen herself reflected back in Olivia's big eyes and dark hair. But she hadn't known to make anything of it. Plenty of women around her age looked similar to her. But not this similar, she realized now. This was uncanny.

A week and a half ago, Maya had met her sister. And she hadn't even known it.

But, she now realized, Olivia had been fully aware of their dynamic. And she hadn't said anything.

Phoebe was calling. Maya answered it but didn't say anything.

"Mom? What is this?" Phoebe's voice shook. "Isn't that the heirloom necklace?"

Maya felt like crying. "That's the necklace, all right."

"And Olivia? She's the baby in the photograph?"

"I think so." Maya squeezed her eyes shut. "I found some adoption papers yesterday. It looks like Olivia is my sister."

"So, she's had the necklace this entire time?" Phoebe asked.

Maya remembered Olivia's earnest smile last week when she'd come to the door with a lie. "I think she stole the necklace." She went on to explain everything about Rainey, Olivia, and Olivia's supposed plan to take photographs of the Albright mansion. "I don't know why she didn't just tell me who she was," Maya finished. "I would have fallen apart with love for her. I would have told her I always wanted a sister!"

Phoebe was speechless. "This is the most insane story I've ever heard."

Maya stood up and paced along the rug near the fire.

"How did she know where the heirloom necklace was?" Phoebe demanded.

“I have no idea,” Maya said. “I just can’t stop thinking about what it must have felt like for Olivia, coming into the Albright mansion for the first time. She’s known about the adoption for years. It must have been so alienating to learn about me. About my aunt’s offer of the inheritance. No wonder she wants to pit herself against me.”

“She’s angry.”

“Anyone would be.” Maya collapsed back on the couch. “What do you think I should do?”

“How much do you care about the money?” Phoebe asked.

“Very little right now. I want to sit with Olivia. I want to explain myself. I want to build a relationship with her, if possible. Then again, if she already stole from me, we’re not off to a good start.”

“Maybe she isn’t the kind of woman you want to know,” Phoebe suggested.

Maya felt a pang of regret. Perhaps Phoebe was right. But everything felt far more complicated than that.

After she got off the phone, Maya sent the article to Brad, who called her as soon as he could.

“I knew Rainey was up to something,” he spat, sounding angrier than Maya had ever heard him. “And I knew I should have followed Olivia through the house! I would have caught her taking the heirloom.”

Maya sighed. “I don’t know what to do. I mean, technically, the inheritance and the heirloom belong to her, too.”

“They don’t,” Brad said. “Your Aunt Veronica passed this all on to you.”

“Providing I find the necklace,” Maya reminded him. “And I didn’t. Olivia did.”

Brad was quiet for a moment. “The kids are coming back from recess right now,” he said, his voice heavy with regret.

“I’ll come over after school, and we can talk about this more. All right?”

Maya had to stop herself from telling Brad she loved him. It was too soon. But his support, just then, meant the world.

That afternoon, unable to stop herself, Maya drove out to the nursing home to beg the nurses to see her Aunt Veronica. But yet again, they told her she was too ill for visitors.

“We think she’s nearly out of the woods,” the head nurse explained. “By Christmas, she should be up for it. But we have to be very careful right now. One false move, and she could get even sicker.”

Maya thanked them, returned to Phoebe’s car, and placed her forehead on the steering wheel. After a series of deep breaths, she grabbed her wallet and removed Olivia’s business card from within the folds. Why hadn’t she thought of this before?

But Olivia’s phone rang and rang. It was clear she didn’t want to answer it. Maya wrote her an email, begging her to reach out again. It was all she could do.

Before she pulled out of the nursing home parking lot, Phoebe texted her again.

PHOEBE: The articles are all over the internet now.

PHOEBE: People have really run with the story. They’re calling her the “Anastasia” of Upstate New York.

MAYA: Wow.

PHOEBE: You have to get that necklace back!

Maya ignored the message, started the engine, and returned home. As she wandered through the shadowed halls that afternoon, her footsteps echoing, she couldn’t help but tremor with loneliness. Nothing about her life fit the description she’d always told herself. And now, as Olivia

spouted her resentment toward the Albrights and Maya herself, Maya felt helpless.

## Chapter Sixteen

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To distract Maya from her anxious, stirring mind, Brad spent the night at the Albright mansion that evening, brewed her coffee in the morning, and stayed as long as he could without being late to school. Maya listened from the bed as Brad closed the front door, leaving her alone in the huge house. She had half a mind to jump back into her car and drive to Pennsylvania, where it was safe.

But no. Now that a full day had passed since she'd officially learned the identity of her half-sister, she was armed with even more questions: *why had the Albrights given Olivia up for adoption? And why had Bethany abandoned the Albrights? Were the two issues related? And, if she discovered the truth, could she bring Olivia back to the mansion? Could she heal the wounds of the past?*

Maya set to work with renewed energy, scouring the upstairs bedrooms and the libraries for answers. Over the course of her time there, she'd stumbled into a few diaries, none of which had interested her at the time. Now, she ached to find a diary from the year 1971— perhaps one written by Veronica or even Bethany herself.

Instead, during the late afternoon, she stumbled into something better.

A complete collection of diaries from her Grandmother, Diane.

Maya didn't find them in either library. In fact, she found them as she rearranged her clothes in the back closet of her

Aunt Veronica's bedroom. Because she'd slept there for a week, she'd begun to think of the room as "her space" and had forgotten to look there for clues. But, of course, it stood to reason that Veronica would keep priceless items there. Her mother's diaries, which spanned the course of her entire life, were priceless.

Maya set the diaries on the edge of the bed. Her head and heart pounded. After diving through so many photographs the past week, she'd come to think of her Grandma Diane with fear. She'd been a regal and terribly beautiful woman with the air of someone who'd always looked down on the rest of the world.

Because Maya was a writer, she wanted to get context of her grandmother's life before she charged directly to 1971. So, she picked up the first diary, which her grandmother had written at the age of eighteen. This is what she read:

*April 18, 1950*

*You can't imagine how excruciating it is to fall in love with someone your father hates. My older sister, Margot, is betrothed to a well-dressed and very rich man who has promised her even more wealth. My parents assume I will find someone like him. But it's nothing to me. Not now that I've met Victor.*

*I can't imagine staying here, knowing Victor is just down the road, yearning for me. I can't imagine living a life so far from passion. It seems okay for Margot— but I've always been different. I know that.*

*Victor tells me he has a promising opportunity in America. I know nothing of America; I know only what the romantics say of it— of its impossible mountains and marvelous riches for even the poorest of men.*

*I know it's no use explaining to Father the tremendous depths of Victor's heart. Father would laugh me off the estate if he heard me use such language. He's never understood anything.*

*May 11, 1950*

*Margot is married. She's moved to a gorgeous estate just across the moor and has already taken to speaking in that horribly drab way married ladies speak, as though she looks down upon anyone who hasn't precisely made her decisions. Father and Mother have begun nudging me about Margot's husband's brother, who has just returned from India. It's assumed he's finished his "wild" years and is now ready to settle with a "sensible woman like me." But who's to say I'm sensible? Isn't that the most boring thing of all!*

*Victor Albright has a plan for me. For us. We will leave tomorrow, late at night, and be aboard the ship by the following morning. We'll have hardly a few pennies to rub together, which is utterly romantic. I know nothing about being poor, but being rich doesn't seem to have done my parents any good. And it certainly didn't keep Margot's betrothed at home and safe.*

*Forgive me. I'm bringing the emerald necklace. It belonged to my father's great-grandmother and was meant to be mine after I married, anyway. I can't part with it. And no matter how wretched things get in America, I will never sell it.*

*July 14, 1950*

*We've been in America for six weeks. Throughout most of that time, Victor and I have been terribly ill. We've holed up in a horrific apartment in New York City, where we share a bathroom down the hall with the rest of the neighbors. While Victor scans the city for work, I spend the day in bed, crying.*

*I finally contacted my family to let them know I'm all right. I imagine they recognize the devastation in my words. I made a horrible mistake in coming here. Yet I know I can never go back.*

*Loving Victor was the worst decision of my life. I got caught up in the fantastical language he used about a future that doesn't exist. I am a foolish woman, and I must pay the consequences. I do not know what will become of me. Perhaps I will die in this apartment in Manhattan, one that reeks of garbage.*

*December 14, 1950*

*It will be the most miserable Christmas. That is sure. I spent over an hour contemplating the heirloom necklace, marveling at its beauty and the sheer wealth behind it. I considered what money I could get from pawning it. Thousands? Millions? Then again, whatever pawnshop I wandered into probably couldn't give me what it's worth.*

*Listen to me. I nearly pawned a priceless heirloom. I must be insane.*

*Victor continues with his promises. He's so sure he's on the brink of discovering something incredible. Of becoming one of these wealthy Manhattan men we see on the street sometimes.*

*Oh, it's horrible listening to him. Sometimes, I can't stand it.*

*But worst of all, I've just learned something. Something that makes me want to run as far as I can away from him.*

*I'm pregnant. And I already hate this baby more than I can say. Whoever this baby is, they will eat me from the inside and take away the last of my strength.*

*Oh, England. How I ache for you.*

Maya continued to read for hours, flipping through pages, devouring her Grandma Diane's words. She couldn't believe the horrible thoughts of this woman, who'd given away her riches for love and then immediately regretted it. She was so haughty that Maya struggled to comprehend her.

In the diaries, Diane reported the birth of her first daughter, whom she named Veronica. It was clear from her words that she felt no love for the little baby, who needed her so. By then, her husband, Victor, had made a healthy mountain of wealth on "importing and exporting," but the wealth was still not enough for Diane. Diane wrote about pushing Victor further, reminding him of just how much she missed her "gorgeous" life back in England. She also wrote about hiring a nurse to do the majority of the childcare so that Diane could go back to "feeling and looking her best."

By the time baby Bethany arrived three years after Veronica, Victor had generated enough wealth to purchase the



estate in Hollygrove.

Of this, Diane wrote:

*June 3, 1955*

*The mansion is said to have been built two hundred years ago, which is nothing in England terms but incredibly ancient to Americans. The nurse has set up the nursery and the bedroom for Veronica and Bethany, and I've wandered the hallways, plotting decorations for each of the rooms. Victor is away on business yet again, and I've demanded that the nurse remain here to care for the children. Doing it alone always gives me the blues.*

*I wrote a long letter to my sister, Margot, back in England, telling her all about the mansion Victor purchased, as well as the tremendous wealth he's earned. I told her I'm living almost precisely the way we did back in England, but on my own terms. But when she wrote back, she didn't congratulate me whatsoever. Instead, she told me that our father is dead. This is information I don't know what to do with. I burned the letter immediately.*

*I knew when I left England that Victor would carve out space for us in this brand-new country. I knew we would make it work.*

Maya's stomach flipped over. This was the woman who'd raised her own mother? This was her grandmother?

When Maya had first given birth to Phoebe, she'd felt doubled over with love and surprise. She'd told Steve, over and over, "I don't know how I got so lucky. I just don't know."

But Diane spoke of her daughters as though they were necessary elements in life she wanted to brag about. She'd forced the nurse to raise them.

And the worst of it was as her daughters got older, it seemed that Diane pitted them against each other. It was as though she wanted to create another "competition" between them, just as she'd had with her sister, Margot.

Diane wrote:

*August 17, 1960*

*The girls are fighting down the hall. I can hear them screaming, and the sound is nostalgic to me, a reminder of those long-lost days with Margot. And I catch myself wanting to ignite this behavior. I know that this sort of competition and animosity creates strong and powerful individuals. I know that nothing wonderful comes from comfort.*

*For example, I gave little Bethany a beautiful doll with gleaming hair and big eyes.*

*But to Veronica, I gave nothing.*

*It was an experiment, I explained to Victor. And it's been marvelous to watch.*

*Veronica's jealousy mars her beautiful face. Bethany struggles, knowing she should share but understanding she's been "chosen" by me. She likes feeling chosen. She likes feeling more loved. And this has carved a dramatic distance between the girls. When, years ago, they cuddled close on the sofa together, reading, I knew it wouldn't be long till they found hatred in their hearts.*

*In this way, I mold beautiful yet top-thinking young women. In this way, I carve the future of the Albright name.*

Eventually, Maya slammed the diary closed and blinked through the darkness. She'd let the fire nearly die out, and she hurried to add logs to the flame. On her phone were fifteen messages from Brad, asking her if she was all right. He was worried about her.

MAYA: I'm fine. But I think I have a hunch as to why my mother didn't want contact with the Albrights anymore.

MAYA: I'm beginning to think this house is really haunted.

MAYA: Can you please come over?

BRAD: I'll be there in fifteen minutes.

BRAD: Sit tight.

## Chapter Seventeen

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**B**rad drove frantically to the Albright mansion, his heart in his throat. When he stomped up the porch steps, Maya flung the door open and threw her arms around him. She shook violently. Wordlessly, Brad took her hand in his and led her to the kitchen, where he brewed her a cup of tea. She looked weak and pale, and Brad asked if she'd eaten anything.

“I was too distracted,” she said, rubbing her temples.

Brad rummaged through the cabinets to find pasta and pesto sauce. In the fridge was fresh parmesan, which they'd used for another recipe last week. It was marvelous to feel that he and Maya had fallen into a sort of rhythm together. They shared groceries.

“It won't be long,” Brad assured her, touching her shoulder as the pasta boiled.

Maya sighed. Beside her was a stack of journals, which seemed to be the reason behind her fear. Over the phone, she'd said “haunted.” But she didn't actually mean “ghosts,” right? Even as he thought this, a gush of wind swelled over the big house, seeming to raise it up and drop it back down again.

Brad prepared two bowls of pesto pasta with fresh parmesan and poured them two glasses of wine. They sat on stools at the kitchen counter, facing the window, where spits of snow went past the window. It was the only thing they could see against the inky night sky.

Maya took a sip of wine and forked several pieces of penne, then closed her eyes. “This is delicious, Brad,” she offered. It seemed to take all her strength to smile. “It’s funny, isn’t it? Sometimes, you think the world is ending. But usually, you just need to eat something.”

Brad laughed. “That happens in second grade often. When kids are having a meltdown, I often have to pass them a granola bar and tell them to take a break.”

Color returned to Maya’s cheeks, and she took several more bites and another sip of wine. “I can’t stop thinking about Olivia,” Maya breathed, then winced. “I’m sorry. I really need to shut up about all this. You must be bored out of your mind!”

Brad put his fork down with a clank. “I’m not bored, Maya.” How could he explain it? She could never bore him. Ever.

Maya took another bite and chewed contemplatively.

“Are those diaries?” Brad dared to ask.

Maya nodded.

“From your Aunt Veronica?”

“My Grandma Diane,” Maya explained. “She left everything in England, including her inheritance and title, to come here with her fiancé, Victor. But she grew impatient and cruel with him. She’d romanticized being poor. But the reality was much different than she’d thought.”

“That’s a surprise.” Brad didn’t lay the sarcasm on too thick.

“I know.” Maya rolled her eyes slightly. “I can’t tell if she was always a sour woman or if the move to America made her that way. But after her daughters were born, she pitted them against each other. She wanted to strengthen them, apparently. But it just sounds very cruel.”

Brad knew the innermost workings of children’s hearts. It broke him up inside, thinking of a mother who would purposefully create this pain.

Maya and Olivia were a result of that suffering.

“I still haven’t made it to 1971,” Maya confessed. “I’m too tired. And Olivia won’t reach out to me, anyway. I feel like I’m in the middle of a horrible, dark labyrinth with no way out.”

Brad touched her thigh. “I’m here,” he reminded her. “And I’m not going anywhere. Just remember that.”

After dinner, Maya confessed to being “so exhausted, I could cry.” Brad said they should go to bed early. Upstairs, they changed clothes and cuddled in the darkness. Brad could feel Maya’s brain working overtime. It was as though the ghosts of the Albrights’ past wouldn’t let her rest.

“I have to find a way to explain everything to Olivia,” Maya muttered just before they both fell asleep. “I have to make her understand.”

\* \* \*

The next day, Brad pushed himself through a distracting morning and afternoon. Presumably, because she’d already done her damage with Olivia, Rainey kept her distance, only smirking at him from across the lunchroom, looking as though she owned him. Brad had half a mind to try to get her fired—although that wasn’t his way. They needed teachers. Too many left the profession as it was.

Maya texted infrequently throughout the day. Brad felt a dramatic distance between them, one he knew was a result of the diaries. Still, he wanted to go back to the coziness of that first day he’d slept over. He wanted the cleanliness and euphoria of that time.

Thaddeus texted him to grab coffee after work. Brad agreed, sensing he wouldn’t see Maya that evening. She needed space. If he was honest with himself, he knew better than to jump into romance so quickly. It was just that she was the closest feeling to “home” he’d felt since his wife died. He hated admitting that, but it was true.

Thaddeus was sitting at their usual coffee shop table with a slice of cake and a cappuccino before him. Brad ordered a carrot cake and an Americano and gave Thaddeus a side hug. Thaddeus looked chipper, but his smile immediately fell when he noted Brad's demeanor.

"What's up, man?"

Brad did his best to explain that he'd fallen head-over-heels with Maya. Also, Maya was going through a tumultuous time; his school was stressful, and Rainey had double-crossed him to get Olivia into the Albright mansion to steal from Maya. It was a mouthful, but Thaddeus listened with rapt attention.

"You know Veronica," Brad went on. "She's your client. Did she ever say anything about another heir to the Albright fortune?"

Thaddeus shook his head. "But Olivia was adopted as a baby. Legally, she was hardly ever an Albright."

"I assume that kind of language makes her even angrier," Brad said.

Thaddeus sipped his cappuccino, his eyes on the window. "And Maya wants Olivia in her life? Even after she stole right out from under her?"

Brad nodded. "Maya was alone for so much of her life. She'll take any family."

"And how do you feel about that?" Thaddeus offered Brad a soft smile. "As her boyfriend, I mean."

Brad's cheeks were hot. "You think it's too fast?"

"I think I haven't seen you care so deeply about someone like this in years," Thaddeus said. "And it gives me hope. That's all."

Brad cleared his throat, momentarily at a loss for words. "I can't begin to understand Olivia's full motivations for stealing," he said. "But if Maya wants to give her a chance, I have to stand by her decision. And protect her in any way I can."

After Thaddeus and Brad finished their coffee and cake, Thaddeus excused himself back to the office. They hugged a final time, and Brad felt a wave of gratitude for their friendship. There had been many years in which Thaddeus had been his only confidant. He'd seen him through the depths of despair and out again.

Brad walked through downtown after that, engaging with the Christmas decorations and pausing at a few street vendors for a hot wine and a falafel sandwich with peanut sauce. He ate at a stand-up table, watching passers-by, mostly visitors from the city who'd come to soak up Christmas charm. They spoke too loudly for the quaint village, as though traffic buzzed around them. But only one car came down the road in the span of fifteen minutes.

Brad tried to call Maya after he finished, but she didn't answer. Perhaps she was diving through more diaries; perhaps she was on the phone with Phoebe.

Or perhaps she just wanted time alone. That was okay. It had to be.

Brad didn't feel like going back to his dark, shadowy home alone. He'd grown accustomed to being with Maya, which allowed him to avoid his anxious thoughts. Now, he felt them creeping back up again. He decided to head to the local bar for a nightcap. After that, he'd head home, watch a few episodes of *The Office*, and go to bed early. There was just one more day of school before break. He could make it.

The little dive bar on the corner was hopping. People from the city had apparently read about the bar's "charm" and filled all the booths and high-tops. Brad took a stool along the bar, where the bartender, Nate, cracked his knuckles and greeted him by name. Brad ordered a beer and glanced at the basketball game on the nearest television. This was a fine way to spend his night alone.

"How's it going?"

Brad turned to find a well-dressed man, clearly from the city, addressing him a few stools away. He wore a tan peacoat and a turtleneck, which made him look like a villain in a



made-for-TV movie, and he had thick black hair and shimmering green eyes. His jawline could have cut through steak.

“Not bad,” Brad said, raising his glass to the stranger. “You traveling through for Christmas?”

“Something like that.” The man’s dimples deepened. “This is quite a funny little town, isn’t it?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Brad said. “I was born and raised here.”

The man laughed. “Were you! Hollygrove sounds like a made-up name. I drove up from the city this afternoon and could hardly believe my eyes when I got here. It’s like the set of a Christmas movie.”

“We take pride in that,” Brad said, grateful for this distraction. “Why’d you pick Hollygrove?”

The man chuckled. “Funny story. My girlfriend is the heir to an enormous inheritance here in Hollygrove. The plan is to bank on that and head back to the city.” He rubbed his first finger and thumb together as though he felt a wad of bills.

Brad’s heart dropped with the realization. This was Olivia’s boyfriend. He had to be tactical if he wanted to get closer to Olivia and ultimately bring Maya and Olivia together again.

“What’s your name?” Brad asked.

“Nick,” the man said, clapping Brad’s hand before shaking it.

“I’m Brad. A pleasure to meet you.” Brad moved aside to sit closer to him and inhaled a thick wave of Nick’s cologne. He couldn’t cough it up. He couldn’t insult him. “Tell me more about this inheritance,” he said.

“It’s wild, actually,” Nick said. “My girlfriend never had anything. She was always a mess, to tell you the truth. And she was devastated about it. Not that she spoke about it at length, but you could tell there was a hole here.” Nick gestured to his chest, where Olivia’s heart should have been.

“When did your girlfriend learn about this inheritance?” Brad asked, thinking already that he couldn’t wait to call Maya after this exchange.

“Just in the past month or so,” Nick said.

Inwardly, Brad cursed himself for ever having told Rainey about the Albright inheritance. Then again, if he hadn’t, Olivia and Maya never would have come back together again.

“How much is the inheritance?”

“Fifty million.” Nick wagged his eyebrows. “That’s a chunk of change, even by New York standards.”

Brad’s heart pounded. Despite his best intentions, he’d already begun to detest the arrogance of this man.

“Where is your girlfriend tonight?” Brad asked off-handedly. Maybe he could track Olivia down sooner than he’d planned.

Nick palmed the back of his neck, looking almost nervous. “That’s the thing. She doesn’t know I’m here.” He lowered his voice. “It’s a surprise.”

Brad arched his eyebrow. “Are you heading to her hotel after this?”

Nick cackled. “No way. Much better, my friend. Much better.” He slung back the rest of his whiskey cocktail. “Get this. Part of her inheritance is a mansion with something like fifty rooms. I looked at the plans of the house online and fell to my knees at the potential of the old place.”

Brad’s eyes were heavy with memories of the Albright mansion, which he’d already begun to think of as partially his. He knew that was foolish. It was jumping the gun. But his romantic heart had gotten the better of him.

“Anyway, she’s staying there right now,” Nick went on. “I imagine I can hole up there for a while until we figure out what to do. I’m a chef back in the city, so I can’t stay too long. But I have my sous chef handling things for now.”

Brad’s stomach dropped. He gaped at Nick, connecting the dots. Nick wasn’t Olivia’s boyfriend. Nick was, incredibly,

Maya's. He sucked down the rest of his beer, his head ringing like a gong. Maya. The woman he'd spent nearly every day sleeping next to for a week. This was her boyfriend. This was the man she'd said she was done with.

"Sounds good," Brad heard himself say. He needed to make sure. "What did you say your girlfriend's name is? Maybe I've met her."

"I doubt it," Nick said. "Her name is Maya. I imagine she's kept to herself since she's gotten here. She hates Christmas more than anything, and just walking through this town would freak her out."

Brad wasn't sure how he got out of there in one piece. One minute, he was saying goodbye to Nick and wishing him well, and the next, he was tearing down the sidewalk as winter wind blasted against his face. His eyes were heavy with tears. Although he'd only had one beer and a hot wine on the street earlier, he felt unstable, as though he couldn't trust his footsteps.

When he reached home, he locked the door behind him and collapsed on the couch. His heart thudded with dread.

Maya had told him her relationship with Nick was over. But their breakup had been recent. Brad knew enough about relationships to understand that feelings didn't just "go away" that quickly.

Had Maya contacted Nick that morning after Brad had left, asking him to drive up? Telling him she needed him? Or had Nick reached out to her late last night, as Brad had slept in her bed? Had he told her he still loved her? That he wanted to try again.

There were numerous possibilities. But the only thing Brad knew for sure was this: out of nowhere, his fledgling relationship with Maya had died. And his heart felt as though it was melting away to nothing. He wasn't sure what to live for now. But he had to find a way to get through.

## Chapter Eighteen

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It had taken Maya ages to find the strength to open her Grandma Diane's diaries again. Just as she had back in Nick's apartment in the city, she distracted herself with cleaning: scrubbing the countertops, vacuuming the library, and doing loads of laundry in the downstairs laundry room with its state-of-the-art machines. Twice, she reached out to Olivia, and once, she called Veronica's nursing home to see if she was well again. She didn't make contact. By the time Maya sat down with a mug of tea and the next diary, it was nightfall. She owed it to herself to keep reading, regardless of the heartache it brought her and how lonely she currently felt. And she resolved not to call Brad until tomorrow. She hated bringing him so deep into her darkness. She didn't want him to realize life had been easier without her.

Maya kept reading through the sixties. In the diaries, Grandma Diane spoke of her husband's tremendous wealth, of the grand piano she'd purchased and had delivered from France, and of her mother's death back in England. Diane wrote with the air of someone recording facts, without the emotionality behind the words. Frequently, she wrote about Veronica and Bethany as though they were pawns in the greater game of Diane's life. It was clear that Bethany was more the golden child in Diane's eyes; that Bethany was smarter and prettier than Veronica. Diane doted on her as much as a woman like Diane could possibly dote.

And then, in the summer of 1970, Bethany got her first boyfriend. And everything changed.

*July 19, 1970*

*My darling Bethany has fallen from grace. I heard her telling Veronica she's fallen in love with Peter Miller—the baker's boy—and that she wants to run away with him and start a family. Veronica laughed. "You're only fifteen!" she said, bless her.*

*I don't know what to do. I forbade Bethany from ever seeing Peter again, but of course, I cannot watch her every move. There's resentment in her eyes. She looks at me as though I'm tremendously cruel, her greatest enemy. I remember thinking of my father that way mere months before I stupidly left England with Victor.*

*I ache to think of Bethany making a similar mistake.*

Over the course of that year, Diane continually ranted about Peter Miller and Bethany's quaint, small-town romance. Several times, Veronica tried to convince Diane that Bethany's love was nothing to worry about. "*She'll grow out of it,*" Veronica said. But Diane was never sure.

And then, it happened. Bethany got pregnant. And Diane's worst fears were realized.

*December 11, 1970*

*My stupid daughter has ruined us. She's just sixteen years old, and she's pregnant with the baker's son's child.*

*I don't know what will become of us. I cannot have my family associated with the Miller family. Victor and I have worked too hard for too long.*

*Of course, when I asked Victor what to make of this, he hardly looked me in the eye. He cannot face realities the way I can. He's always been weak.*

In the journal, Maya read on with rapt horror. She read as her grandmother forced Bethany to stay home from school and never associate with her friends or classmates again. She read as Bethany grew more and more pregnant, lonely, and frightened. Diane forbade Veronica from speaking about Bethany's pregnancy to anyone. She also kept Bethany away

from the servants in the house to ensure that gossip didn't whip its way through Hollygrove.

In essence, she locked Bethany away until she gave birth.

And then she forced Bethany to give the baby up for adoption.

*November 8, 1971*

*Finally, the baby's cries no longer echo through the Albright House. The only sound I hear is Bethany weeping into her pillow down the hall. I tried to tell her this is a good thing. Now that the baby is gone, she can return to her normal life. She can go back to school. (As soon as she loses the baby weight, of course.) And she can be a wonderful pillar of our family and our community, just as we planned.*

*December 19, 1971*

*I don't know what's gotten into Bethany. She walks around the mansion like a ghost. Although she lost the baby weight almost immediately, she refuses to see anyone, not even her dearest friends. Veronica says she's "depressed." I see no reason for that. Bethany made a mistake; I handled it. I made it go away.*

Bethany's clear descent into depression continued for the course of a year. In the diary, Diane wrote that Bethany refused school, that she hardly left her bedroom, and that she'd gotten tremendously thin.

*September 22, 1971*

*Veronica is engaged to be married. Her fiancé is of good ilk. He's handsome and wealthy, and he has wonderful plans for his future. Veronica seems pleased, as well. Tonight, we gathered to celebrate at the dining room table. I commented on Veronica's fiancé's brother, mentioning that Bethany would be eighteen next year. Maybe we could arrange a date? But a moment later, Bethany threw her glass of wine to the ground. Shards of glass went in all directions. She was gone in a flash, ripping up the staircase like a monster.*

*I don't know what to do with that girl. I used to think she was the daughter who resembled me the most. Now, she's like*

*a stranger.*

By March of the following year, Bethany was gone.

The only mention Diane made was on March 18, 1973:

*Bethany left a note, but I've torn it up and burned it. Victor cried, and I called him a coward. We've lost a daughter— not in the traditional way, but in a way that shows just how weak she truly is. I hope wherever she is, she feels my disappointment. I hope she knows never to reach out for help. She won't receive it.*

Maya closed her eyes, imagining her mother at the age of eighteen, running away from home without a penny to her name. Bethany's escape echoed Diane's from the fifties when she'd left England. But without Bethany's diaries, there was no way to know what Bethany had been thinking.

Maya tried to put the pieces together. Bethany had married Maya's father at the age of twenty and given birth to Maya just a few months after the wedding. It stood to reason that Maya's father had helped Bethany escape. That, or Bethany had met him shortly after.

Maya hoped her father had offered a sense of home for Bethany. She prayed she'd felt the love she never had with Diane.

Feeling resigned and broken-hearted, Maya flipped through the next several years of Diane's diaries. She only ever referred to Veronica as her daughter and never once mentioned Bethany— not until 1981, the year Bethany died.

*December 27, 1981*

*The hospital sent word of our darling Bethany.*

*As I walk through the haunted halls of the Albright House, I can still hear her laughter.*

*She will always be with me. I will always know her.*

*I pushed her away. And now, she's gone forever.*

*I will always ache.*

Maya's eyes were heavy with tears. Abruptly, she closed the diary and stared at the hungry fire. This was the first "tender" diary entry Diane had made in decades. It was as though she'd finally recognized her own humanity, but it had been too late.

All Maya wanted in the world just then was to sit by the fire with Olivia beside her. She wanted to translate the horror of their family's past. She wanted to find forgiveness somewhere in this mess.

But when she picked up her phone, she couldn't bring herself to do anything but call Brad. It was past eleven at night, far beyond Brad's bedtime, and the phone rang and rang without answer. Maya ended the call and set the diaries to the side. She felt as though she'd exerted herself, as though she'd just run up an enormous hill and was peering out over a kingdom from the top. She'd discovered the truth of her life and explored her mother's trauma. But now, what could she do about it? She was lost.



## Chapter Nineteen

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**F**riday morning, Maya woke up at four in the morning, padded to the kitchen, and brewed a big pot of coffee. She waited expectantly for six AM to roll around, knowing that once Brad got up for his run, he would call her back. But six came and went—and Brad didn't reach out. Her heart flipped over in her chest. She needed human contact. The big mansion around her echoed.

Maya showered, did her hair and makeup, and drove to Hollygrove Elementary in time for bus drop-off. But after she parked the car a block away and headed back down the sidewalk, all the students were inside. She could see classrooms through the windows, children rubbing their eyes of sleep as their teachers got them to recite spelling words or tell stories. Maya reminded herself that school would let out in less than seven hours, at which time she could pluck Brad from the chaos of the elementary school, perhaps buy him a drink, and tell him everything.

That, and ask him about his day. Genuinely get to know him more. She'd been selfish, demanding so much of his empathy and time. She needed to give back.

Maya turned on her heel and strode downtown, her eyes on the garlands that hung from store to store, the sparkle of the heaps of snow, and the sharp steeples of the surrounding churches. She decided to head to the coffee shop for a scone and a cup of coffee, where she would regroup and think about how to contact Olivia and translate her newfound information.

That's when she heard her name bellowed out across Main Street.

Maya froze in recognition. For a split second, she thought maybe she was dreaming. That was the only explanation, wasn't it?

And then, she heard it again. "Maya! Wait up!"

There was no mistaking it. That was Nick's voice.

Maya turned around as Nick, dapper as ever in a tan pea coat, his hair fluffed up with the mousse he always used, his smile vibrant, swaggered toward her. She was immediately transported back to their first date, when he'd taken her to one of the most expensive oyster bars in New York City and said, "If you want to have a good time, baby, stick with me." He'd seemed like a character in a 1940s romantic film. She'd swooned.

"Nick?" Maya was breathless as he approached. "What are you doing here?"

For a moment, Maya let herself get swept up in the romance of it all. Nick Collins was the successful, handsome chef she'd met and fallen in love with five years ago. She'd lived with him for years. They'd traveled around the world together, to Paris, Rome, Bangkok, and Sydney. He'd once said, "I would have loved to have children with you, Maya. If only I hadn't met you too late in the game." And Maya had wept with love.

"Look at you," Nick said now, his cheeks bright red with chill. "You're beautiful."

Maya furrowed her brow with confusion. She glanced around downtown, trying to make eye contact with passers-by. Perhaps she should ask someone else if this was really happening. Maybe Nick was a mirage. Maybe she was about to communicate with nothing but air.

"How did you find me?" Maya demanded, trying to make her voice sound stern.

Nick's smile widened. He enjoyed this game. "I heard everything about you on the news."

Maya bristled, remembering the journalists who'd met her outside the Albright mansion. That, plus the story of Olivia and the heirloom necklace, had meant more media attention than Maya had ever dreamed of. It also meant a boost in blog traffic. And, apparently, a visit from Nick. But did she want that?

"Get a cup of coffee with me," Nick ordered in that authoritative way she'd once loved. "There's a great little stall at the Christmas market. I know you hate Christmas. But I promise. It's worth it."

*Hate Christmas?* Maya had all but forgotten that was a part of her personality. She'd been swaddled in Christmas celebrations for weeks.

Maya was wordless as they walked toward the little Christmas market, where the stalls remained from the festival. That had been two weeks ago, but it felt more like two years. Had Veronica known Maya would fall into the past like this? Had that been a part of her plan?

Nick greeted the man at the coffee stall with his city swagger and asked for two cappuccinos.

"Hey there, Maya!" Ben, the coffee manager, greeted her warmly, his eyes still on Nick. "Who's your friend?"

"This is Nick. He's in from the city," Maya said, her voice wavering. She was suddenly fearful that Ben would make a beeline for the elementary school and tell Brad what she was up to.

"Hopefully to stay for a while," Nick said, winking at Maya. "I heard a rumor about a mansion around these parts. Do you know anything about that?" he asked Ben.

Ben laughed nervously and handed over the cappuccinos. "You stay warm this morning," he ordered, refusing to answer Nick's question. "It's not even twenty degrees."

Maya and Nick fell into step beside one another, wandering through downtown. On the one hand, this felt like the most normal thing in the world: Maya, in step with her love, Nick, drinking a cup of coffee. On the other, Maya had

grown exponentially since Nick had kicked her out of their apartment.

Maya stalled on the sidewalk and blinked up at him. She blurted, “What about your new girlfriend?”

Nick took the question in stride. “It didn’t work out.”

“I see.”

“I called you,” Nick said. “I wanted to explain.”

Maya’s head throbbed. She hadn’t fielded any calls from Nick. She had a vague memory of Phoebe “blocking” Nick on Maya’s cell phone, calling it the single greatest way to get over someone. That meant he couldn’t call her at all. Maya had been too out of her mind to notice or care.

“I made a mistake,” Nick continued, as the wind ripped between them, tossing Nick’s perfect hair. Somehow, this made it even more aesthetically pleasing, which didn’t seem fair.

“Did you know I have a sister?” Maya asked.

Nick flinched. He sipped his cappuccino as though he waited for the perfect response to fall into his mind. When it didn’t, he said, “That mansion must be really something. And Maya! Fifty million! Think of everything we can do with fifty million! Think of all the pasta we can eat in Rome! Think of the apartment we can buy in Manhattan!”

Maya’s throat closed up. She blinked at him, realizing that a part of her had hoped for this; she’d ached for him to realize he was making a mistake. To know that he’d thrown something good away too soon.

“And that’s not all,” Nick went on. “Remember my contact at *The Restaurant* magazine?”

Maya vaguely remembered Nick’s editor friend at the food magazine—a man with a greasy mustache and a belly that showed appreciation for decadent food. “I think so?”

“He said he’d hire you on the spot,” Nick said, smacking his thigh. “He always adored your food critic writing, and he couldn’t believe you were out of a job. I even showed him

your blog, and he went gaga over it. Apparently, you reviewed a little bagel place on the Lower East Side that he's obsessed with."

Maya felt as though New York City was an imaginary place, as though she'd never been there her entire life.

"He said you could start in January," Nick went on. "And he's willing to pay even more than *Food & Drink* ever did. How about that?"

Maya's heart pounded. This was it: her dream to return to New York City, to food writing, and to Nick, her love. It was all right there, waiting for her. Why was she hesitant?

Suddenly, her phone buzzed in her purse. It felt like a lifeline, and she raced to answer it. "Hello?"

"Maya Waters? This is the Hollygrove Nursing Home."

Maya's heartbeat quickened. Her immediate fear was that Veronica had died, that she'd missed her chance at meeting the only family member who actually wanted something to do with her.

Instead, the woman on the line said, "I'm happy to report that your Aunt Veronica is back up and around this morning. She's been asking about you. Do you have time to come by this afternoon to say hello?"

"Yes. I can be there right away."

"Visiting hours aren't till one," the woman said.

"Thank you," Maya stuttered. "See you soon."

Maya hung up and gazed up at Nick. He was looking at her the way he looked at a perfect steak he'd just cooked, as though he was tremendously proud of what he'd done in the kitchen. She wasn't sure she wanted to be his project anymore. Then again, the idea of refusing Nick's love felt impossible. Her love for him was bludgeoned and bruised, but it was still there, hovering behind her heart.

"I have to go," Maya said. "There's a family emergency."

Nick cocked his head. "I can come with you. Whatever it is, you shouldn't do it alone. Let's go."

"No," Maya insisted. "I have to go alone."

Something like fear passed over Nick's face. It had perhaps occurred to him that winning wouldn't come so easily to him this time.

"Have dinner with me tonight," Nick ordered. "There's an okay-looking Italian place around the corner. We can, you know, talk. About everything." He paused and looked meek for a moment. "I can explain myself better. Please, let me."

Maya stuttered. She was caught completely off-guard. "All right," she said, stepping away from him.

"Meet me at seven-thirty," he instructed. "I'll wait for you as long as I have to, Maya. I know you're the one."

## Chapter Twenty

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Maya pulled up outside the Hollygrove Nursing Home at twelve-forty-five and sat in stunned silence until visiting hours began. She tried to call Phoebe, but Phoebe was busy with a work meeting and didn't answer. This meant Maya was left to stew alone.

Nick had tracked her down. Nick was still in love with her.

Her stomach throbbed as the realization took hold of her. Unfortunately, Nick's return made more sense than anything else. Maya was potentially fifty million dollars richer than she'd been back in New York City. Nick was a man who dictated his life with wealth and fame. Now that Maya had both in spades, he wanted a piece of the action again.

Oh, that hurt her heart to think about. But it was true. She knew it in the belly of her soul.

Maya signed into the visitor's book and followed a nurse through the hallways of the nursing room, her nose filled with the smell of medicine, cleaning supplies, and starchy foods. With each step, Maya reminded herself that she was about to meet her aunt for the first time. Everything felt unreal.

Veronica Albright's suite was the most regal room Maya had ever seen in a nursing home. A large mahogany wardrobe sat near the window, gleaming in the light that streamed through the drapes, and an ornate couch with a floral pattern was pushed against the wall beneath a painting of a little girl guiding a sheep through the woods. A television was off and

pushed into the corner, as though Veronica didn't want anyone to know she deigned to watch television, and a bookshelf was featured on the wall nearest the door, laden with what had to be three hundred books. Maya stood in the doorway for a second, frozen with fear, then rapped gently on the doorframe. "Ms. Albright?" she said quietly.

A shadow peeked out from the kitchenette. "I'm here, honey. Just one moment." The tap in the kitchen ran, and then, a very old woman smaller than five feet walked delicately into the living room. Veronica had a froth of white hair, slender shoulders, thin hips, and long fingers. She probably weighed no more than ninety-five pounds.

Still, Maya could see the young woman in the photographs back at the mansion in this woman's face. They had the same twinkle in their eyes. The smile that played out across Veronica's lips was similar to the childlike one Maya had seen in the photos of young Veronica and young Bethany.

"Look at you," Veronica said, walking slowly toward her. "You look just like Bethany."

Maya's throat tightened. She wanted to refute this; she wanted to remind Veronica that Bethany had died at the age of twenty-six. Maya had been allowed to live twenty-two years longer than her mother.

"You do," Veronica insisted, as though she sensed Maya's rebuttal. "Your eyes, nose, and mouth are the same. And something about your posture." Veronica tapped her chin with a single finger as her eyes widened.

Maya still hadn't said anything. She took a small step forward, feeling foolish. For weeks, all she'd wanted was to throw her arms around this woman.

Veronica walked the rest of the way to the cushioned chair by the window and sat. She motioned to the couch beside her, urging Maya to join her. Maya's mouth was dry.

"Thaddeus tells me you put on quite a show," Veronica said as Maya settled in.



“The festival was wonderful,” Maya said, her voice wavering. “Everyone in town helped me out.”

“I heard a special elementary school teacher stepped in to pick up the slack,” Veronica went on.

Maya’s stomach flipped over. Something in her face betrayed her, and Veronica chuckled.

“As you already know, after your brief time here, people gossip all over Hollygrove,” Veronica explained. “And sons and daughters come into Hollygrove Nursing Home and do some more gossiping with their parents, who spread that gossip around here. You see, we know everyone who’s everyone in Hollygrove. We don’t just gossip about people. We analyze who they are based on their parents, their relationships, and their careers. We spend hours discussing why people are the way they are. It’s more like a literary analysis than anything.”

Maya tried to loosen into her aunt’s joke and laughed gently.

“I had Brad Turner in class, you know,” Veronica said.

“He told me.”

Veronica smiled. “He was a wonderful child. So helpful. So sensitive. When he told me he wanted to be a teacher, I went back home and wept into my pillow. It seemed too good to be true that I’d had a hand in molding Brad Turner’s mind.”

“He’s the best man I’ve ever met,” Maya said quietly, surprising herself with how earnest she sounded. She genuinely believed it.

Maya flinched and crossed her ankles. She knew she needed to ask Veronica about some deep-held secrets in the Albright family. But she didn’t know how to begin.

“I heard about the necklace,” Veronica said as though she read Maya’s mind. Her eyes clouded.

Maya nodded. Somehow, she didn’t want to tattle on Olivia for stealing it.

“Olivia is my sister,” Maya said with a tired shrug. “I didn’t know about her at all until a few days ago. And I don’t know what to do about it. It’s clear she hates the Albright family. By extension, she hates me. I don’t know if I’ll ever get that necklace back. And maybe that doesn’t matter anymore. Not now that I know about all of this.”

Veronica wet her lips. Her eyes stirred with sorrow. “My mother’s rage after Bethany’s pregnancy still echoes through everything,” she began. She touched her ear and added, “Sometimes, I can still hear her yelling in my head. Bethany was her favorite child— her prettiest daughter. She had great expectations for her. Oh, but it was terrible. Bethany was just a girl. And all at once, it was as though her mother no longer loved her.”

Maya swallowed the lump in her throat. “Did you know my mother was going to run away?”

“She stopped speaking to me around the time of your sister’s birth.”

“Her name is Olivia,” Maya reminded her.

“Olivia,” Veronica echoed. “That must have been chosen by the adoptive parents. Your mother wasn’t allowed to name her. And she wasn’t allowed to talk about the baby after she left.”

Maya’s heart cracked.

“When I heard your mother had run away, I wasn’t surprised,” Veronica went on. Her face was pale. “But I was broken about it. I didn’t leave the house for many weeks. I could hear my mother down the hall, alternating between screaming and crying. She lost about thirty pounds very quickly. I think she knew it was her fault for chasing Bethany away. It took her ages to figure out how to carry the weight of that.

“I was married not long after that,” Veronica went on, “and my husband moved into the Albright mansion. My father was very sick, and my mother needed company. I was afraid that if we abandoned her altogether, she would never come out of

there again. Sometimes, my mother pressed me for a child. She wanted us to extend the line. She always told me that her blood was ‘royal.’ But it was hard to imagine this broken, lonely woman as a royal.” Veronica sniffed.

“Eight years after Bethany ran away, we received a letter announcing that Bethany had died in a car accident on Christmas Day. Father was already dead, but Mother crumpled to the ground, wailing. My husband carried her to her bedroom. She didn’t leave it for another few months. By then, she was so weak that I knew she was about to die.” Veronica’s eyes glistened with tears. “She went into fits of rage and sorrow, frequently repeating Bethany’s name. Until she no longer had the energy. She died the next summer. My husband said she was finally free— mostly from herself. Gosh, she could be a nasty woman. She never really knew how to love.”

Veronica whisked a tear from her cheek and gave Maya a tentative smile.

“We knew about you,” Veronica went on. The words were like a knife through Maya’s heart. “There was so much chaos that winter, spring, and summer, and my husband and I didn’t know what to do. After my mother died, I made a phone call to the county authorities where Bethany died. They said I could, of course, come to Pennsylvania to speak to your adoptive parents.”

Maya’s heartbeat had slowed to such a degree that she felt nearly unconscious. Was this really happening?

“It’s no excuse,” Veronica went on, her eyes on the window. “I fell into a horrible depression that autumn. I suffered two miscarriages. And I fought with my husband continually. I thought to myself, why would I bring Maya here? To this horror? Isn’t it better to break the familial cycles and allow her to be free from the Albright curse?”

Maya furrowed her brow.

“I hope you’ll believe me,” Veronica whispered. “I imagined bringing you to that mansion and revealing the darkness that lurked at the heart of our family. I imagined it would completely alienate you.”

Maya remembered her adoptive parents and siblings and how much they'd hated her. She'd been their curse. And it had tainted her life forever.

Veronica pressed a handkerchief over her face and sighed deeply into it. Maya was speechless. Here this woman was, so many years after the events of the past. Everyone she'd ever loved was now dead.

"Your mother and I adored Christmas," Veronica continued, removing the handkerchief. "It felt needlessly cruel that she'd died that day."

"I've never celebrated it," Maya said quietly.

"It's been a struggle for me," Veronica said. "But it's part of the reason I threw myself into the Christmas Festival every year. I wanted to honor Bethany's memory." She paused. "It's, of course, part of the reason I wanted you to plan it. We have to help Bethany live on."

"You know so much more about her than I ever did."

Veronica bowed her head. "I'll tell you everything. She was my sister. She was my dearest friend. And I miss her every single day, even so many years later."

Maya's heart felt bruised. She glanced at the door, aching to return to her car and drive as quickly as she could away from here.

But before she left, she needed to ask one final thing.

"Do you have any advice about Olivia?" Maya forced her eyes back to Veronica.

Veronica tilted her head. "You don't need to worry about the necklace," she said softly. "If it's gone, it's gone."

But Maya shook her head. She didn't care at all about the necklace, about its worth or its memories. "I just want to talk to Olivia," she stuttered. "I want to explain everything you've just told me. I want her to know Bethany as well as she can. It wasn't our fault, what happened in the past. And it seems reckless to throw this all away."

Veronica smiled sadly. “I can’t help but feel that my mother is still working her dark magic so many years later. Perhaps she’s keeping you and Olivia apart.”

“I don’t believe in dark magic,” Maya said softly. “But I do believe in forgiveness and rebirth.”

Veronica raised her shoulders. “Then it seems the curse of the Albright family really is broken,” she said after a pause. “And maybe you and Olivia can find a way to come together again.”

Maya was exhausted. She wanted to drive back to that cursed mansion, fall into bed, and sleep for the rest of the day.

“If you do find her,” Veronica went on. “Will you please bring her here?”

Maya nodded and took one of Veronica’s small hands in hers. Loneliness echoed from Veronica’s eyes. “I’ll bring her,” she said. “We’ll find a way to be together after all this time. I promise.”

## Chapter Twenty-One

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On the drive back downtown, tears filled Maya's eyes, making the snow-capped world around her blurry. She gripped the steering wheel of Phoebe's car, her heart pounding, and eventually pulled over to the side of the road to clean herself up. The story Veronica had imparted rippled through her. It seemed impossible that so much darkness had permeated at the edges of her life since her birth. And now, she was here in Hollygrove— forced to reckon with the mistakes from the past. Was she strong enough? Again, she tried to call Phoebe, but Phoebe didn't answer and immediately wrote back that she was with Henry; they were going over a contract to buy an apartment. A flash of happiness came over Maya. Phoebe wasn't an Albright. She was a happy, confident young woman. She was okay.

Maya was overcome with the desire to go to Brad's elementary school and tell him everything. She wanted to burrow her face in his chest. She needed him to tell her what to do next. He was the voice of reason in her life.

Maya drove the rest of the way to the elementary school and parked on the street behind the old brick building. School was letting out. Children scampered from all exit doorways, yelping as they darted through the chilly air. It was the perfect time to approach Brad on bus duty beneath the eggshell blue sky. There, surrounded by happy children, Maya's familial sorrows wouldn't feel so heavy.

Maya walked around the building and spotted Brad right away. Her heart lifted, and she charged toward him,

revitalized. But when he spotted her, his eyes were glazed, and he took a step away from her. A child distracted him, tugging at his sleeve, and he dropped down to give him his full attention. Maya waited off to the side until he was finished, watching his face as he helped his student.

“Hey,” Maya said when he was finished, her voice cracking.

Brad shoved his hands into his pockets. He looked at her as though he’d never seen her before.

“I just met my aunt,” Maya said, drawing nearer. Maybe he’d had a bad day. Maybe she could carry the weight of his problems, too.

“I’m glad she’s doing better,” Brad said stiffly.

Maya tilted her head. “Are you okay?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Brad dropped down to talk to another student. His movements were all wrong, jagged. This was the man who’d spent most nights of the week in Maya’s bed. They’d moved too quickly. He’d probably realized she was a stranger. Maybe he needed space to think.

“Do you want to get a cup of coffee?” Maya asked.

Brad arched his eyebrow. “I promised Thaddeus I’d help him with something. Rain check?” He said it as though they were barely friends. As though they’d met in passing once or twice. “I have to run. Ms. Michaels? Are you okay with taking the rest of the bus duty?” He turned to address the other teacher, who grinned mischievously at Maya.

*What was going on?*

Brad fled the scene before either of them could say another word. May shifted nervously as the winter wind ripped against her coat. Something in Rainey’s expression gave her pause. Had she said something to Brad? Had she somehow destroyed the love building between them?

Maya had underestimated Rainey from the very beginning. It was because of Rainey that Olivia had come into Maya’s

life. And it was now probably Rainey's fault that Brad ran away from Maya at full speed.

"Rainey," Maya blared. Her tone was angry. "Can I talk to you?"

Rainey kept that horrible smile plastered on her face. She approached, bouncing as she walked.

"How are you, Maya?" Rainey asked, using her teacher's voice.

"You're friends with Olivia, aren't you?" Maya didn't want to beat around the bush.

Rainey blinked. "We've been friends for thirty years. That's how I know the tremendous pain your family has caused her."

Maya's heart thumped. "Rainey. I need to talk to Olivia."

Rainey's smile fell slightly.

"It's really important," Maya continued, her eyes smarting. Now that Brad had rebuked her, her emotions were spiraling out of control. "You have to understand, Rainey. I grew up all alone in an adoptive family who resented me. I never thought I had anyone. But I've just been given a tremendous gift. Not the mansion. I could take that or leave it." Maya cleared her throat. "But I now know I have a sister. It's beyond my wildest dreams. And I really, really need to talk to her."

Rainey's smile was now completely gone, replaced with a grimace.

"Please, Rainey," Maya begged. "If I had known about her, I would have shared the inheritance without a second thought. Whatever opinion you have of me, it's wrong. I just want a family. I want love." Tears fell from Maya's eyes.

Rainey rolled her eyes slightly and stared out beyond the parking lot, where the sun flirted with the tops of barren trees. Maya remembered the first day they'd met, how Rainey had sized her up, viewing her as the obstacle between herself and Brad and whatever happiness she'd imagined for them.



*We are tied up in our fantasies*, Maya thought now. She thought of her Grandma Diane, who'd assumed she was fleeing England in pursuit of a happier, gorgeous time in the United States. She'd been wrong. There was just more life over here. And life was always messy.

"She's across town," Rainey announced, still unable to look Maya in the eye. "The Nettle Creek Bed and Breakfast. I told her to get out of town a few days ago. She has what she came here for." She swallowed. "I don't know what she's waiting for."

But Maya knew. She understood, now, that Olivia had been working from a script she'd written for herself before ever coming to Hollygrove. Her plan had been to come here and "ruin" the Albright family. But there was emptiness in that destruction.

Maybe Olivia would welcome Maya. Maybe they would find a way to break through the horrors of the past. Maybe, one day, they would find a way to call one another "sister." But Maya had to find the bravery to approach her and explain everything. That would take all the strength she had left.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

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Maya walked to Nettle Creek Bed and Breakfast, tugging her winter hat lower over her ears and allowing tears to draw lines down her cheeks. The walk was no more than twenty minutes, but it felt more like hours. Frequently, people she'd met at the Christmas Festival passed by, waving happily, greeting Maya by name. Maya hardly heard herself interact with them. She was in another world.

The Nettle Creek Bed and Breakfast was yet another beautiful Upstate New York Victorian home, yet slightly smaller than the one where Felicity and Conor took their guests. Maya paused at the front steps and peered through the window at the owner of the bed and breakfast, who worked diligently in the front kitchen, slicing tomatoes. Through the window to the right, the bed and breakfast's Christmas tree gleamed beautifully.

Maya realized, then, that the Albright Mansion needed a Christmas tree for the holiday season. It would be her first Christmas tree since the age of six.

Maya knocked on the front door and heard the noise echo through the enormous house. Footsteps came closer and closer until the innkeeper opened the door and smiled. Her fingers were stained from the tomatoes.

"Good afternoon," Maya said. "My name is Maya. Is Olivia around?"

“Olivia? I believe she’s in her room,” the woman said.  
“Won’t you come in?”

Maya followed the innkeeper through the foyer and into the living room, where a fire crackled happily in the fireplace, reflecting its light upon the Christmas baubles on the tree. Maya sat on the couch as the innkeeper traipsed upstairs.

“Olivia? Someone is here to see you!” the innkeeper announced. Maya was grateful she didn’t say her name. Olivia might have avoided her.

A minute later, Olivia appeared at the bottom of the staircase and stared at Maya as though she were a ghost. Maya stood abruptly and stared back. Now that she knew who Olivia was, there was no mistaking that they looked like sisters.

Even the innkeeper suggested it as she headed back to the kitchen. “Are you family? You could be twins!”

“We are,” Maya announced, sounding braver than she felt.  
“Aren’t we, Olivia?”

Olivia remained silent. As soon as the innkeeper disappeared into the kitchen again, Olivia spoke very quietly.  
“How did you find me?”

Maya sighed. “I’ve been calling you all week.”

“And I haven’t answered. For a reason.”

“I understand.” Maya swallowed the lump in her throat. Stubbornness marred Olivia’s face. “Will you sit with me? I promise I won’t take up too much of your time. But if I don’t say a few things to you, I’ll regret it forever.”

Olivia stumbled toward the chair opposite the couch, sitting as far away from Maya as she could. She crossed her hands over her lap and looked Maya directly in the eye. It was like looking in a mirror.

“Can I ask you a question?” Maya asked, surprising herself.

Olivia raised her shoulders.

“How did you find the necklace? I looked all over for it. I couldn’t find it anywhere.”

Olivia’s cheeks were pale. “I don’t know if I should tell you.”

“I don’t need it,” Maya assured her. “Now that I know the truth about the Albrights— and about you— I don’t care about the money at all.”

This seemed beyond Olivia’s comprehension. She squinted at Maya.

From Maya’s purse, she retrieved the photograph of Bethany and baby Olivia, taken so long ago. She handed it to Olivia, her heartbeat pounding in her ears. Olivia handled the photograph as though it were about to explode. For a long time, she stared at it. Tears spilled from her eyes.

“I couldn’t make sense of this photograph when I first found it,” Maya went on. “But then, I found your adoption papers and our Grandmother Diane’s diaries.”

Olivia forced her eyes back to Maya’s.

“She was a truly horrible woman,” Maya said, her voice cracking. “I don’t say this lightly. It seems like she locked our mother away when she got pregnant with you and then made her give you up for adoption. After that, she was somehow surprised and broken-hearted when our mother ran away.”

The words “our mother” rang in the air between them.

Olivia swallowed and put the photograph on her lap. “But why? Why didn’t our mother come look for me?”

“Maybe she did,” Maya said. “I’m guessing our grandmother never told her where you were. Maybe she never stopped looking for you.” She paused, bringing Bethany’s face back to her mind’s eye. “I can’t imagine she ever did. The woman I knew, the mother I knew, loved powerfully.”

Olivia shook her head. “I don’t know what to say. I can’t make sense of any of it. Ever since I was a teenager, I’ve known I was an Albright...”

“But by then, our mother was already gone,” Maya whispered.

Olivia rubbed her eyes as though she were a child. “And you were there. With her, I mean.”

“I was only six years old when she died,” Maya said. “I hardly remember her.”

“But you remember some things.”

Maya nodded and continued to rack her mind for memories. The few she had had sustained her for forty-two years—and she gave them to Olivia, now, knowing they were like fuel.

“She loved Christmas,” Maya said softly. “Even when I was really, really little, I remember sitting on Mom’s lap and gazing up at the Christmas tree. She spent a lot of time making it perfect. I remember my dad lifting me up and pretending to ballroom dance with me as Mom played Christmas records. She had the very best cookie recipes. One Christmas, when I was four or five, I remember eating too many and getting very sick. She stayed up with me by the fire, telling me stories. She must have been so angry with herself for letting me eat too many.” Maya chuckled sadly.

Olivia closed her eyes as though she could imagine the scenes. As though the Christmas tree at the Nettle Creek Bed and Breakfast was the same one their mother had decorated all those years ago.

“I was adopted by our neighbors after my parents’ death,” Maya went on. “They were Christians, and they wanted to do the right thing, but I knew they resented me. And they could never bring themselves to love me. I grew up confused about who I was and my place in the world. And in many ways, that’s affected who I am all the way through adulthood.”

Olivia’s lower lip quivered. “I feel the same.”

The sisters were quiet. Maya ached to tell her everything Veronica had imparted just that afternoon. But something in Olivia’s eyes told her there would be time for that. Later. Maya just had to be patient.

“Wait here,” Olivia ordered. She disappeared upstairs and returned with the heirloom necklace, which glinted ominously. Maya remembered it from all those family photographs, and her heart skipped a beat as she held it.

Then again, it was only a necklace. It was only a few pieces of rock.

“Our Grandma Diane stole this necklace when she ran away from her family in England,” Maya said softly.

Olivia shivered. “It scared me to wear it. Even though I didn’t fully know the backstory, it felt haunted.”

Maya handed the necklace back to Olivia and raised her chin. Olivia looked surprised to have it back, as though she’d still expected Maya to pocket it and flee the bed and breakfast.

“About ten years ago, I befriended one of the maids who worked at the Albright mansion,” Olivia said. “When I told her about my relationship with the Albrights, she told me where they kept the heirloom necklace. She said she would never steal it for me herself because she was too frightened—but that if I ever made it inside, I could take it.”

This amazed Maya. Olivia had been planning this theft for years. When Maya had arrived in Hollygrove, she’d started up a chain of events that had led Olivia and Maya here.

“There’s a safe behind the wardrobe in the second bedroom on the third floor,” Olivia went on. “Before her death, it was Grandma Diane’s office.”

Maya nodded, remembering the room. She hadn’t been able to pull aside every piece of furniture. More than that, she hadn’t cared to. The necklace hadn’t mattered enough. Her real quest had been discovering the truth of her family.

“What is your plan, now?” Olivia asked softly.

Maya raised her shoulders. “I don’t know. What’s yours?”

Tears shimmered down Olivia’s cheeks. She turned and gazed at the Christmas tree, lost in thought.

“The inheritance,” Maya began quietly. “It’s half yours.”

Olivia arched her eyebrow as though she still didn't believe Maya.

Maya raised both hands. "Fifty million is more money than I know what to do with."

Olivia bowed her head. "It's strange. I thought the money was all I wanted— that and recognition as an Albright. But now that you're offering it to me, the idea of all that cash makes me feel resigned." Olivia rubbed her neck. "Of course, I'll take it. I've struggled with money my entire life, and I've turned into a resentful person because of it. But to be honest with you, Maya." She raised her eyes toward Maya and stared at her with longing. "I'm realizing now that all I really want is a sister. Someone to call when times get tough. Or— more than that— someone to celebrate with. Someone to invite to my birthday party. Someone who looks so much like me and who seems to see the world in the same way."

Maya's throat was tight with sorrow. She stood and cleared the distance between herself and Olivia, taking her hand. "Why didn't you tell me when we first met?"

"I keep asking myself the same thing," Olivia whispered. "I assumed you'd be like the rest of the Albrights. Greedy. Pompous." She shrugged. "I assumed you wouldn't believe me."

"On the contrary. Even if you were lying right now about being my sister, I'd welcome it. Even though I was adopted, my adoptive siblings refused to call me their sister. But here you are, yelling that we're related across the rooftops. How can I refuse?"

Olivia laughed and wrapped her arms around Maya. Maya's heart flipped over. In her mind's eye, she imagined herself and Olivia in another dimension— living their girlhoods alongside one another. How different would Maya have been if she'd had an older sister? How differently would she have treated her friends? What decisions would she have made? Would she have respected herself and her heart more?

When their hug broke, Maya blinked away tears and laughed at herself. "I'm sorry," she said. "I feel a little

foolish.”

“Not as foolish as me,” Olivia said.

Maya and Olivia smiled curiously at one another. Now that they’d been given the gift of one another, they didn’t know what to say.

And then, Maya stuttered with a thought. “I have to meet my boyfriend for dinner.”

“Your boyfriend?” Olivia smiled. “Brad, you mean?”

Maya closed her eyes as her thoughts swirled. “Nick. He’s technically my ex-boyfriend. But he came all the way to Hollygrove to tell me he’s still in love with me. He wants me to come back to Manhattan. He even offered me my dream job.”

Olivia tilted her head thoughtfully. “You sound doubtful.”

Maya stared at the Christmas tree. Her sister wanted to give her advice about her relationships. This was beyond her wildest dreams.

“When did you break up with Nick?” Olivia asked.

“He broke up with me about a month ago.” Shame stirred in her stomach. “He said he met someone else.”

“What a coincidence that he comes right around the time you’re set to inherit fifty million dollars,” Olivia offered.

“Twenty-five million,” Maya corrected with a wry smile.

“I’ve only interacted with you and Brad a couple of times,” Olivia said softly. “But the way you looked at one another was so generous and loving.”

“It felt generous and loving.”

Olivia raised her shoulders. “Don’t you owe yourself a fresh start with someone like that?”

Maya’s heart thudded. She knew her sister was right.



## Chapter Twenty-Three

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Maya convinced Olivia to move her things to the Albright mansion that afternoon. After another soul-affirming hug, Olivia raced to the second floor of the Nettle Creek Bed and Breakfast to pack as Maya turned on her heel and strode back into the sunny streets. The bright blue sky had begun to dim, and spindly trees cast their shadows across heaps of snow.

Maya's dinner with Nick wasn't for another two hours. Maya alternated between running to Brad's house and telling him everything—and spending the next chunk of time alone to think. As temperatures on the street dipped, she scurried back to the coffee shop Brad had first taken her to weeks ago, where she ordered a cup of coffee and a slice of pistachio cheesecake from Cynthia, the woman behind the counter. As Cynthia slid the piece of cake onto a plate, she gave Maya a huge smile and said, “Brad is one of a kind. You're lucky.”

Maya's heart pumped. Now that she'd made amends with Olivia, she'd begun to experience that afternoon with Brad on a loop. He'd looked at her as though she were nothing to him, as though he'd decided she was trash.

“He really is,” Maya said.

Maya took her coffee and cake to the corner. Right on cue, Phoebe called her back, all but shrieking with excitement.

“We bought the apartment, Mom!” Phoebe cried. “It's happening! The next step of my life!”

Maya's smile hurt her face. "That's brilliant news, honey." She waited expectantly, hoping Phoebe would end with a pregnancy announcement.

Instead, Phoebe said: "Henry and I have been so focused on our careers the past few years. But now that we have the apartment, we're opening ourselves up to other stories. Other lives." She paused, and Maya could practically see her grinning into the receiver. "I want to be a mother, Mom. But doing that terrifies me a bit. Great Grandma Diane was so heinous and unloving. And that hatred was passed down through generations. I don't know what to make of it." She paused. "What if some of Great-Grandma Diane's personality is in me?"

Maya closed her eyes, lost in a swell of love for her daughter. "The fact that you're asking that is proof you're nothing like her," she said. "Diane thought of no one but herself—until her actions had consequences. You were always such an empathetic child. So open-hearted. So wonderful." Maya's eyes filled with tears. "You'll be a fantastic mother, Phoebe. Don't second-guess yourself. Go with your instincts."

Phoebe's voice was filled with tears. "I love you, Mom."

"I love you, too." Maya stuttered, amazed at the words she prepared to say. "Would you and Henry like to come to Hollygrove for Christmas?"

"You want to celebrate Christmas this year?"

"More than anything," Maya said. "I think it's finally time to start."

\* \* \*

Maya put on lipstick in the bathroom of the coffee shop and gave herself a brief yet impactful pep talk.

"You loved Nick Collins," she told her reflection. "You loved him with your whole heart and mind and spirit. And he rebuked you." She took a deep breath. "Stay strong."

Remember all you've learned over the past few weeks. You're different."

Growth was the only thing that mattered. And Maya had grown in spades since her drive up from Manhattan.

Maya reached the Italian restaurant at seven-twenty-eight, two minutes before Nick had told her to come. The ambiance of the restaurant was warm and inviting, with nearly every table filled with Hollygrove locals sipping red wine and talking about their days. Cheeks were ruddy from the chilly air, and candles flickered. Just as Maya approached the hostess to ask if Nick was there yet, she heard his voice, animalistic and louder than anyone else's in the restaurant.

"I'm sorry. You don't have a chianti on the entire wine list?" Nick demanded.

Maya peeked around the hostess table to see Nick at a table near the corner. He glared up at his waiter, a guy no older than twenty-two, who sputtered with fear.

"Do you have any recommendations? Something from the Aix-en-Provence region, perhaps?" Nick blared.

The waiter had probably never heard of the Aix region, let alone been to France. Maya's heart went out to him.

But privately, she was grateful to have seen Nick like this again. It cast her back through the previous five years of her life when Nick's "occasional bad temper" had been like the weather for her. She'd just had to deal with it when things got bad. She'd had to take his insults. She'd had to watch him ridicule other waiters and staff members across the world. She'd once been kicked out of a Tokyo restaurant because Nick had had an issue with their way of life and food preparation.

It suddenly felt poisonous to ever speak to Nick again. And she didn't want to give him the opportunity to convince her otherwise. That was the thing with these overwhelmingly handsome, manipulative guys. If you gave them an inch, they took a mile.

Maya smiled to the hostess, who smiled back nervously. “Can I help you, ma’am?”

“You can,” Maya said. “I’m supposed to go on a blind date with that man in the corner. The one who’s being terribly rude to your colleague.”

The hostess wrinkled her nose. She couldn’t help it. It seemed likely that she’d had a negative interaction with Nick already.

“I don’t think I’m going to make it,” Maya went on with a small laugh. “Would you mind passing him a note from me?”

The hostess smiled conspiratorially and produced a notepad and a pen. “I normally don’t condone standing people up on dates,” she said very quietly. “But I’ll make an exception in this case.”

Maya hid on the other side of the hostess stand so that Nick couldn’t see her. On the pad of paper, she wrote simply:

“Never again. M.”

Maya folded the note and handed it to the hostess.

“I’ll deliver it myself,” she said. “Merry Christmas.”

“And to you,” Maya said before whipping back into the darkness.

On the other side of the street, she paused for a brief moment to glance back toward the restaurant. Nick was still at the table near the corner, staring down at the note in his hand. He looked flabbergasted. His cheeks were white as snow.

It was probably the first time anyone had turned down Nick Collins. Maya had never been so proud.

Maya directed herself toward Brad’s little house. As she raced, her feet crunching through the snow, the Christmas lights that hung downtown blurred. She tried and failed to practice what she might say to him. How could she articulate how important the previous few weeks had been? How could she explain how completely she’d already fallen for him?

Maya appeared on the front porch of Brad's home. The front window was aglow with light from the television and a small Christmas tree. Maya imagined Brad decorating it by himself, perhaps listening to a podcast, wrapping Christmas lights around the base, the middle, and the top. She imagined he'd done this with his young wife so many years ago. They'd had traditions he'd unfortunately been forced to carry alone.

Maya walked slowly up the steps and knocked. She listened as Brad's footfalls grew closer and closer. When he answered, he did so with a curious expression, a little wrinkle forming between his brows.

"Maya?" He sounded incredulous. Immediately, he hardened his expression to the same he'd worn earlier. It was clear he didn't want her there.

"Can I come in?" Maya asked.

Brad rubbed the back of his neck, then hesitantly opened the door. Maya stepped into the warm foyer and glanced toward the living room, where Brad had paused a movie.

"*Die Hard*," Maya said. "Everyone says it's the best Christmas movie."

"I don't say that. But it's fantastic." He sounded stiff. "You've never seen it?"

Maya shook her head. Again, she felt as though she spoke to a stranger. Brad continued to look at her incredulously. She suspected he wanted to throw her out.

She had to say something. She had to remind him of what kind of woman she was.

"I spoke to Veronica and Olivia today," Maya said softly. "I've learned so much about my family. And I know I couldn't have done any of it without you. I wanted to thank you."

Brad's eyes stirred. "You found Olivia?"

"Rainey told me where she was."

Brad looked more confused than ever. He turned and padded into the living room, where he collapsed on the couch

and pointed at the La-Z-Boy beside him. As though he didn't fully want to, he said, "Please. Have a seat."

Maya removed her coat, hung it on the rack, and followed him. But she remained standing. Sitting in the chair across the room from the man she was falling in love with felt too alienating.

"Brad," she began. "I came here tonight to tell you something."

Brad clasped his hands. "I already know."

Maya cocked her head. Was he about to refuse her?

"I met him the other night at the bar," Brad went on. "Nick, right? He's really handsome. Successful. Charming." He raised his shoulders. "I'm sure you'll be really happy together."

Maya's jaw dropped. "You met Nick?"

"You don't have to pretend we're in love or anything," Brad went on. "I get it. You and Nick needed a break from one another. You came here. We had a fling. Whatever? It happens. We're adults."

Maya's heartbeat was in overdrive. She thought she might have a heart attack. "No!" She cried, dropping down onto Brad's couch and taking his hand. "I didn't know Nick was coming. This morning, when I saw him, it threw me for a loop. That's true. But all day, I've thought about you, Brad. About how happy I am with you. About how I believe in a different future than the one I saw for myself in Manhattan."

Brad's eyes caught the glow of the Christmas tree near the window. He looked at her with disbelief. Maya wrapped both hands around one of his and whispered, "You can't think for a minute I'd forget the past few weeks with you. They were the best in my entire life." She swallowed. "I told Nick it's over. I'm done, forever. If I could, I would wipe the past five years from my memory and start over here with you."

Brad wrapped his hand around the back of Maya's head and gazed at her. She felt unlike she ever had with Nick, as though she were the only woman in the world.

“I’m falling in love with you, Maya,” Brad whispered.  
“Maybe it’s a mistake. But right now, I don’t care.”

This was all Maya needed to hear. She cleared the distance between them, closing her eyes as she kissed him. They wrapped their arms around one another, cradling each other as a wicked wind barreled against Brad’s little house. The home was a dramatic contrast to the mansion in which they’d first fallen in love, yet with the fire crackling in the fireplace and the Christmas tree’s bright lights, Maya felt it was the safest and warmest place in the world.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

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**O**n Christmas morning, forty-two years to the day after the accident that had taken Maya and Olivia's mother's life, Maya awoke to a gorgeous snowfall. Tenderly, she stepped from the bed she shared with Brad and tip-toed toward the window, where she gazed at the rolling hills, blanketed with what looked to be at least eight inches of new snow. There was something about it that felt fresh and clean; it felt like starting over.

"You're glowing."

Brad's voice interrupted Maya's reverie, and she turned to gaze back at him. He was still in bed, propped up on his elbow, smiling happily. Maya bounded back to bed to kiss him and slip back into the warmth beneath the sheets. "Merry Christmas," she whispered. She'd never been so happy to realize it was the 25th of December.

"Merry Christmas to you."

"Did you have any dreams?"

Brad smiled. "Nothing. I slept like a log. You?"

Maya bit her bottom lip, remembering the flashes of her dream, even as it faded with the light of the morning. In it, she and Olivia had been little girls scampering around the field outside the Albright mansion. Someone had been calling their names. Had it been their mother?

A few minutes later, Maya padded downstairs to make a pot of coffee, listening to the creaks and moans of the massive house. After she set up the machine with filtered coffee and



fresh water, she tip-toed to the living room to turn on the lights of the Christmas tree. Immediately, reds, pinks, blues, purples, and yellows illuminated the gorgeous space and reflected from the baubles that hung from the branches.

The decorations were quite old, probably purchased during the years after Diane and Victor had moved to the United States from England. Veronica had told Maya where they were in the attic. “You can use them if you want to,” she’d said with a shrug. “Just because my mother had a wicked streak doesn’t mean she didn’t have great taste.”

And when Veronica had seen the Christmas tree for herself on Christmas Eve, her eyes had welled with tears. “I can’t believe it. It looks just like it did when I was a girl.”

Apparently, Veronica hadn’t bothered to decorate her home for Christmas since her divorce. “I allowed myself to celebrate with the Hollygrove Christmas Festival,” she’d explained. “But here at the Albright Mansion, I mourned my darling little sister, Bethany.”

Maya poured herself a cup of coffee, made a fire, and sat on the couch, thinking about the day ahead. It was only seven-thirty, and they had an entire day of celebration ahead of them. Wonderfully, Brad’s sister planned to bring her children over in the afternoon. Maya looked forward to that. She imagined that the echoes of children playing in the hallways would rejuvenate the old place.

One day soon, maybe, Phoebe’s children would be the ones running through the halls and playing hide-and-seek in the library. Maya could hardly wait.

The staircase creaked, and Maya jumped up to greet the next awake: Olivia, whose dark hair cascaded messily and beautifully down her shoulders and back. She wore a big t-shirt and a pair of sweatpants, and she raced to hug Maya with more energy than most children.

“Merry Christmas!” they said in unison.

Maya hurried to pour her sister a cup of coffee as Olivia chatted happily, following her from the living room to the

kitchen and back again. “I had a strange dream about Mom,” she said, wrapping her hands around her mug of steaming coffee. Her eyes were as big as orbs.

“What happened in it?”

Olivia raised her shoulders. “I can’t remember. I just remember warmth. And love.”

Maya sipped her coffee and sat back down on the couch. Olivia sat cross-legged beside her and followed Maya’s gaze to the Christmas tree.

“She must know we’re together,” Maya said. “I dreamt of her, too.”

Olivia was wordless. Ever since she’d moved into the Albright mansion ten days ago, they’d spent hours getting to know one another, going through the events of their lives, and telling each other the deepest secrets of their souls. Maya had joked they should start a podcast. They’d spent the first fifty years of their lives without each other—and they had to catch up.

A moment later, another creak on the staircase brought Phoebe into the warmth of the living room. She greeted them both with hugs and hurried away to get her own coffee before returning to cozy up alongside them. Maya’s heart burst.

“This place is enormous,” Phoebe breathed. “Henry and I nearly got lost on our way to our room last night.”

Olivia and Maya giggled.

“We’ve gotten lost several times,” Olivia reported, giving Maya a sidelong glance.

“We should draw a map,” Maya said.

“Especially if we really set up the hotel,” Olivia offered. “Phoebe, did Maya show you the potential menu she wrote up for the hotel restaurant?”

“It’s all just make-believe,” Maya insisted. “I’m not a chef. I’m just a food critic.”

Phoebe and Olivia glared at her.

“You have got to be kidding,” Phoebe said.

“What?” Maya laughed nervously.

“Every single meal I’ve had since I moved in has been exquisite,” Olivia protested.

“Yeah,” Phoebe said. “Did you ever consider cooking the food rather than writing about it?”

In truth, Maya had considered this. Endlessly. She’d sat in gorgeous restaurants across the world, studying the way dynamic flavors engaged with her palate, speaking with chefs, and tapping into the culinary scene. There was nothing she loved more than eating—and sharing the food she prepared.

Phoebe placed her head on Maya’s shoulder and watched the fire, whispering as though she could already visualize the next few years of Maya’s life.

“I’m picturing the mansion as a beautiful hotel,” she breathed. “With a five-star restaurant, numerous rooms, a library, two swimming pools, and tennis courts. And I’m picturing your blog, Mom. ‘A Taste Above The Rest.’ But you don’t need to travel anywhere. You write about the hotel. About the guests you have here. And about the food you prepare for them.”

“I love the sound of that,” Olivia breathed.

Maya could see it, too. She imagined beautiful Olivia at the front desk, greeting guests happily and showing them to their beautiful, refurbished rooms. She imagined herself experimenting with different flavors, ingredients, and textures in the kitchen. And she imagined herself, Phoebe, Olivia, Veronica, and Brad in the hotel restaurant after a long day, sharing a bottle of wine.

There was no telling what would happen next. But there, in the Albright Mansion, they could do nothing but gaze optimistically toward their futures. Once upon a time, Diane and Victor had set out on an adventure that had changed the course of their lives forever. It had been a dark and alienating road; mistakes had been made. But here, so many years later, Maya, Olivia, and Veronica had decided to right the wrongs of

the past. And none of it would have been possible without Aunt Veronica— who'd retained her belief in the magic of Christmas, even when all was lost.

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