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KATIE
WINTERS

NANTUCKET
HARVEST

❖ A Nantucket Sunset Series ❖

Nantucket Harvest

A Nantucket Sunset Series

Katie Winters

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Chapter One

Nantucket Island broke from the glittering ocean. It was a lush oasis dotted with iconic vacation homes for the rich and famous, featuring miles of white, sandy beaches and an unforgettable and transportive historic district, one that romanticized the island's hundreds of years of remarkable stories. Layla Johnson leaned against the railing of the ferry, her face against the wind as her reddish-brown locks whipped out behind her. Tears shimmered from her eyes and painted her with long, skinny stripes. This was the place where she'd fix everything wrong with her life. This was the island where she'd find herself again.

Layla hadn't been to The Copperfield House since 1993. Back then, Greta Copperfield had been her number-one rival amongst women novelists in North America, a pretentious competition that had demanded all literary magazines and publishing houses to take sides. "Who do you like more? Copperfield or Johnson?" Journalists had written Think Pieces, and numerous universities had had classes comparing their work. Unlike men, who might have gotten even more competitive and volatile due to such rivalry, Layla and Greta instead struck up a wonderful friendship. And when Greta stopped writing in the wake of Bernard's prison sentence, Layla had been sad to say goodbye to her only worthy

opponent. Greta's prose had improved Layla's prose. That was the nature of competition.

But now, Layla was fifty-three years old, and she was in the midst of the worst writer's block she'd ever encountered. Her brain was filled with cement. She hadn't had a creative idea in what felt like a decade, an era that had demanded so much from her emotionally that she often wasn't sure if she still wanted her career or her life. Maybe she didn't want to be Layla Johnson at all anymore. She was the only one who knew about her writer's block, of course. Her editor and her agent were both quite sure she would deliver a brand-new book by the end of November, just as she'd said she would.

At least Layla was still capable of lying. Maybe that was proof her fiction-writing wasn't dead. Not fully, anyway.

Because Layla lived in New York City, she didn't own a car. The little black Cadillac ELR she'd opted to rent was sleek and sophisticated, and as she drove from Nantucket Harbor toward The Copperfield House, her heart was in her throat. This was the first "adventure" she'd allowed herself in years. Probably in no time flat, she would sizzle with an idea for a story again. That was the reason people went on writer's retreats, wasn't it? It brought you out of your shell and ignited that creative spark. It forced you to see everything from new and unique perspectives.

The only problem was, of course, that it was the first day of September—which meant she had to write a new book in three months. That was a nearly impossible feat. The Copperfield House had better work its magic on her.

Greta Copperfield waited for her on the front porch of the gorgeous Victorian, shifting gently on the attached swing. Layla stopped the engine and stepped out of the car, her legs

stiff after the drive. Although Greta was now in her early seventies, she seemed to float down the porch steps, her skin glowing with vitality. What was that woman's secret? Even when Layla had been a twenty-three-year-old rockstar in the literary world, Greta had always looked more sophisticated, better-dressed, with skin that seemed incapable of wrinkling and voluminous hair. At that time, she'd been forty years old.

"Layla Johnson, as I live and breathe." Greta kissed Layla on both cheeks, the way she'd learned to do in Paris, and held her elbows, taking her in. She smelled like lilacs and the sea.

"Greta. It's so good to see you." Layla felt breathless. During the twenty-five years when Greta had been a recluse in this house, Layla hadn't dared reach out to her, and now, she wasn't entirely sure why. Had she been afraid of her, of the changes that had happened to her? Or had she just been too caught up in her own drama to care about someone else's?

She wasn't proud of the answer.

"Let me help you with your things," Greta said.

"Oh! No. I can do that." Layla hurried around the back to open the trunk. There, she'd packed two suitcases and her laptop bag.

The screen door screamed from the porch, and Greta called out, "Quentin! Come say hello to Layla. And please, help us with these bags, won't you?" When Greta turned back to face Layla, she wagged her eyebrows and added quietly, "I have a full house these days. Plenty of men to do the heavy lifting!"

Layla laughed. It must have been bizarre for Greta to have all of her family back after so many years alone. Layla lived by herself and felt a crippling sense of loneliness most days. She couldn't imagine having her space invaded like that.

Quentin Copperfield was, of course, the most famous of the Copperfield children. Although he wore frayed jeans and a white t-shirt, he walked with the confidence of a man in a five-thousand-dollar suit, and his smile was terribly handsome, one Layla knew well after his many years as the most-renowned nightly news anchor in the United States. He'd quit earlier this year, and the station had initially struggled to replace him.

"Layla! Welcome to our home," Quentin said, shaking her hand.

"Thank you," Layla said. "Last time I saw you, you were a teenager! All you talked about was going out to Los Angeles to be an actor."

"And he did, for a time." Greta beamed.

Quentin palmed the back of his neck. "Luckily, I got out of it after doing my third commercial for organic dog food. I thought there had to be some other way to make a living."

"Seems like you did all right for yourself," Layla said. "What are you doing now?"

Quentin gestured vaguely toward The Copperfield House. "My wife and I moved here this spring, which has been a Godsend. Both of my daughters are away at NYU for the autumn semester, but my son is still here."

"That's James. He's a wonderful kid," Greta said.

"My daughter helped me with a documentary this summer," Quentin said, "and as that's being edited, I'm working on another with a friend named Henry. He lives over on Martha's Vineyard."

"A documentarian," Layla said. "Sounds like a wonderful next step."

“It’s certainly not as stressful as the nightly news,” Quentin assured her, swinging both suitcases from the back of her trunk. “And you couldn’t talk me into living in the city again right now. This fresh air has done me a world of good.”

* * *

Greta showed Layla both entrances to The Copperfield House — one through the family side of the house and another through the back so that Layla could come and go without running into fifteen different Copperfields on the way.

“But you’re practically family,” Greta assured her. “So please, come over to our side of the house whenever you want to.”

Layla blushed as she followed Greta up the residency staircase. “I don’t think I came to this side of the house last time.”

“No! I remember you stayed in one of our guest bedrooms,” Greta said. “We had a stacked residency calendar that year. It must have been 1993?”

“Great memory,” Layla said.

“I had a lot of time to reminisce,” Greta offered. “Ah. Here’s your room.”

It was a quaint room, approximately ten feet by ten feet, with a bay window that overlooked the Nantucket Sound. Quentin had placed Layla’s suitcases directly next to the bed, and a wide, clean mahogany desk sat near the window, demanding to be written at.

“It’s gorgeous,” Layla said, touching the chair in front of the desk and willing herself to dream up a new story.

“It’s my favorite room on this side of the house,” Greta confessed.

“Are the writers here yet?” Layla asked.

Greta shook her head. “They arrive in two days. They’re all ecstatic to be working with the great Layla Johnson.”

Layla blushed again. If only they knew how inadequate she felt right now. “You said in your email you have their writing samples?”

“Ah! Yes.” Greta opened one of the drawers on the desk and pulled out a stack of manuscripts. “We got many responses to the ad. It was difficult to whittle it down to just three writers.”

It had been Greta’s idea: a writer’s workshop, helmed by the “great” Layla Johnson. It was a way to rejuvenate The Copperfield House residency after its long hiatus, bring more money in, and, as she put it, celebrate the next generation of writers. Because Layla had felt so stuck in life and in writing, she’d agreed without thought. But now, the idea of coaching three writers terrified her. What could she tell them? She’d forgotten every single writing rule.

Their names were Evie Randall, Bella Hawkins, and Victor Atkinson. They had all gotten their masters in fine arts (MFA) in writing, and they were all between twenty-eight and thirty years old. The thought of them peering up at her with expectation made Layla shiver.

“I guess I have some reading to do,” Layla said.

“Don’t worry yourself too much,” Greta told her. “Settle in a little bit. Enjoy the beach and the island. It won’t get too cold around here till the end of September.” Greta snapped her fingers. “I just remembered the last time I saw you!”

Layla laughed with surprise. “I’m drawing a blank.”

“It was your wedding!” Greta smiled. “It must have been 1995. I told Bernard I’d never seen a more gorgeous couple.”

Layla’s smile fell, and she twirled her wedding band on her finger. “Oh. Yes. It was a magical day.”

“How is Brad? I hope he’ll visit the island while you’re here?”

Layla’s heart pounded in her ears. “I wish he could. Unfortunately, he died.”

Greta’s face fell. “Oh, my goodness. Layla, how crass of me.”

Layla shook her head. “Don’t worry about it.”

“No. I stepped out of line,” Greta said. “And I’m sorry. When did it happen?”

“It’s been a few years,” Layla explained. “Much longer than I’d like to admit. I just can’t bring myself to remove the ring.”

Greta nodded. “I can understand that. All those years Bernard was in prison, I kept my ring on, too.”

Layla understood the heaviness of that. For the entirety of those twenty-five years, the world had been convinced of Bernard’s guilt. Nearly a year ago, the Copperfield siblings had come together to prove Bernard’s innocence— and the world had woken up to the injustice that had occurred.

“And they really can’t do anything to Marcia Conrad for what she did?” Layla asked.

Greta shook her head. “Last we heard, she’s holed up in a mansion somewhere, hiding. We doubt she’ll ever work again.

I imagine she'll publish a tell-all memoir in the next few years."

"Her side of the story," Layla said sarcastically. "She probably will."

"But we can't worry ourselves with her anymore," Greta said. "We have Bernard back. All my children are here. And we've entered into a wonderful new era." She took Layla's hand and squeezed it. "You're a part of that new era, too. I'm so glad you're here. I read your most recent novel last week to prepare. Gosh, it was marvelous. You know your way around beautiful sentences. You always have."

Layla had labored on that book obsessively. Her heart had been black and blue, so much so that now, she didn't dare pick up that novel, as it reminded her of the weight of her fear.

"Dinner is at seven-thirty," Greta said as she breezed toward the door. "Please, make yourself at home. My children can't wait to see you again. Welcome to The Copperfield House."

Chapter Two

Samuel Garreth had dreamt of this moment for the past twelve years. His fingers shook as he unbuttoned his orange prison jumpsuit and stepped out of it, tossing it into the laundry hamper in the corner. The clothes he'd been wearing when he'd come in were no longer here—it was impossible to know where they'd ended up, and he was too nervous to ask. But the prison supplied him with a pair of cheap-looking jeans and a navy polo. Never in his wildest dreams would he have worn something like this polo, yet he was so grateful to be in anything that wasn't orange.

The car waiting for him on the other side of the gate still had its engine on. It was a drizzly, gray day in early September, and Samuel opened his arms to the sky above and inhaled deeply. This was his first moment of freedom. This was it.

The man who jumped out of the driver's seat wasn't the grizzled old man he'd known in prison. Bernard Copperfield looked well-fed and happy, and his gray and white hair had been styled to sweep over his head. He wore a wool sweater and a pair of slacks, and he wrapped his arms around Samuel as though he was his father—and said, very quietly, “You did it, Sam. You're free.”

Samuel sat in the passenger seat of Bernard's car and clutched his knees. He hadn't been in a car in a very long time, obviously, and it felt as though they were going too fast, speeding along the highway. The radio played a song he'd never heard before, and he was struck with the realization that everything, even bad pop music, had gone on without him.

"I know it's weird," Bernard said at a stoplight, glancing at Samuel. "You don't have to explain it to me."

Samuel tried to laugh. "I can't believe it. The sky is so huge."

"Is there any place you want to go?" Bernard asked. "Any food you're craving?"

Samuel tugged his ear nervously. "I feel like I've lost all sense of what I like and don't like. Maybe my taste buds are completely different."

"Greta is preparing a feast for tonight," Bernard told him. "I think she sees it as a challenge, bringing you back into the world of culinary delights. But I understand the need for a greasy sandwich or French fries on the way. We have a bit of a drive, and dinner isn't for another eight hours."

Samuel rubbed his hands together and gazed out the window. "Maybe a burrito?" he said, surprising himself.

"Mexican it is," Bernard said, drawing his car into a nearby parking lot, where he removed a long, thin cell phone from his pocket. Twelve years ago, Samuel had had an iPhone and had been relatively addicted to it. His fingers no longer itched to touch something like that.

Bernard checked the area for the best Mexican restaurants and charted a course for a place twenty minutes away. "Is that far enough from the facility?" he asked Samuel knowingly.

“I don’t know if anything is far enough away,” Samuel answered honestly.

The Mexican restaurant wasn’t busy, thank goodness. A family sat in the corner, eating tortilla chips and salsa and talking quietly, and a man in his thirties sat in a booth by himself, playing on his phone. Samuel and Bernard grabbed a booth along the wall and sat across from one another. This reminded Samuel of the number of hours they’d sat just like this, playing chess and talking about anything that came to their mind. In prison, you had nothing but time.

A waitress arrived with waters filled with huge ice cubes. The water was painfully cold and delicious, and Sam could not get enough of it. He also ordered a Cherry Coke nervously, realizing, as he did, that he hadn’t spoken to a woman in twelve years. Although the waitress was in her twenties and probably saw him as an old, forgettable guy, to him, she was a revelation. Her blond hair was brighter than his memories of the sun, and her fingers were feminine and thin— so unlike the hands of the men in prison. She hardly looked at him as he ordered a burrito with chicken. But as she turned, he yelped, “Sorry! Actually, I’d rather have a burrito with steak. And refried beans. And queso dip. Please.”

Now, she looked a bit peeved, and she scribbled out his old order and revised it. “You sure about that?” She laughed gently.

“Sorry.” Heat filled his neck and his cheeks. “I’m starving.”

“I understand. When I’m really hungry, I don’t know what I want to eat, either. I’ll bring those drinks and chips out for you guys, okay?”

After the waitress disappeared into the kitchen, Samuel placed his face in his hands and heaved a sigh.

“It feels like a lot right now. I know,” Bernard said gently. “When I got out a year and a half ago, I spent months holed up in my study. I slept up there. I barely spoke to my children or my wife. I didn’t know how to live in the world anymore.”

“But you seem great now,” Samuel said.

“I don’t feel great all the time,” Bernard admitted. “But my family has been my saving grace. And I hope we can be there for you, too.”

Bernard had written Samuel with the idea six months ago.

His letter said:

“We want to offer you a room at The Copperfield House for as long as you want to stay. You will need to give your parole officer an address, and mine is as good as any. Besides, I need help with a few repairs, and I know how handy you are.”

This came from a brief stint they’d done together, a class making small pieces of furniture— a chair, a nightstand, a table. Samuel had relished the class, throwing himself into it as a way to forget the horrors of everything else. It had been around that time that his divorce had gone through, and he hadn’t heard from his children in many months. He’d needed that furniture class. It had saved his life.

“I appreciate that,” Samuel said. “I don’t have anywhere else. Gosh, I sound pathetic. I can’t even pay for my own burrito.”

“I’m buying you that burrito,” Bernard reminded him. “It takes time to get back on your feet. You can’t put too much pressure on yourself.”

Samuel wanted to roll his eyes. Another part of him wanted to suggest Bernard drop him back off at the prison facility where he belonged. Maybe he didn't have what it took to make it on the outside. Not many did.

But the Cherry Coke was a revelation. Samuel drank from a straw and closed his eyes at the cherry sweetness. "I don't remember it being that good."

"It probably wasn't," Bernard said. "I had the sensation that I slept-walked through the first part of my life. Now that I'm out, I don't sleepwalk anymore. I'm very awake to every experience."

Samuel took a tortilla chip and dipped it into the chunky salsa. His tastebuds again exploded with flavors as he chewed and swallowed. "I don't even know what to say."

"I don't demand anything from you," Bernard said.

Samuel settled into himself a little bit more. He ate another chip and felt his brain activating. It had been a long time since he'd eaten the soggy white toast in prison that morning.

"By the way," Samuel said, deciding now was as good a time as any, "I was happy to hear they cleared your name."

Bernard dropped his gaze, looking embarrassed.

"Why didn't you ever tell me you weren't guilty?" The question had been on Samuel's mind for a year. "I mean, every other guy in prison told me how not guilty he was. You were the only one who didn't go on and on about it. And yet, I have a hunch you were the only one who wasn't actually guilty."

"That's not for me to say," Bernard offered.

"I guess I understand," Samuel said after a moment. "You were never like the others."

“Neither were you,” Bernard reminded him.

Samuel shrugged. “But I was guilty.”

“And you never said you weren’t.”

Samuel was quiet, remembering the hours and hours of wisdom-filled conversations he’d had with Bernard over the years. How had Bernard been able to stand it? How hadn’t he gone insane, knowing he wasn’t guilty? It was impossible to understand.

The waitress returned with Samuel’s burrito and Bernard’s fish tacos, along with a heaping pile of refried beans and fried rice. It was more food than Samuel had seen at once in years, and his mouth watered.

“You want hot sauce?” the waitress asked.

“Sure!” Samuel sounded a little too excited, and she smiled confusedly at him before she left to fetch the hot sauce.

“Be careful with that stuff,” Bernard warned. “You haven’t eaten anything with real flavor in a while.”

Sam placed a droplet of hot sauce on the edge of his burrito, then used his knife and fork to cut a thick, cheesy, meaty, and spicy bite. When it hit his tongue, he closed his eyes and felt the twelve years of sorrow, loneliness, and rage flow away from him. And when he opened his eyes, he realized he was crying.

“I told you that hot sauce was spicy,” Bernard said.

But Samuel wasn’t crying because of the hot sauce. He could have added more of it, dousing the burrito just to prove to himself he was still alive. He was crying because of how overwhelming the world was when you thought it no longer

belonged to you. He prayed he was up for it. He prayed he could open his arms to this next chapter the way Bernard had. He wasn't sure he had the strength.

Bernard drove them to the Hyannis Ferry, where he parked the car and led Samuel to the top deck. It was September 4th, and you could feel the air spiced with autumn, with slowly dying leaves. This deep in the afternoon, it was in the upper sixties, and Samuel grabbed the railing of the ferry and raised his nose to the sky.

He hadn't been to Nantucket since his twenties. That was thirty years ago, a few years after his wedding, after the birth of his first child. They'd left the baby with the grandparents and spent the weekend sunbathing, kissing on the pier, kissing everywhere, really, and going out to dinner. They'd felt on top of the world. They'd told each other they would be cool parents. They'd told each other nothing would change.

Samuel had never told Bernard he'd been to Nantucket before. He'd kept details about his family life separate, choosing to inhabit philosophical worlds with Bernard instead. But as Bernard drove off the ferry, Sam was accosted with memories from that long-ago vacation, so much so that he could practically feel his wife's breath on his neck and hear the sound of her laughter.

"Welcome to Nantucket," Bernard said proudly. "As far as I can tell, it's the best place in the world. I hope you learn to love it as much as I do."

And five minutes later, as they turned down Bernard's road, Samuel saw what could only be The Copperfield House. Bernard had spoken of it with such poetry that Samuel felt he would know it when he saw it—and he'd been right. It was an old Victorian with ornate trim around the windows, an

enormous wrap-around porch, and a sprawling green lawn that petered out against the pristine, white beach. Flowers erupted from the gardens that lined the porch, and a beautiful older woman sat on the porch swing, writing in her journal. As Bernard turned the engine off, he bowed his head and said, “There she is. The love of my life.”

And Samuel remembered the only time Bernard had ever brought up Greta in conversation. It had been probably five years ago, during a depressive spell for both of them. It had been winter, and the prisoners were despondent; the guards had taken away several of their activities, and Samuel had never felt so bored. Only conversations with Bernard got him through.

“She was the smartest woman I ever met,” Bernard had said. “She made me believe in something about the world, something I’d previously believed to be a farce. And when she took me in her arms for the first time, I knew I’d found a home I never wanted to leave.”

At the time, Samuel had thought, *I know exactly what you mean*. But he hadn’t been able to explain himself or the terror of his own broken heart, not to Bernard, not to anyone.

Chapter Three

Layla's first class with Evie, Bella, and Victor was set for two-thirty that afternoon. Although she'd already dined with them twice and seen them frolicking on the beach, all exuberant and lithe, she was terrified to stand up in front of them and pretend she knew so much more than they did. In fact, she was pretty sure she'd known much more about writing as a twenty-eight-year-old, if only because she'd been so brash back then. She'd assumed nothing could ever hurt her. She'd assumed her ideas were strong.

Layla had committed herself to reading Evie, Bella, and Victor's writing before class. Just as Greta had said, they were brilliant writers with unique styles. Evie was more of a lyrical and emotional writer. Bella's writing was visceral and sometimes a bit gross, although Layla knew that was *in* these days. Victor's writing was very masculine; he reminded her of a young Philip Roth. She made a mental note not to tell him that, though. He didn't need such a big boost to his ego.

Of the writers, Layla had a special place in her heart for Evie's writing— but she knew better than to play favorites. That had infuriated her as a younger writer.

Greta had assigned the library as the meeting place for writing classes. Layla arrived a little bit early and checked

herself in an antique mirror not far away, fluffing her hair, feeling older than dirt compared to these youthful writers. Fifty-three wasn't old, per se. She knew that. She also knew she'd gotten a dye job just a few days before coming to the island in preparation for them. Did she want to blend in? Was she insane?

The three of them arrived a couple of minutes before two-thirty. Bella strode in first, a confident redhead with a sunburn on her cheeks and shoulders. She wore a dark green dress and a pair of sloppy-looking black boots, and she smiled easily as though nothing was difficult for her. Victor came next in a white t-shirt and a pair of jeans, looking like Jack Kerouac in the middle of his road trip. Next was Evie, who looked meek and pale, her black hair streaming behind her. Layla's heart flipped over at the sight of the three of them. Although she and Brad had tried, she'd never been able to have children. These three were the same age as her children might have been.

"Good afternoon, all!" Layla leaned against a large desk and crossed her arms over her chest. Her hoop earrings waved gently against her neck. "Grab a seat wherever. It's just the four of us, and Greta said to make this space feel like home."

Victor sat in the middle of Evie and Bella. Bella crossed her legs while Evie placed her hands between her thighs and stared out the window.

"How have your first couple of days on the island gone?" Layla asked, stuttering slightly.

"They've been great!" Bella said. "I can't believe this old house. And the view to the water is insane!"

"As is Greta's cooking," Victor added.

Victor and Bella glanced at one another, then held one another's gaze for a split-second longer than was necessary. Evie stared at the ground, looking despondent.

"How is your room, Evie?" Layla asked.

Evie's voice was very small. "It's comfortable. Thank you."

"Victor and I were just discussing your book," Bella said. "The most recent one."

Victor nodded. "We were talking about the dual timelines. You handled them so expertly."

"My heart broke in both storylines," Bella continued excitedly. "And somehow, they were able to elevate each other into a startling climax."

"Neither of us saw that coming," Victor agreed.

Layla was nervous, as she always was when people discussed her work in front of her. Well, she hadn't been nervous about that in her twenties, when she'd been lauded as "the next great talent."

"Thank you for saying that. We can discuss that in detail if you like," Layla went on. "We can analyze what worked for you and what didn't. I could even talk about previous drafts of the book and how the story changed..."

"That would be fantastic!" Victor said.

"When I read you were teaching this workshop, I nearly lost my mind," Bella said. "I called my mom and told her that if I didn't get it, I would quit writing altogether."

Layla laughed. "You should never quit writing. Never, ever. Trust me, this business is all about receiving one rejection after another. Sometimes, you have to reject your

own ideas, if only to get to what really matters to you as an artist. And that's the hardest rejection of all, sometimes."

Evie continued to stare out the window. It was almost as though she wasn't there at all. Layla considered telling Evie just how much she'd enjoyed her writing, but then she remembered her promise to herself not to play favorites.

"Why don't we start by reading aloud from the pieces you sent in," Layla suggested. "That way, we can find a way to critique each other's work, make each other better, and see where our strengths and weaknesses lie."

Layla passed out the manuscripts to each of the writers. Victor puffed his chest as he scanned the first few paragraphs of his, clearly pleased. Evie hardly looked at hers as though it didn't belong to her at all.

"I already read Bella's," Victor announced. "And I have zero notes. I could gush about it for a while, I guess."

Bella's cheeks turned crimson. Again, Layla felt breathless, nervous about this clear attraction between two of her students. In a party of three, things could get messy. She knew that.

"Evie? Do you want to go first?" Layla asked coaxingly.

Evie nodded and raised her manuscript. It occurred to Layla, now, that she hadn't seen all three of them frolicking on the beach that weekend. It had only been Bella and Victor. Where had Evie been? Had she been hiding in her bedroom?

Evie read her poetic prose with a shaky voice. All the while, Bella and Victor glanced at one another semi-discreetly, smiling as though they'd just discovered something nobody else knew.

* * *

As they finished their first class of the workshop at five, Greta appeared in the doorway of the library. She was flushed, presumably from her hours in the kitchen, and she gushed happily about how thrilled she was that the four of them were there.

“I’ve made a feast,” she explained. “I hope you’re hungry.”

“Starving,” Victor said.

“Dinner’s at seven-thirty,” Greta explained. “Layla, do you have homework for your writers?”

Layla had waffled in this department. Did she want to give them homework? Or did she want them to work on a single project that they could then present at the end of their three months? She wasn’t sure. But in front of Greta, she wanted to seem sure, so she said, “I want you to write a flash fiction piece, no more than one thousand five hundred words. Use Nantucket as your inspiration. Have it ready for Wednesday’s session.”

“Flash fiction,” Greta said. “That sounds fun.”

“Feel free to participate, Greta,” Layla said. “I don’t know if you three know this, but Greta was my greatest rival back in the nineties. I was endlessly jealous of her prose.”

“And I was jealous of yours,” Greta said.

One after another, Victor, Evie, and Bella gathered their things and left the library. Bella’s laughter bounced through the hallways.

“How did it go?” Greta asked, her voice a whisper.

“It was fun,” Layla said nervously.

“Why do I feel a ‘but’ coming?”

Layla shook her head. “It’s silly. I just have a suspicion that Victor and Bella are flirting all the time. It makes me nervous.”

“Well, romance at The Copperfield House is sort of a given. Many artists have fallen in love here,” Greta said. “Just this past summer, Aurora fell in love with a local fisherman, and that love transformed her work.” Greta’s eyes were shadowed.

“Aurora? The young woman I met at dinner the other night?”

Greta nodded. “She’s spending more and more time at Brooks’ place, but she still has a room down the hall from yours. If you peek your head into the painting studio, you can see some of the stuff she’s been cooking up lately. Goodness, she’s talented.”

Greta had told Layla bits and pieces of Aurora’s story: that her mother had previously been at The Copperfield House, that she’d had to go to a mental institution during the summertime before being allowed to return to The Copperfield House. “She was the loneliest woman I’d met in a long time.”

Greta couldn’t know that Layla was currently the loneliest woman in the world. Layla didn’t want anyone to know that. But she did wonder if The Copperfield House attracted that sort of person— people who couldn’t exist within society. People who couldn’t play by the rules.

As they left the library, Layla asked if Greta needed help in the kitchen, and Greta said, “Come on down! My daughters are there, and they just opened a bottle of wine. Join us.”

Layla dropped off her things in her bedroom and padded downstairs, around the side of the house, and then up the front porch of the family side of the house. She felt too nervous to enter the house through the passageway, as it seemed like intruding. When she knocked on the door, Alana walked over to the window and smiled out at her, showing every ounce of that model beauty.

“What are you doing, Layla?” She opened the door. “Didn’t Mom tell you to use the passageway?”

Layla waved her hand. “I was too nervous.”

“Don’t be,” Alana ordered her. “Julia! Get another glass for our friend.”

As Layla drew closer to the kitchen, the air thickened with the smell of simmering onions, olive oil, baked bread, and gruyere. By the time she reached the kitchen, Julia had her glass of wine poured, and she handed it over to her and said, “Welcome to the kitchen party!”

“Thank you.” Layla smiled nervously and nodded toward the other sister, Ella, who was seated at the kitchen table and eating a cracker.

“Mom said you had your first class,” Julia said. “How did it go?”

“I love talking about writing with people at the beginning of their careers,” Layla answered honestly. “They seem to have no doubt.”

Ella laughed. “I know what you mean. I feel the same way with younger musicians. I’ve fallen on my face too many times to have that level of optimism, but I think it’s the single-greatest way to get through the industry.”

“Absolutely.” Layla breathed easier, surrounded by Greta’s three daughters. “Oh, Greta said you’re headed out on tour this autumn?”

Ella nodded. “Really soon, actually. Which is good because I’ve been broken-hearted with both of my children in college! I need a distraction.”

Greta entered the kitchen and stirred something in a pot with a wooden spoon. “Danny texted me today about his linguistics class. He said the professor referred to one of my books from the eighties!”

“No kidding?” Layla laughed. As a teenager, she’d adored so many of Greta’s books, although some of them had been a little too philosophical for her to fully understand.

“Did he throw his hand in the air and say you’re his grandmother?” Alana asked.

“Danny doesn’t like attention the way you do,” Greta said, not unkindly, as Alana laughed.

“Oh, look! There’s Dad.” Julia pointed out the window at Bernard, who walked along the beach with another man. The other man was maybe in his fifties, wearing a navy polo that didn’t quite fit him and a pair of jeans. “Is that...?”

Greta nodded, her eyes buggy. “That’s Samuel. I met him a few hours ago.”

“What’s he like?” Alana asked.

“Very quiet,” Greta whispered, although they were half a football field away. “I asked him if he needs to go shopping for supplies, and he looked at me like I had two heads. Bernard says he’s not used to people being kind to him. And more than that, he used to be very rich, and he’s really not sure how to exist in the world without money.”

“Huh.” Ella tilted her head. “He doesn’t look rich.”

“Those clothes look straight from a big-box store,” Greta said. “I’m sure the polo itches to high heaven.”

“But he must be thrilled to be out of the jumpsuit,” Julia offered.

Greta nodded pensively.

“Who is this?” Layla interrupted, feeling out of the loop.

“Oh! Goodness. Sorry, Layla. I should have told you. Bernard’s friend got out of prison today. His family abandoned him while he was there, and Bernard says he has nowhere else to go. We have all this space, so I said, of course, he can come here. Bernard assured me his crimes were purely white collar.” She smiled nervously. “I hope that’s okay?”

Layla was intrigued. She watched Samuel walk across the sands, imagining what he must be feeling, with the salty breeze across his cheeks and through his hair, his shoes shifting, his eyes to a pink marshmallow horizon. It nearly broke her heart.

Chapter Four

Sam apologized to Bernard. “I really can’t make it to dinner tonight.” He palmed the back of his neck, his heart buzzing like a hornet’s nest. Bernard nodded kindly as though he’d expected this.

“We’re doing room service,” he explained. “I figured being at the dinner table would be too much for you. Heck, it still is for me, sometimes.”

They were out on the beach in front of The Copperfield House. Samuel was still in the plastic-y polo and jeans, yearning to take them off, to lay on his bed in a private room and stare out the window.

“Please,” Samuel began as they walked back through the sands. “Tell me what I can start working on tomorrow. I’d love to get my hands dirty.”

“We have plenty of time for that,” Bernard assured him.

But Samuel touched Bernard’s shoulder. “I need a distraction,” he explained quietly. “Something to think about.”

Bernard bowed his head and beckoned for Samuel to follow him. He led him around the side of the big Victorian and pointed up at a patch of the roof that needed to be

completely redone, the shingles removed to allow for a new set.

“I have all the supplies in the garage,” Bernard explained. “New shingles. A ladder. Equipment. You’ve hung shingles before, haven’t you?”

Samuel nodded. “In my twenties, after my wife and I moved into our first house.” His heart burned with nostalgia, and he wavered on his feet as though he was about to collapse. He needed to pull himself together. “I don’t remember it being too difficult. I can figure it out.”

“Great,” Bernard said. “My son is away for most of this week, working on a documentary, and my son-in-law, Will, is preparing to go out on tour. I would do it myself, but...” He trailed off and gave Samuel a mischievous smile. “I’m getting old, Samuel.”

Samuel wanted to insist that he wasn’t, that he still had so many years left. But Samuel felt old, too—and he was quite a bit younger than Bernard was. He decided not to argue.

“I’ll get started mid-morning,” Samuel said. “After everyone wakes up.”

“Perfect,” Bernard said.

Samuel said goodbye to Bernard, wanting to reach out to hug him but holding himself back. He felt overstimulated and on the verge of tears. He took the residency entrance and headed up to his bedroom, which Bernard had shown him earlier. Previously, it had featured just a double bed, an antique desk, and an empty wardrobe, but since his arrival, someone had been there. There were clothes piled in stacks on the bed: three pairs of jeans that were exactly his size, flannel shirts in deep colors like dark green, navy blue, and ochre, and normal

t-shirts in white, black, and gray. On top of that, somebody had bought him underwear and socks, a good brand that wouldn't itch. As quickly as he could, he ripped off the polo and jeans the prison had given him, wadded them up, and shoved them into a drawer in the wardrobe. He then wrapped a towel around his body and walked down the hallway for his first shower by himself in twelve years.

It would be a week of firsts. It would be a year of firsts. He would maybe never get over it.

That night, Greta, Bernard, and one of their daughters, Ella, came upstairs with his feast. Samuel was in a soft t-shirt and a pair of boxers, listening to the rain as it pattered gently against the windowpane. As they lined up the food— chicken a la orange, fresh baguette, Brussels sprouts, potatoes— their smiles were warm and welcoming, and Samuel didn't feel an ounce of shame for wearing what he was. Because he wasn't yet allowed to drink, they brought him a can of Cherry Coke. Samuel could have cried.

“I almost forgot!” Bernard leafed into his pocket and retrieved a brand-new cell phone. “It's already connected to Wi-Fi, and it has a SIM card inside, so you can make calls and use the internet outside the house.”

Samuel's heart flipped over. How much did something like this cost? “I can't take this.”

“Just take it for now,” Bernard urged him. “You're going to need it. The world is different than it used to be. Oh! Also.” He clicked around on the screen. “This app plays all the music you want in the world. Just type whatever you want to listen to.”

After Ella, Greta, and Bernard returned to the other side of the house, Samuel was left in his room alone with his

tremendous feast, his new clothes, and his cell phone. He sat gingerly at the desk, searching his mind for the perfect soundtrack for dinner. Finally, he landed on an old classic, “Dancing In The Dark,” by Bruce Springsteen, which he remembered from his childhood. And in fact, as it began to play, he read on the music app that Bruce Springsteen was, incredibly, still on tour! He was much older than Samuel.

Strangely, this gave Samuel hope. He had so much time left. He could begin again.

* * *

The next morning, Samuel woke up at dawn and went to the kitchen downstairs to brew a pot of coffee. According to Bernard, the only other people currently living at the residency were three writers, their writing instructor, and a musician and painter named Aurora (who apparently spent a lot of time with her boyfriend, who also lived on the island). They’d had others over the summertime, a filmmaker and another writer and musician, but they’d all moved on to other residencies to work on other projects.

As Samuel drank his coffee in the kitchen, someone entered the residency half of the house. Their footsteps grew louder and louder until Greta popped into the doorway, carrying a big platter of croissants and a bowl of apples, oranges, and bananas.

“Oh! Goodness. Samuel!” Greta laughed. “You scared me.”

Samuel raised his coffee. “Sorry about that.”

“No worries at all.” Greta placed the croissants and fruit on the table in front of him. “I just didn’t think anyone else was

awake yet. Please! Eat a croissant. I woke up early to make them.”

“You made these yourself?” Samuel took one of the soft, flaky croissants from the tray.

“There’s fresh butter in the fridge.” Greta whisked across the kitchen to fetch that, plus some strawberry jam and camembert cheese. “I need to go grocery shopping again. We have twenty-somethings on this side of the house.” She laughed easily.

As Samuel scraped butter onto a piece of croissant, he got up the nerve to say, “Thank you for shopping for me.”

Greta furrowed her brow. “Are the clothes all right? I had my eldest daughter go to the store for you. She has a better eye for fashion than I do.”

Warmth flooded through Samuel’s arms and legs. “They’re perfect. Thank your daughter for me.”

“You can thank her yourself,” Greta assured him. “When you feel ready, that is. I hope you’ll feel comfortable here.”

Greta disappeared back to the family side of the house, muttering something about making breakfast for her grandson. Samuel poured himself another cup of coffee and took a banana back up to his bedroom. He had plenty of time to kill before he could start on the roof, and he spent most of that time updating himself on the major news highlights of the previous twelve years. He wasn’t sure he remembered the world being half this angry back then. Maybe he just didn’t have a good memory.

Or maybe, back then, he’d just been too bogged down with his own drama to care about the world.

Up on the roof, Samuel adjusted himself nervously and wiped the sweat from his brow. This first morning was all about clearing out the bad roof tiles to make way for the new. The ladder was firm and awaiting him, ready to take him down whenever he'd had enough. To eliminate his fear of heights, which he'd forgotten he had, he gazed out across the glittering Nantucket Sound, watching a sailboat glide west toward Martha's Vineyard. Gosh, it was pretty up here. Gosh, he hoped he didn't fall.

As he watched the boat, something else caught his eye on the beach. There, walking very close to one another, so close it was clear they were in love, was a couple. The young woman had long red hair that whipped out behind her, and she laughed beautifully at whatever the young man told her. He was tall and muscular, and he wore a white t-shirt and a pair of jeans and was tanned, presumably from hours on that very beach. To Samuel's surprise, they walked directly toward The Copperfield House and entered the residency. Maybe they were the writers?

Watching them triggered a wide range of memories. Samuel could only think of his first few months with Georgia, how delirious with love he'd been. They hadn't had two pennies to rub together, and he'd worked as a dishwasher, a car washer, a gardener, and a dog walker, anything to make a few bucks to take his girl out. He'd told Georgia he would do anything for her, and they'd fallen into one another's eyes, incapable of seeing anyone else. After six months of that chaos, they'd eloped. They hadn't been able to afford a wedding, and they'd told each other and their families that they'd have a party later on when they had the cash to make it something special. They had, in fact, had a wedding party later on, a luxurious one with a wedding planner and everything.

But by then, the love had felt different, like a shoe that didn't quite fit.

Still, he'd done anything for her. He still probably would.

Suddenly, Samuel realized he was being watched. He turned rightward to stare at a woman through the window of The Copperfield House residency, and the surprise of her gaze made him jump. Several roof tiles fell to the ground, and his heartbeat was rapid, proof of his terror. Immediately, the woman opened the window and called out, "I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to scare you."

Samuel placed his hand on his heart and willed himself to calm down. He felt as though she'd yanked him from his daydream, and he had whiplash.

"I was just looking out at the water," the woman continued, "and then realized you were right there! You surprised me."

Samuel took a deep breath. "Wow. That woke me up."

The woman, who was maybe a little bit younger than Samuel, with dark, reddish hair and beautiful, big blue eyes, smiled gently. "Did you sleepwalk yourself onto the roof?"

Samuel laughed, surprising himself. Had he laughed at all yesterday? It felt unnatural, and his throat closed immediately as though it couldn't handle the stress.

"Bernard asked me to do some repairs," he explained. "I'm trying to earn my keep."

"You're staying here at the house?"

Samuel nodded. "Are you one of the writers? Or the musician?"

"I'm the writing instructor, apparently," she said. "Layla."

“Samuel.”

“Nice to meet you.” She frowned slightly.

Samuel decided to come right out with it. “I’m sure they told you about me. I’m the one who just got out of prison.”

Immediately after he said it, Layla’s cheeks turned pink. He wasn’t sure if that meant he was acting strangely or if it frightened her he’d just been locked away. Probably both.

“Is this your first full day out?” Layla asked quietly.

Samuel shrugged.

“And you’re repairing a roof?”

“I ate a burrito yesterday,” he explained.

“How was that?”

“A revelation,” Samuel said.

Layla laughed again. Samuel knew his radar was off; otherwise, he would have said there was an attraction between them. What did he know? Including Greta, Ella, and the waitress from yesterday, Layla was only the fourth woman he’d spoken to. He didn’t seem to be getting any better in the socializing department.

After a long silence, Layla raised her chin. “Do you notice anything strange about the world now versus the world when you went in?”

Samuel set his jaw. He wasn’t sure he was so comfortable with the question, especially from a stranger. Then again, the honesty and openness in Layla’s eyes beckoned to him.

“I was just thinking that it seems angrier,” he explained.

Layla grimaced. “I’ve thought that, too. But it’s happened gradually. And now, it’s like we’re in boiling water.”

Samuel nodded, holding her gaze. He had the sudden urge to clamber across the roof and climb in through the window, as he'd seen young men do in sitcoms. He wasn't a young man. He wasn't wanted in that window.

"I should get back to work," he said, his voice stiffening.

"Of course. The roof won't repair itself," Layla said. "How long will you be at The Copperfield House?"

"A while," he admitted.

Layla brightened. "I'm here till the end of November. I'm sure I'll see you around."

Samuel's heart dropped into his stomach. The idea of living alongside a beautiful woman like Layla was almost too much to bear. "See you later," he said, feeling dumb. "Have a great day."

Chapter Five

That afternoon, Layla donned a long, flowing yellow dress, styled her hair into long curls, did her makeup with heavy eyeliner and firetruck red lipstick, and headed outside. In her backpack, she had her laptop and her journal, and she felt renewed and big-eyed, ready to see Nantucket in all its glory. As she walked along the road, she waved to Greta on the front porch, where she read, as always, from the swing.

“Are you coming back later for dinner?” Greta called.

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world!”

Layla wandered toward the historic downtown, where tourists streamed in and out of little boutiques, ate melting ice cream cones, and whispered to crying children, trying to calm them down. Layla understood. There was something about vacations, about the high intensity of the emotions, that made anyone a little more upset.

Although Layla was ordinarily very health conscious, she opted for an ice cream cone of her own, a pistachio flavor, and wandered along the harbor, gazing out at the boats as they shifted gently along the docks.

“Layla!”

She turned swiftly at the sound of her name and saw Aurora and her boyfriend, Brooks, approaching. Aurora was a goddess with long, flowing hair and Stevie Nicks-style dresses, and her cheeks were perpetually sun-kissed. She didn't look like a woman who'd just had a breakdown.

“Hello! What are you two up to?”

Aurora laced her arm through Brooks'. “I convinced Brooks to take me sailing again. I'm worried the weather will get bad very soon. Of course, Brooks, being a fisherman, always has to be out in it.”

“The cold must not bother you anymore!” Layla suggested to Brooks.

“He's got thick skin,” Aurora answered. “I think I'm a wimp in that department.”

“The first time I met her, she was soaking wet at a bus stop in Hyannis, waiting for a ferry that wasn't coming,” Brooks remembered. “I never thought for a minute you were a wimp.”

“You missed the ferry?” Layla asked.

Aurora blushed. “Yes. I thought I wasn't going to make it to The Copperfield House at all, but Brooks took me here in his fishing boat. It was my first time on a boat of any kind, and I was so nervous. I can't swim.”

Layla winced. “That would be scary.”

“You can swim now,” Brooks said. “Sort of.”

Aurora waved her hand. “Sort of! That's about right. Hey, will you be at dinner tonight? Greta is trying her hand at an Indian stew. She said she's never made it before.”

“It's bound to be fantastic,” Layla said. “See you both there.”

Layla finished her ice cream cone and wandered away from the harbor, falling into a coffee shop with local artist paintings hanging on the walls and hip indie music playing from the speakers. It reminded her of some of her favorite coffee shops in New York City, places she'd written and read in over the years. Some of those coffee shops had rules for their customers: *If Layla Johnson is here, do not disturb her.* She was a coffee shop celebrity, if only because people who went to coffee shops tended to read more than others.

But Nantucket was usually filled with celebrities, and nobody gave her a second glance as she walked toward the corner table with her Americano. There, she opened her notebook, placed her pen to the page, and found herself writing a single name: Samuel.

Immediately, she seized up with worry. Ever since she'd met Samuel that morning, her brain had felt recharged, activated, telling itself a story that she needed to put down on the page. It wasn't hard to imagine how difficult his life currently felt, how bizarre it was to be out of prison, and what he felt he'd missed or left behind. Greta had mentioned he'd been married before, that his family no longer spoke to him, and that was rife with story potential, too.

Was it moral to write about someone else's life? Layla wasn't sure. Then again, she was a writer, which meant that everything in life was "material," in a way. And it wasn't like she knew all the details about Samuel's life, anyway. She knew he'd gone to prison; she knew his family had abandoned him.

Plus, she only had three months to write a completely new novel. And it had to come from somewhere. By the time it came out— years from now, given how slow publishing was,

Samuel would be long gone, building a life elsewhere. And she would be back in New York City, enjoying the fruits of this labor.

She would be Layla Johnson again. She would respect herself.

Layla's very first novel had been published in 1989 when Layla was only nineteen years old. This was the work that had skyrocketed her name to stardom. She'd written the majority of it during her final year of high school, skipping big milestones like prom and graduation parties to edit at home. She'd burned with a fire she couldn't ignore. And when she'd become truly and deliriously famous, she'd felt it had all been worth it. Sort of.

The novel was called *The Mulberry Tree*. It was based on an incident from Layla's childhood, wherein she and her sister, Connie, had been lightly kidnapped by a neighbor. "Lightly," meaning that he'd just wanted to take them for a little while, just for a day or two, to teach their father a lesson. Apparently, their father had angered him for one reason or another, something their father was apt to do to anyone, be it friends or relatives or coworkers, if he had a job at the time.

Layla had used the experience to talk about the general mess of her family life growing up, as well as her dynamic with her sister, which had altered considerably after the kidnapping. You would have thought she and Connie would have grown closer after an experience like that, but, in reality, they'd spent as much of their childhood apart, becoming very different people. Their fear had altered them that day.

The Mulberry Tree was so named because their neighbor had met them at their backyard mulberry tree nearly every day after school to give them treats and talk to them about what

was going on in their lives. They'd trusted him so completely. Their parents had spent their free time ripping each other to shreds, getting drunk, or getting into fights, so much so that they hadn't had much time to care for their daughters. Their neighbor had been their rock. But he'd used them. They'd been his pawns.

At the time of the novel's release, after many years of trying to rebuild their relationship, Layla and Connie had been on good terms. Connie was two years younger, but she'd dropped out of high school, taken her GED, and moved to the city to live nearer to Layla. Layla was a student at NYU, on heavy scholarship, and although she'd written so much about it, she was on a quest to forget her childhood.

But when the book was released and Layla's fame mounted, she was forced to speak more about her childhood than ever before. And unfortunately, the book cast the limelight on Connie, as well—which enraged her. Connie had shown up to Layla's dorm one night, her eyes fiery, looking the way their father had when he'd wanted to hit them. And she'd demanded, "How dare you write about me? How dare you put me out there like that?"

Connie and Layla hadn't spoken for the next four years. Layla had missed her so completely. Even during their teenage years, when they'd been at a distance from one another, Layla had always known Connie was asleep just down the hall. But in the early nineties, Layla hadn't been sure what was going on with her sister. She worried she'd fallen on hard times, gotten on drugs, or fallen in love with the wrong guy. As the older of the two, Layla was plagued with nightmares about what could have befallen her.

As Layla circled these memories now, in this Nantucket coffee shop, guilt swelled over her. Of course, after what her sister had done later, it shouldn't have mattered anymore. Maybe it didn't.

People didn't ask her many questions about *The Mulberry Tree* anymore. It had been her first hit that had revealed her as a supposed "prodigy," but it was no secret to her nor anyone else that the book wasn't her best. The six she'd published after that had been both critically acclaimed and bestselling, and they'd more-or-less overshadowed the success of *The Mulberry Tree*. Of course, Connie had always remembered it. Connie had never let her forget. "You mined our family trauma for your career," she'd blared. "You used me."

The difference was, of course, that Layla didn't actually know Samuel. Everything she wrote would be complete fiction, based on the idea of a man starting over completely after prison. That wasn't exactly a singular experience. That happened to people all the time.

Chapter Six

Wellesley, Massachusetts: 2007

Samuel Garreth was forty-one years old and making one hundred and twenty thousand dollars per year. He worked at a mid-sized sales firm, quite high up; his colleagues liked him and appreciated his efforts, and his bosses gave him yearly bonuses. He had a beautiful wife, Georgia, whom he loved with his whole heart, and two wonderful and bright children, Quinn and Ronan, who were thirteen and eleven, respectively. Ordinarily, they took one big vacation per year to places like Greece, France, or Japan, and they had a moderately-sized home with a guest bedroom, a study, and a television bigger than anything Samuel would have ever dreamed of as a kid. He was happy, so much so that he often pinched himself when he woke up in the morning. This couldn't be his life. And yet, it was.

It was a surprise to him when he learned just how unhappy Georgia was.

Okay, it shouldn't have been such a surprise. For the past five years, she'd been slowly fading away from him. He couldn't remember the last time they'd gone out on a date, or she'd laughed at one of his jokes or genuinely connected with him on an emotional level. But married couples went through

different eras of their relationships; everyone knew that. And he assumed theirs would rise again soon, find renewed passion, and leave this gray time period in the dust.

Samuel worked later than usual and drove back home with the windows down, listening to the radio and humming along. He'd called his wife's cell before he'd left the office, but Georgia hadn't picked up. That wasn't necessarily a surprise. Maybe she was out in the yard and couldn't hear it. Maybe it was dying.

But when Samuel parked and got out of the car, he realized his wife and children weren't home. This wasn't entirely strange, either. Samuel took a beer from the fridge and sat on the back porch with his feet up, reading a Jack London novel. Sometimes, he paused to consider his relationship with Georgia and how he could reignite it again. Maybe they could go on vacation, just the two of them. They could return to Nantucket Island, where they'd vacationed many years ago after the birth of Quinn. Maybe there, Georgia would remember just how in love with him she was. They still had seven years before Ronan went to college, and Samuel wanted to go through that time as a united force. After that, they could figure out what it meant to be "empty nesters" together. Maybe they could sell the house. He could retire early, and they could travel cheaply, buy a motorhome, and explore.

Of course, living in Wellesley wasn't easy. It was the third-richest town in all of Massachusetts. To live there, you needed to be somewhat wealthy. And, to Samuel, they were.

But when Georgia, Quinn, and Ronan returned home about an hour after Samuel had, their faces were glum with disappointment. Samuel's initial fear was that something horrible had happened, that one of their children had gotten

hurt. But after Quinn and Ronan scampered up to their rooms, Georgia collapsed on the chair beside Samuel and burst into tears.

“Honey! Are you okay?” Samuel hurried to hug her from behind, overwhelmed.

Georgia shook her head. “I’m sorry. I really am.”

Samuel couldn’t breathe. What was this about?

“It’s just that we went to the Thomkins’ new house today,” she said. “And it’s just gorgeous, Samuel. It’s insane. They have three swimming pools, a hot tub, a sauna, and heated floors in all five of their bathrooms.”

Slowly, Samuel removed his arms from around Georgia’s shoulders and blinked out dully from the porch. This wasn’t the first time she’d brought this up. This was just the most dramatic time so far.

“And the kids looked at me and asked, ‘Why can’t we have this?’” Georgia went on. “And I didn’t know what to tell them. I mean, it’s embarrassing for them to live in the smallest house in the entire neighborhood.”

Samuel sighed and dropped back into his chair, eyeing the Jack London novel, wishing he could return to that world. “Honey, our house is beautiful. Remember when we picked it out? You were so smitten with it.”

Georgia gave him a look that suggested she thought he was an imbecile. Samuel felt as though he’d been slashed across the belly with Freddy Kruger’s fingers.

“I don’t mean to overreact,” Georgia continued. “It’s just we live in Wellesley. And people talk about us. They pity us, Samuel.”

Samuel felt himself consumed with vitriol. He wanted to ask Georgia why she didn't make more money if she cared about it so much. But he wasn't that kind of guy. Plus, he loved Georgia so much. She was acting like a child, yes. But that was a result of her environment.

"Maybe we should leave Wellesley," Samuel suggested. "If everyone is so mean here, why don't we go somewhere else?"

Georgia looked at him as though he'd just grown a second head. "The kids have the best chance at a good future here," she said. "Quinn has a fantastic theater community, and Ronan loves his soccer team. We can't just take them away from that."

Samuel wanted to remind her that Wellesley wasn't the last place on earth, that other soccer teams and theater communities existed, and that the world was big.

"Did you give any thought to asking your boss for a promotion?" Georgia asked meekly.

They'd talked about this three months ago. At that time, Samuel hadn't felt comfortable because they'd just given him a sizeable Christmas bonus, and he hadn't wanted to seem ungrateful.

"It's been six months since Christmas," Georgia reminded him. "And you've been working so hard."

Had he? In all honesty, Samuel worked his full forty hours a week, just like so many other Americans, but made sure to come home at a decent hour so he could make it to those theater productions and soccer games. He loved his children, and he didn't want to give his life to work. He'd listened to that song "Cat's in the Cradle" one too many times.

“I can ask,” Samuel said reluctantly. “But I can’t promise they’ll give me enough for us to upgrade the house.” He paused and slid his tongue across his teeth. “Georgia, we have so much extra room. No, we don’t have a pool, but we could talk about putting one in. Maybe not this year, but next year?”

Georgia stared at the ground as though the idea of looking at him in the eye disgusted her. Samuel tugged at his hair, picked up his book, and disappeared upstairs, where he took a long shower and thought about the water bill he’d have to pay if they had a pool. The children’s school wasn’t cheap, and neither were Georgia’s clothes or his suits. What did she want from him? Why was she doing this?

Samuel raised his fist and smashed it against the wall of the shower. The thump was watery and distant, and probably, nobody in the house heard it. He considered punching the wall again but knew it wouldn’t matter. In his children and wife’s eyes, he wasn’t good enough, not for them or this neighborhood. He had to make something work.

When he got out of the shower, he found Georgia at the edge of their bed, removing her earrings. With somber eyes, she explained to him that Jefferson Ford, one of their neighbors, maybe had a job for Samuel, if Samuel was willing to interview for it. Jefferson Ford made more money than God; everyone knew that. And he looked down on everyone else in the neighborhood for not managing to “do life” like him.

“I don’t want to work with Jefferson,” Samuel said stiffly, tugging on his boxers and dropping onto the bed.

Georgia blinked at him. “Jefferson likes you. He thinks you’re smart and that he could use someone like you.”

Samuel rubbed his eyes. “Just let me ask my boss about the raise, okay? I like my job. I like the freedom it gives me.”

Georgia was silent the rest of the night. Frequently, she tossed and turned, waking Samuel up. He wanted to demand, “Does this really bother you that much? You really can’t sleep because I don’t make as much as you think I should?” But he kept his mouth shut.

Jittery, suddenly frightened that Georgia would leave him if he didn’t secure more money, Samuel booked a meeting the very next day with his boss. He’d worked for him for ten years at that point, and Samuel considered him a friend. He’d attended the baptism of all of his children, as had his boss for his. But after a few minutes of pleasantries, Samuel got up the nerve to ask for that raise— and his boss’ smile fell off his face.

“Samuel, you’ve seen the numbers this quarter, haven’t you?” His boss stared out the window. “They’re not up to par. I’m not even considering bonuses for Christmas this year.”

Samuel closed his eyes, imagining the bludgeoning he’d get from Georgia if he didn’t even get the Christmas bonus.

“Are you in a bad way?” his boss asked him. “Do you need help?”

“I’ll be okay,” Samuel told him, hating that he’d asked in the first place. “Thank you for your time.”

Later that afternoon, his wife called him to ask how the conversation had gone. It was rare that she called him at work, and, initially, Samuel’s blood pressure spiked with excitement.

“Hey. How did it go?”

Samuel sighed. This was why she’d called. Of course. “He didn’t go for it.”

“Why the heck not?”

Samuel was in the kitchen of the office, and he wanted to keep his voice down. “It’s complicated. I can tell you more later.”

It wasn’t complicated. Not in the slightest. But did she think money grew on trees, or what?

After Samuel got off the phone, one of his coworkers, Bobby, entered the kitchen and poured himself a mug of coffee. He looked pale.

“You okay?” Samuel asked him. “You coming down with something?”

Bobby shrugged. He seemed incapable of looking Samuel in the eye. “I just found out my wife is cheating on me.”

Something cold and hard fell into Samuel’s stomach. He thought he was going to throw up. “Bobby, gosh. I’m so sorry, man.” Samuel had been to Bobby and Tammy’s wedding. He’d watched their first kiss as man and wife. It was true that Samuel was sort of a sucker in the romance department, but he truly believed that marriage was for life. He’d believed in Tammy and Bobby’s love. “What happened?”

Bobby raised his shoulders. “We were fighting so much about money. It seemed like we never had enough.”

Samuel dropped his gaze. It was too close to home.

“Anyway, she got a better job,” Bobby went on, “and she started cheating on me with her boss. It’s so cliché, isn’t it? It makes me sick to think about.”

Samuel touched Bobby’s arm, resisting his urge to hug him and comfort him the way he used to do with Ronan and Quinn.

“She moved out yesterday,” Bobby went on. “And now, I can’t stop thinking about going home to that empty house. It terrifies me. I don’t know who I am without her, you know? And maybe that’s the whole problem. Maybe that makes me pathetic.”

Samuel’s head was filled with Bobby’s story the rest of the day, so much so that he left work early and drove back home. He found Georgia in the sunroom, reading the same Jack London book he’d been reading and drinking a glass of white wine.

“You’re home early,” she said, sounding accusatory.

“I felt sick,” he explained, walking past her and heading toward his bed. Unfortunately, Georgia followed after him and hovered in the doorway as he undressed and drew the curtains.

“I called Jefferson,” she explained. “And told him you’d like to talk to him about that job.”

Samuel’s shoulders shook beneath the covers. Was this a nightmare? Georgia sat at the edge of the bed and continued to talk about her dreams for their future, about spending an entire month in Italy, about buying that “gorgeous house on top of the hill,” and about being able to afford French lessons for the kids. Why did the kids need to learn French? Samuel had no idea. Apparently, they needed to learn Mandarin, too. Samuel couldn’t speak any language except English, and he’d done all right for himself. Well, he’d thought he was doing all right. Apparently, he’d been lackluster at best.

“I just want to be happy,” Georgia whispered through the shadows. “I want our children to have the best chance at success they can.”

And in that moment, heavy with sorrow, Samuel resolved to do anything he could to ensure Georgia had whatever she wanted. He couldn't lose her. He loved her too much.

Chapter Seven

Present Day: Nantucket Island

Layla's editor, Val, always preferred video chatting to normal phone conversations. Although this normally irritated Layla, today, she found herself thrilled to brush her hair and apply a bit of lipstick, if only to show Val just how put-together she was. She set up her computer on the desk in her bedroom and waited quietly, staring out the window at the wide-open ocean. When Val's smiling face popped up in a little box, Layla knew it was time to perform.

"Layla! Look at you. You look sun-kissed," Val said.

Layla laughed, her voice like music in her own ears. "I feel sun-kissed. The island has been good for me."

"I'm glad to hear it," Val said. "Everyone in the literary community is dying to know. What's it like to live with the great literary married couple, Bernard and Greta?"

"They're just as fantastic as everyone thinks they are," Layla said. "Unfortunately, I have no juicy gossip. All I can say is that Greta is a wonderful cook, and Bernard is a marvelous conversationalist, and I think it would do my writing good if I was able to live here at The Copperfield House for the rest of my days."

“And leave the city?” Val was a city gal through and through and couldn’t imagine leaving NYC forever.

“Why not? I haven’t thought of the city once.”

Val smirked and folded her fingers beneath her chin. “I take it that means you’ve had quite a bit of success on the manuscript?”

“It’s flowing very well. I will definitely have it to you by the end of November, as planned,” Layla said confidently, glad, for once, to give Val good news that wasn’t riddled with lies. Lies were monstrous, as they trapped you in them and forced you to make them true, even to yourself.

“And you still don’t want to clue me in on what it’s about?”

Layla leaned back in her chair. “It’s about second chances.”

“Intriguing.”

“I think it’s something people in their forties, fifties, and sixties think about quite often,” Layla breathed. “I’m using a huge event in a main character’s life to illustrate just how much control you actually have over your own destiny. It doesn’t always feel like very much.”

Val’s eyes glistened. For a moment, Layla thought she was going to say something about what had happened to Layla, thus suggesting that the book was all about her. Layla would have ended the call immediately.

Instead, Val offered, “I just love that, Layla. There just aren’t enough books for our generation of women. Life doesn’t end when you turn thirty, no matter how much the media tells us it does.”

“Imagine my surprise when I turned thirty-one,” Layla joked.

Val laughed easily, throwing her head back. “You sound fantastic, Layla. Maybe I should come to that island and get a dose of sunshine myself.”

“I’m here another two and a half months,” Layla told her. “You can come any time.”

“Don’t you have a few students? How are they?”

Layla considered Bella, Victor, and Evie, whom she’d known for two weeks at this point. “They’re eager to learn. I think I was much more stubborn at their age than they are.”

“You have to be stubborn to make it in this business,” Val affirmed. “You should impart that as much as you can.”

“I don’t want to be too pessimistic,” Layla said. “Anything can happen in life. I want them to open to whatever comes.”

Layla realized she was preaching a sermon she hadn’t truly listened to herself. But that was the thing about having an editor: you had to perform your own mental health, your own productivity, in order for them to think you were on your way somewhere, ready to bring them with you.

After the call, Layla went down the road to a Nantucket flower shop to purchase a bouquet of lilies. She placed them in a vase Greta had lying around the house, one she said she could use, and set the vase on her desk. Feeling recharged, she opened her laptop to her newest project and charged directly into chapter five. It was a dramatic scene in which the prisoner, whom she’d just named Sam for now (but planned to change later), was drunk in a bar, calling and calling his wife’s number from a stranger’s cell phone. All he wanted in the world was to hear her voice again. Didn’t she understand how

he'd ached for her? Didn't she understand how lonely prison was?

Of course, in order to write the book, Layla had to come up with a reason Samuel had gone to prison in the first place. This wasn't something Greta had told her, and she didn't want to use real-life facts, anyway. She decided to circle the idea of his crime throughout the novel and reveal it at the end. It didn't really matter what he'd done, anyway. It only mattered that he'd ruined his life in the process.

That evening was the going-away dinner for Ella and Will. Together with their band, they were headed out on a three-month tour across the United States and Canada, and Greta refused to allow them to leave without full bellies and a reminder of the tremendous love waiting for them on Nantucket.

After two weeks at The Copperfield House, Layla had been clued in on what had happened previously in Ella and Will's lives. Just last year, they'd broken up after more than twenty years together. Their band had been dead, much to the dismay of their thousands upon thousands of fans across the world. At that time, Ella had brought her youngest child, Danny, to live at The Copperfield House to escape the city—and eventually, Will had followed to rekindle their romance and their musical partnership. It was endlessly romantic and yet another example of “second chances.”

It was a beautiful night in mid-September, warm enough to sit on the back porch in sweatshirts and sweaters. Alana, Ella, and Julia set the table, chatting as they whisked between indoors and out. Layla sat on a rocking chair with a glass of wine, proud of her word count for the day, feeling loose and easy. Bernard was beside her with a glass of whiskey,

discussing writing with Victor, Layla's student. Although Bernard was pleased with many of Victor's answers to his questions, Victor seemed overtly arrogant to Layla, as though he already saw himself as one of the great novelists, even this early in his career.

Bella strode up with her own glass of wine and sat directly beside Victor. You could feel the beams of attraction coming off of them, especially when they glanced at each other. New love was intoxicating yet so difficult to take in. Layla sipped her wine and smiled at Bella.

“How is your writing going?”

“Oh, it's great,” Bella said. “I feel so inspired here. And yours? You said you were working on a novel?”

Layla nodded. “I have a tight deadline for the end of November, but I should be able to make it work.”

Bernard overheard her. “End of November? Goodness. That gives me anxiety for you. Do you work well under pressure?”

Layla laughed. “Does anyone? Oh, but the book is basically writing itself. Just like you said, Bella, I feel very inspired here.”

“Maybe we could read over some of the chapters in class?” Bella asked. “I would love a preview into the next masterpiece by Layla Johnson!”

“I can't imagine showing my work before it's ready,” Victor chimed in.

For once, Layla was grateful for Victor's opinion. “That's the thing, isn't it? You're opening yourself up to criticism the minute you send it over.”

Bella looked crestfallen, as though Victor disagreeing with her had ruined her entire day. Layla could empathize. She'd felt similarly after she'd met her husband, been so lost in love for him that she'd needed to align her values with everything he stood for. She'd lost so much of herself, and she wasn't even sure what those pieces were anymore. It had been too long.

Suddenly, Samuel appeared at the bottom of the porch steps. He wore a black t-shirt, a flannel, and a pair of jeans, and he looked as though he'd gained a bit of healthy weight since Layla had last seen him a week or so ago. It was strange to see him in the flesh, as Layla had written so much about him over the past two weeks. It was like her book character had come to life.

"Samuel! Good evening." Bernard stood to greet him. "Pull up a chair!"

Ella breezed back onto the porch. "Can I get you a glass of lemonade?"

Samuel blushed, embarrassed to be doted on. "Lemonade sounds incredible. Thanks."

Ella poured him a glass and handed it to him as he sidled up next to Bernard, nodding at Victor, Bella, and Layla. Layla's heart shivered, and she took a long drink of wine. There was so much she didn't know about him, so much she'd just made up on the page.

"How was your day?" Bernard asked.

"Really good," Samuel said. "Charlie showed me his workshop down the road." Charlie was Julia's boyfriend, a woodworker. "I couldn't believe some of the pieces."

“He’s an incredible talent,” Bernard said. “Of course, it’s hard for me to think of him as anything but the kid my daughter was dating back in the nineties. But that’s my own problem.” He laughed.

Samuel smiled nervously and glanced Layla’s way again. “He said he has work for me if I want it. I think the parole officer would like to hear I have something to do.”

“That’s fantastic.” Bernard’s voice was soft and tender. “I could see the two of you getting along very well.”

Not long after that, Charlie arrived with a bouquet of flowers for Julia, which she placed in a vase in the center of the table. He shook Bernard’s hand and nodded Samuel’s way, saying, “Hey, stranger.” Layla noted Samuel’s mannerisms, the way he spoke, and how, slowly, he began to melt around the happiness of this big, boisterous family.

Just before they sat to eat, Greta announced, “Everyone, raise a glass. I want to make a toast to Ella and Will. They’re off on a grand adventure together, one that will assuredly change the trajectory of their lives and their band’s fame. I wish you happiness, health, love, plenty of music, and love as you drive across this country together. And make sure you eat plenty of delicious food on the way! Nutrition is key to touring. A little birdie told me that.”

Ella and Will had one arm slung around the other, and they swayed gently, smiling at Greta. They were gorgeous, clearly made for the stage, and enamored with each other. It seemed to Layla that everyone on the island was overwhelmingly in love. This was different than New York City, where, it seemed, singledom ruled. Layla, herself, knew eight fifty-something women who lived by themselves and didn’t date, just like her.

They often mocked the idea that people felt they “needed” one another.

Layla wasn't sure if they mocked the lovers because they were jealous or because they genuinely no longer believed in love. She couldn't even answer it for herself.

After a salmon dinner with cheddar biscuits, the Copperfield women cleared the dinner table and left their guests and the men to watch the sunset. Layla followed after them, hungry to help, but they shooed her out again, telling her to enjoy the view and another glass of wine. As Layla walked back outside, Samuel approached, and they held each other's gaze in the doorway. The heat from Samuel's body made Layla's knees give way.

Samuel stuttered slightly. “Did you enjoy dinner?”

Layla dropped her chin. “It was delicious.” Had Samuel gotten used to non-prison food? Or was every meal a revelation to him? “Did you like it?”

“I could have eaten three more plates,” Samuel said. “My appetite has been wild lately. I've been going on long hikes across the island and swimming whenever I get too warm.”

Layla could just picture him walking along the sands, gazing out at the water.

Suddenly, Victor bucked up behind Samuel. “Do you mind if I squeeze through here?”

The magic was broken. Layla pressed herself against the wall so that Victor could walk between her and Samuel.

“Samuel! Didn't you say you play guitar?” Bernard called from the porch.

Samuel blushed again. “I haven't played in years.”

“You should play for us!” Bella cried. “Doesn’t this weather call for it?”

Samuel looked hesitant. Layla slowly brought her hand to his elbow, and her touch forced his eyes toward hers.

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” Layla said.

But something in Layla’s tone clearly suggested she wanted him to play terribly. And Samuel shrugged and said, “Why not?” He hurried into the living room to remove Bernard’s acoustic guitar from the wall. Layla poured herself another glass of wine and sat in the rocking chair, watching as Samuel leaned against the railing of the porch and tuned the guitar. Everyone on the porch quieted, eyes on him.

“I’m pretty rusty,” he explained again. “I’ll pass this over to Ella and Will as soon as I embarrass myself.”

But Samuel didn’t embarrass himself. As a moon hung low in the night sky and stars spotted the darkness above them, Samuel strummed through his favorite tunes, allowing those on the porch to sing along. Layla heard her own voice rise, following his lead, and frequently, his eyes found hers through the shadows. Layla’s heart burst with surprised expectation. It was as though something enormous was about to happen.

Layla knew better than to hope for anything to change in her life, not this deep into it. More than that, if Samuel ever found out she was basing a character off of him in her novel, he would probably never want to speak to her again. She couldn’t get close to him. But she could watch him, and she could sing his fabulous songs. That had to be enough.

Chapter Eight

Wellesley, Massachusetts: 2008

Samuel closed on the purchase of the new house in July. Just as Georgia had requested, it was the best and most beautiful home in the entire neighborhood, with an in-house pool, an outdoor pool, a hot tub, a sauna, a basement movie theater, two state-of-the-art kitchens, high ceilings, heated floors, seven bedrooms, and a wide, sweeping lawn with grass so fresh and bright that it looked taken from a desktop background. Because Georgia had gushed about the house so much, nagging at him, dreaming of their lives there, Samuel didn't tell her about the purchase until it had gone through. And when he drove her up the hill and handed her the keys to her brand-new palace, she collapsed into his arms and wept. "Oh, I love you, Samuel. I love you so much." It was music to his ears.

Just as he'd assumed she would, Georgia opted to throw out everything they owned and buy brand-new furniture to suit the new place. She had a vision for every single room and took it upon herself to oversee the entire redesign. "We can move in starting November 1st," she announced to the family. "And by the weekend of Thanksgiving, we can host the housewarming party to end all housewarming parties."

Quinn and Ronan were ecstatic. Samuel watched as they raced down the hallway to select their bedrooms, both of which faced the backyard and had their own bathrooms. “I love you, Daddy! I love you so much!” Quinn cried over and over with tears in her eyes. “I cannot wait to have a sleepover here!”

Samuel liked the house. It was too big, the kind of thing that made you lose your sense of self and your sense of time, but he appreciated swimming in the indoor pool, watching his favorite films in the cinema, and not fighting with Georgia every gosh darn day about whether their lives were mundane and sad due to their lack of wealth.

On the Saturday after Thanksgiving, Samuel donned an Italian shirt he’d ordered directly from Rome and paraded downstairs to find his wife talking to the caterers overseeing their housewarming party. They’d invited the most exclusive guests in the neighborhood, people Georgia really wanted to impress, including Jefferson Ford. That was one thing Samuel was looking forward to— showing Jefferson Ford just how little he’d needed his offer of a job. Samuel had done all of this himself.

For the billionth time, Georgia talked about the guest list, worrying about various people’s nut allergies or inability to eat gluten. She’d covered all her bases, probably. Samuel wrapped his arms around her and kissed her delicately on the back of the neck, reminding her, “They’re all here to ogle the house. Who cares about the food?”

“It’s all about the complete package,” Georgia said. “The salmon puffs taste that much better as they’re looking out the bay window or at the grand piano.”

Samuel resisted the urge to roll his eyes. What did he know about impressing people?

“Oh! I forgot to tell you. The Evertons are coming, after all,” Georgia said.

Samuel removed his arms from Georgia’s waist. He blinked twice and steadied his voice. “Great. What do they do again?”

“I told you,” Georgia went on, “Mrs. Everton is an interior designer. She helped me pick out the wallpaper in the upstairs bathroom.”

“And Mr. Everton?”

“Rod is an FBI agent,” Georgia explained breezily. “Isn’t that cool? An FBI agent in the neighborhood! It’s nice to feel so protected.”

Something cold and hard thudded into the base of Samuel’s stomach. He walked around Georgia and poured himself a glass of water as Georgia continued to blather about party specifics— how many bottles of wine she’d ordered, what she should wear, whether or not she should have opted for more kid-friendly food options rather than forcing them into the world of more adult culinary delights. Each time, Samuel managed to grumble, “Oh yeah. Sounds good,” or, “Whatever you think is best,” immediately forgetting what she’d said and how she’d said it. It wasn’t like it mattered what he thought, anyway.

Oh, how he hated this party. Oh, how he wanted to sit in a room alone.

Upstairs, Quinn spoke to Ronan about the party in a way that echoed her mother. Samuel listened in the hallway, wincing at how authoritative Quinn sounded. Many years ago,

she'd been such a sweet little girl, insisting on wearing her fairy Halloween costume at all hours of the day (and sometimes night) and asking for fantastical stories from her father, whom she'd deemed "the best storyteller." Quinn was fourteen, basically a full-on teenager, which frightened Samuel. More than that, he was scared of what this new house would do to her. Obviously, he'd taught her that wealth was synonymous with something great, something revolutionary—something that made you better than anyone else.

Probably, it was the worst parenting decision he could have made.

But he couldn't go back now.

When the party began at four-thirty on the Saturday after Thanksgiving, Samuel did his best to put on a smiling face. He poured himself and three of the neighborhood husbands rounds of scotch, and they stood in the room overlooking the glowing indoor pool and clinked glasses. Downstairs, the wives gushed about the house to Georgia, who acted as though the house wasn't anything that special, just something they'd casually moved into like it was nothing. Samuel loved her. He really did. But right now, he wanted to scream.

"It's really something," Hank, a dental surgeon who lived down the road, said. "My wife's had her eye on this house since it went on the market. When we heard there was a buyer, she had a small breakdown." He laughed. "Heck, we both did!"

"But you deserve it, of course," a man named Walter offered. "You, Georgia, and the kids fit so well here."

"And you have plenty of space for yourself," another guy said. "You could get lost in here."

“I bet you can make yourself scarce if Georgia really needs something,” Hank offered with another horrible laugh.

Samuel wanted to protest. He wanted to tell them that, actually, he and Georgia had previously lived in a one-bedroom apartment, that he’d been so in love with her that he’d followed her around their little home.

Instead, he said, “That’s right! I have plenty of me time.”

That was the problem, he thought now.

Suddenly, Jefferson Ford darkened the doorway of the room. He was wearing a silk button-down, and his five o’clock shadow had been expertly planned, presumably for this very moment, making him resemble Clark Gable. Jealousy rocketed through Samuel, which he tried to dissolve. He’d never been able to escape the feeling that Jefferson and Georgia had slept together. Or, if they hadn’t, that she wanted to, or once had wanted to.

“There you are, man.” Jefferson strode through the room like he owned the place.

Terribly, a voice in Samuel’s head whispered, *Your house is bigger than his, and he hates that!*

“Hey, man.” Samuel shook Jefferson’s hand and poured him a glass of scotch. “Welcome to the new place.”

“This is really something,” Jefferson said, taking the glass. “Isn’t it something, gents?”

The other three men nodded, enthralled with him. He had always been their alpha.

“Tell us, Samuel,” Jefferson continued. “It’s the question on everyone’s mind.”

Samuel arched his eyebrow. *Here we go*, he thought. He thought he might faint.

“Is this really what it means to be in sales? Because, if so, sign me up,” Jefferson said, stretching his arms out on either side of him.

Samuel waited a split-second to allow himself to laugh. The others joined immediately when he did.

“Working in sales is something special,” Samuel offered. “That’s for sure.”

Jefferson furrowed his brow. Within his eyes, Samuel could see questions swimming. Jefferson clearly remembered that just last year, Georgia had asked if Samuel could work for him. He remembered they’d been struggling.

“But I also started my own firm,” Samuel continued.

The four other men perked up, intrigued.

“Were you able to take your clients with you?” Jefferson asked.

“I did,” Samuel explained, palming the back of his neck.

“What’s the name of the firm?” Hank asked.

“Garreth Sales Solutions,” Samuel said. “I kept it simple.”

“When did you start this new company?” Jefferson asked.

Samuel’s head pounded. “It was toward the end of 2007.”

Jefferson tilted his head. “And even with this year’s crash, you were able to keep your clients?”

“They didn’t feel the hit as much as others, thankfully,” Samuel said.

Another figure appeared in the doorway. He wore a dark turtleneck and a pair of slacks, and he looked to make approximately half as much as the poorest man there, just based on his shoes alone. Samuel had never seen him before.

“My wife sent me up here,” the mysterious man said. “I hope I’m not intruding?”

“You must be Rod Everton,” Hank said, striding forward to shake his hand. “My wife hasn’t shut up about having an FBI agent in the neighborhood. You’re making me and all dental surgeons look lame.”

Rod laughed nervously. Samuel nearly spilled the scotch as he poured him a glass. *Focus, Samuel*, he ordered himself as he passed it toward Rod, who thanked him.

“I wouldn’t know what to do in someone’s mouth,” Rod confessed. “You’re the real heroes, as far as I’m concerned.” He then locked his gaze with Samuel as he said, “You’re Georgia’s husband?”

“Samuel.”

“This place is really remarkable,” Rod said. “Thanks for the invite.”

“Georgia made the party happen.”

“But Samuel’s the one who bought the house,” Jefferson boasted, as though the two had always been old, moneyed friends. “No party without the house.”

Did Rod look suspicious? Samuel studied his face for a long time, looking for signs. Before he could think of anything to say, Hank asked Rod a question about being an FBI agent, something about going undercover, and Rod talked around the subject in a way that suggested he couldn’t say very much.

Maybe he didn't suspect Samuel of anything. Maybe everything was all right.

Samuel excused himself to go to the bathroom. Because the house had nine of them in total, he selected the one furthest from the FBI agent, roaming through the hallways before locking himself behind the door. There, he gripped both sides of the sink and told himself to breathe. In the mirror, his eyes were tinged with red; the capillaries were bright. What had he done? Would he live in this guilt forever?

The alternative, he knew, was going to prison for what he'd done. Nobody, and I mean nobody, made money as quickly as he had the past year. He'd been reckless, maybe. It was suspicious that nobody had come after him yet. He'd just moved into the biggest and most beautiful house in the biggest and most beautiful neighborhood in beautiful Wellesley. He had a giant target on his back.

Then again, he reminded himself he was not a dummy. Everything he'd done, he'd double- and triple-checked. He hadn't left a trace.

When he'd quit the sales firm last year, set on ensuring Georgia wouldn't leave him, set on making enough money to be the sort of man she wanted to love, his ex-boss had asked, "Are you okay, Samuel? You aren't going to do anything rash, are you?" Samuel had realized his boss was worried about his mental health.

Downstairs, the men joined the women in the living room, where Jefferson Ford did his best to sequester Samuel to the side, talking his ear off. Apparently, being friends with Samuel was a big deal now. On top of that, Samuel hardly had to work at all these days. The money just kept rolling in. And he just had to find new and creative ways to hide it.

Chapter Nine

Present Day: Nantucket Island

“I don’t know. I feel the verbs used in this particular text are uninspired. And I don’t relate to the characters very well.” Bella twirled a curl around and around her finger and twitched nervously.

“Can you be more specific?” Layla asked, her throat tightened.

Bella glanced at Evie, whose work they were currently discussing. Evie was crumpled in on herself, and her dark hair was greasy and unwashed. As they’d officially been in the writing workshop for four weeks at this point, Layla had asked that they all submit the first five pages of their manuscript for critique. Unfortunately, Layla felt herself inwardly agreeing with everything Bella said about Evie’s work. Where was the passionate, emotional young writer who’d come to the residency?

“Vic and I were talking about the protagonist,” Bella said. “About how she seems so passive. Like, she doesn’t want anything. And I just don’t think you can start a book with a character who doesn’t want anything.” Bella’s eyes widened with nerves.

Evie crossed her ankles, looking as though she wanted to die on the spot.

“Victor, do you want to say something you liked about the piece?” Layla asked. It was important to uphold the positives of any bit of writing, regardless of its downfalls.

Victor cleared his throat. “Um? I liked this paragraph on page three. ‘The view from my window was cataclysmic. I felt like a bug scurrying from one event of my life to the next, as though I had one hundred eyes and could see every perspective. I had no hope.’”

“And what did you like about that paragraph?”

Victor shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s grim, but it’s sort of beautiful.”

Evie tugged at her hair and stared at the ground. Yesterday, they’d critiqued Bella’s piece, and Victor had talked at length about Bella’s use of adjectives, about her stunning pacing. Evie had said she hadn’t liked it, that it felt too “driven” to her.

“Why don’t we stop for today?” Layla suggested spontaneously. “It’s a beautiful day outside, and I imagine you don’t want to spend all afternoon cooped up here with me.”

Bella and Victor eyed one another joyously.

“Are you sure?” Bella asked. “We’re supposed to have another whole hour.”

Layla waved her hand. “Go! Enjoy yourselves. You’re only young once.” She’d hated when people told her that decades ago, but that didn’t make it any less true.

Bella and Victor headed out easily, cracking jokes with one another, already floating on a cloud of love. Evie remained

seated as though she hadn't heard Layla.

"Evie?" Layla's voice wavered. "Can I talk to you?"

Evie parted the curtain of her hair to peer at Layla. Before Layla could say anything, she whispered, "I'm sorry. My work is garbage."

"It's not! It's really not. It's a first draft."

"It's not a first draft," Evie insisted. "It's the tenth draft of something that was much, much worse before."

Layla's heart dropped. She sensed the devastation and neglect in Evie's face. "Did something happen, Evie?" She paused. "You're such a talented writer. You and I both know you can do better than this."

"I feel so broken," Evie whispered, patting her chest. "It's weird. I know."

"Feeling broken is the most understandable thing in the world," Layla told her.

Evie clapped her hand over her mouth. "Right. I'm being so dumb. You told us your husband died."

Layla waved her hand. "This isn't about me. This is about how I can help you become a writer over the next two months." Her heartbeat quickened. "Is there any reason you might be feeling broken?"

Evie eyed the doorway distrustfully. "I know it sounds dumb, but Victor and Bella are very close. And I've felt really lonely here. I don't know." She kicked the leg of her chair. "It's not like I have tons of friends back in Portland, but I have a few key ones. And I hate that I miss them so much. I'm supposed to be focusing on my writing while here. I'm supposed to get really good at this."

“You already are really good at this,” Layla breathed.

Evie shrugged.

Layla’s heart shattered. “Listen. I know what it’s like to doubt your writing. But the only thing that differentiates a writer who makes it and a writer who doesn’t is effort. You have to keep going.”

“You published your first novel when you were nineteen,” Evie pointed out.

Layla sighed. “I got really lucky with that. It’s true. But the only reason my career continued was because I put my nose to the grindstone. In fact, before I came to Nantucket, I had horrible writer’s block. I didn’t know what to do with myself.”

Evie perked up. “You did?”

Layla nodded. “But I’m back at it, all because I didn’t quit. Keep going with me, Evie. Won’t you?”

Evie promised she would try.

* * *

Greta invited Layla out to dinner that night. Alana and Julia joined them, and together, the three Copperfield women and Layla Johnson strode through the chilly early evening toward the Historic District. It was the first week of October, and leaves had begun to shift, greens fuzzing into yellows, oranges, and reds. Layla had on her favorite autumn jacket, a khaki green that always reminded her of her husband’s old jacket back when they’d first gotten together. It was strange what colors could force you to remember.

Greta had made a reservation at a French-inspired seafood restaurant downtown. As they sat at the table with a white linen tablecloth, Alana teased Greta about insisting on French food almost every time they went out.

“I always suggest something else. ‘What about Thai food, Mom? Mexican? Greek?’ But nope! It’s always French, French, French.” Alana laughed, her eyes dancing toward her mother.

“I tried to give my daughters wonderful palates,” Greta sighed into her menu. “I clearly failed.”

“Hey! I’m doing all right for myself,” Julia insisted.

“But that daughter of yours eats the strangest things,” Greta said.

“She’s pregnant!” Julia rolled her eyes playfully.

“The other day, Anna requested a peanut butter and marshmallow sandwich,” Greta told Layla conspiratorially.

“Mom thinks marshmallows are trashy,” Alana said.

Layla was in a good mood, settling into the night. She ordered a glass of chardonnay and listened as Greta, Julia, and Alana teased each other and discussed what Ella had written from the road.

Over appetizers, Greta turned her attention to Layla. “How is it going with your writers? It’s been about a month now, hasn’t it?”

Layla nodded. “To be honest, I’m a little worried about Evie. She told me she’s been really lonely here. And her writing is suffering because of it.”

Alana’s face looked drawn. “I hate to hear that. How old is she?”

“Twenty-eight, I think,” Layla said.

“This must be because of Victor and Bella,” Julia suggested. “They’re two peas in a pod.”

“Bella has that lovey-dovey look on her face all the time,” Alana said. “She reminds me of myself back in high school. Whenever I was falling back in love with Jeremy, I ran after him like a wild animal. And when we took breaks, I turned into Evie. I was so broken-hearted and sullen.”

“And then, the cycle would begin again,” Greta remembered.

Layla had met Jeremy, Alana’s current boyfriend, several times. “I didn’t know you two were high school sweethearts.”

“They hated and loved each other in equal measure,” Julia explained.

“We were dramatic,” Alana agreed. “In any case, I feel like there’s a lot of pressure for young women to fall in love early. I certainly felt that pressure. Julia? Did you?”

“Charlie and Julia were a little different,” Greta remembered. “They never needed anyone else.”

Layla felt a tremendous story beneath the one Greta now referred to, but she didn’t want to pry.

Instead, she said, “When I first met my husband, I fell all over myself with love for him. I thought to myself, ‘If I build a life with him, I won’t be unhappy a single day.’”

Greta’s eyes shone. “I thought something similar when I met Bernard. I just didn’t want to tell him at first.”

Layla twisted her wedding ring around and around her finger. Her heart jumped in her chest.

“We’re so sorry about your husband,” Alana breathed.

Julia nodded somberly. “You must miss him so much.”

“I really do,” Layla said. “Toward the end, we didn’t have that many happy days anymore. In that way, I was relieved when he was gone. We were both in pain.”

“He’d be proud of you,” Julia chimed in. “You’re putting yourself out there. You’re teaching students, writing new novels.”

“Have you considered dating again?” Alana asked.

Bizarrely, Samuel’s face flashed through Layla’s mind—those stoic eyes, his dark and gray curls.

“I like being a recluse,” Layla said. “It suits me. Maybe I should get a cat.”

“There’s no rush in that department,” Greta assured her. “Heck, we don’t really need men, do we girls? They’re lovely to have around sometimes.”

“Especially when you need to reach something on the top shelf,” Julia joked.

“But there’s so many other facets to a woman’s life,” Alana agreed. “I wasn’t taught that as a young woman. Society dictated that I go after romance first and my goals second. I had hoped it was different for this new generation. Maybe I was wrong.”

“I hope I can get through to Evie,” Layla breathed. “Just between us, she’s technically my favorite writer of the three of them. She deserves to flourish here.”

Chapter Ten

The book Layla wrote about “Samuel” probably had no real bearing in reality at this point. Even still, as she wrote out a backstory scene set in prison, in which “Samuel” received divorce papers from his wife and broke down, Layla felt tears spring to her eyes. She gazed out the window of her bedroom as tears quivered down her cheeks, marveling at the horror Samuel must have gone through. For so many years, Samuel had been trapped within four walls, knowing that his family was going on without him.

When Layla finished writing the scene, she checked her email and found a message from her editor, Val.

Layla,

Hey! Just wanted to check in with you. We're planning to get some of the advertising ready for your next release, and I would love to look at some pages to feel the overall tone of the story. I know this goes against everything you stand for, that you prefer to send a book when it's completely finished. But it would really help us out here at the publishing house if you'd be willing to break your own rules.

Layla didn't hesitate. She'd already written the first thirty-thousand words of what she planned to be an eighty-two-

thousand-word novel, and she attached what she'd already written and sent it off.

In her message, Layla wrote:

Hey! I'm sending the unedited first thirty-thousand words. I have a few kinks to work out in the back half of the book (which I'm focusing on now), but I will have the entire book completed by the end of November, as planned.

Thank you for your patience with me during this difficult chapter of my life. I have a good feeling about this next novel. I think the readers will see it as a return to my previous form.

All the best,

Layla

Layla floated from her bedroom, down the staircase, and into the kitchen, where she brewed a kettle to make tea. Down the hallway, she heard Victor and Bella chatting and laughing about something, digging deeper into their romance, setting up a foundation. Layla turned on her heel, set on closing the door of the kitchen to block out the sound. But just before she could, Samuel popped into the doorway, carrying an empty mug. His smile sent a shiver down Layla's spine.

"Samuel! Hi!" Layla hated how bright and girlish her voice sounded.

Samuel stepped inside and closed the door behind him. "Afternoon, Layla. How's your day going?"

"It's going well," Layla answered. "I sent some pages to my editor. Fingers crossed she doesn't completely hate them."

Samuel laughed warmly. If Layla wasn't mistaken, he'd developed a healthy tan in the weeks since he'd arrived, and his arms were thick with muscle, his eyes clearer.

“I can’t imagine she’ll hate them,” Samuel said. “You’re a fantastic novelist.”

Layla’s heart jumped. “You’ve read my work?”

Samuel’s cheeks flashed red with embarrassment. “I read a couple of your books in prison, actually. Maybe it’s not a huge surprise to say we didn’t have a big selection. Your first novel was there, though, as was *Hector’s Game*.”

Layla blinked. “You read *The Mulberry Tree*?”

“Twice,” Samuel said, rubbing his shoulder nervously.

Layla was touched. For a moment, she struggled to look at him at all and was cast down the rabbit hole of her previous life, all those years ago when her sister had learned Layla had written about their childhood and how betrayed she’d felt. Just then, the kettle on the stove screamed, and Samuel jumped forward to remove it from the heat. Layla had her teabag ready, and he poured the hot water into her mug and passed it to her gently.

“That must feel so strange,” Samuel said, breaking the silence, “when someone tells you they’ve read your book.”

“It’s not that,” Layla said timidly. “It’s just that nobody usually reads *The Mulberry Tree* anymore. It was my very first novel, and it completely changed my life.”

Samuel filled his mug with hot water and bobbed the tea bag thoughtfully. “I hadn’t read anything from the perspective of a child in a long time. It forced me to think about my own childhood, to remember things that I hadn’t considered in a long time.”

“That must have been painful.”

“It was,” Samuel said quietly. “But everything in prison was painful in its own way. And thinking about my childhood was a unique and different kind of pain, one that allowed me entire moments of freedom from my circumstances. Once upon a time, I hadn’t been a criminal. I’d just been a kid with scabbed knees and a love of riding my bike.”

Layla nodded, her heart warming as his eyes glistened. He seemed almost too good to be a criminal. Could she work that into the novel? Maybe, in her book, fictionalized Samuel wasn’t guilty at all. Maybe she could redeem him.

“Listen,” Samuel began, his voice wavering, “Maybe this is out of left field. But would you be interested in going to the Nantucket Harvest Festival with me this afternoon?” He paused, as though he’d lost his nerve midway through. “I mean, I just walked by a little bit ago, and it looked sort of fun. Music performances, hayrides, hot drinks, and snacks. It’s probably nothing you’d be interested in.”

“Oh! Greta said something about that.” Layla kept her voice bright. In the back of her mind, another voice screamed: *Is this a date? Is Samuel asking me out on a date?* It had been so long since someone had looked at her like this, as though she were the answer to one of life’s greatest mysteries. She wanted to immediately tell him she wasn’t anyone special, that she was a washed-up writer who was currently stealing his life story to finish her deadline on time.

“Why not?” Layla heard herself say then, surprising herself. “I just sent some pages to my editor. I deserve to take the rest of the day off, right?”

“I think so,” Samuel said.

Layla sipped her tea, scalding her tongue. She grimaced. Samuel’s question had thrown her off her game. Probably, she

would make plenty of mistakes today. First, burning her tongue with tea; next, maybe spilling red wine all over herself, or letting herself kiss Samuel, or telling him a secret she had sworn never to confess to anyone. Could she even trust herself to go out with this guy? Or could she tell herself they were just two friends in a new location, choosing to spend the afternoon eating hot dogs and drinking hot apple cider?

“I just need to get changed,” Layla said. “Want to meet out front in thirty minutes?”

Samuel nodded. “Great. Let’s do it.”

* * *

Layla tore through her closet, searching for the perfect outfit for this date (that was very much not a date). Eventually, she landed on a burnt-red skirt with buttons up the middle, a black turtleneck, and a jean jacket. With her long, curly hair and a dash of red lipstick, she felt almost as carefree and alive as she had when she’d first met Brad. Almost.

Perhaps all of life was just trying to chase after previous feelings. Now that she was fifty-three, she was trying (and failing) to feel like the successful, twenty-something novelist she’d been thirty years ago. And now, she was trying (and failing) to act like her previous self, who seemed to have fallen in love easily, without a second thought.

Middle age was filled with doubt.

When Layla walked outside, she found Samuel standing near the mailbox, his face glowing with October sunshine and his wardrobe perfect: a red and black flannel and a pair of blue jeans. He looked handsome and rugged, a man who’d spent most of his life in the woods rather than behind bars. And as

Layla strode up to meet him, her heart banging like a drum, she heard an ominous voice in the back of her mind again. It said: *You cannot get close to him. If he finds out about the book, everything will fall apart.*

Layla's stomach groaned with dread.

"Hi!" Samuel looked slightly nervous, and he palmed the back of his neck. "You look wonderful."

Layla waved her hand, never sure how to handle compliments about her looks. "So do you."

Samuel laughed. "You should have seen me in a jumpsuit."

Layla was surprised at the ease with which he spoke of his prison life today. For a moment, she was caught off-guard, and Samuel's smile fell slightly.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't bring that up so much," Samuel said. "I've been trying to make sense of it in my life. How do I carry the weight of this horrible thing I went through? Do I make jokes about it? Maybe not." Samuel laughed sadly.

"No! No." Layla shook her head. "I think humor always helps."

Samuel blushed again. "Maybe it's a dark humor. But it's all I have right now."

"I understand that," Layla assured him as they began their walk toward downtown. "I've had friends tell me my humor has gotten too dark for them. My answer is always, 'We're in our fifties now. Things haven't exactly gone as planned. This is the only way I know how to handle it.'"

"Exactly," Samuel said. "I'm surprised your friends wouldn't get that."

Layla was quiet for a moment, considering the fact that she'd pushed so many friends away from her, out of her life, to allow her the ease of loneliness. It was better not to have to explain yourself.

The Nantucket Harvest Festival was in full swing. Multiple food and drink stalls were open, serving nachos, clam chowder, pumpkin pie, hot apple cider, hot cocoa, and plenty of wine and local craft beer. A local band played on a mini stage, and Aurora and Brooks stood directly beside it, Aurora with a guitar wrapped around her chest. She'd either already performed or planned to go on next. As Layla and Samuel sidled up alongside the crowd, Aurora caught Layla's eye and waved.

"This island is something else," Layla said with a laugh. "Everyone knows everyone. Everyone is eager to show just how much you mean to them. It's completely different than New York."

Samuel nodded. "Working in Charlie's woodworking studio has been really interesting. He has so many clients who pop in from time to time just to bring him gifts or say hello. They've taken an interest in me, too, although I can't say for sure why. One of the guys found out I'd never had this particular cookie from a particular bakery across the island, and he brought it for me yesterday."

"Wow. Was it good?"

"It was transcendent, to be honest," Samuel said with a laugh. "Everyone is fascinated with the idea of prison, I think. With the idea of not being able to have what you like or what you crave for so many years."

"So that's why people keep throwing delicious food your way," Layla said.

“And I welcome it,” Samuel joked.

Layla and Samuel waited at a drink stall to purchase an apple cider for Samuel and a glass of wine for Layla. They grabbed a standing table near the stage and clinked their glasses together just as Aurora burst on stage and strummed her guitar.

“Greetings, ya’ll!” Aurora called across the crowd. “Thanks for coming out to the Nantucket Harvest Festival. It’s my very first one, and I’m quite impressed. Have you tried the clam chowder? I think it changed my life!”

Layla glanced up at Samuel, who shrugged, laughing, and said, “Yep. I guess I’ll have to have some of that today, too.”

As Layla and Samuel drank their drinks and watched Aurora’s performance, Layla found herself drawn closer to Samuel so that her head was nearly against his chest. A strange part of her itched with the desire to wrap his arms around her waist so that they could sway in time to the music. How wonderful it would be to be wrapped in the arms of a lover. She’d nearly forgotten how blissfully warm that must feel. She’d nearly forgotten completely what Brad smelled like. Oh, that broke her heart.

After Aurora’s performance, Layla shook some sense back into herself. “Do you want to get that clam chowder now?”

“First, a hayride. Then, clam chowder,” Samuel said.

“I haven’t been on a hayride since I was a kid!” Layla could still feel her sister’s little body pressed up against hers as they’d whipped through the country, her nostrils overwhelmed with the smell of hay and soft, wet earth.

“I guess it’s time,” Samuel said.

The line for hayrides wasn't long, and Samuel and Layla were able to get on the next available hay-filled trailer. They sat in the corner, their backs pressed against a big bale of hay, watching as young parents carried their children aboard. Layla wondered if Samuel was thinking about his own children, about how they'd once been that young, how he'd once held their little hands.

The hayride bucked out from the center of the Historical District, out along the harbor, out of town, before it looped back in again. There was a crispness to the air that transported Layla back to her childhood, making her laugh easily at anything Samuel said. Sometimes, the voice in the back of her mind returned to her, begging her not to get closer to Samuel, reminding her that it would get messy. But as time wore on, it was getting increasingly easy to ignore that voice.

It wasn't like Layla and Samuel would fall fully in love or anything. This was just a bit of fun in the midst of a horrific decade of Layla's life. This was just her, reminding herself she could live again.

After the hayride, they waited in line for clam chowder for more than fifteen minutes. Many people around them complained endlessly about the wait, but Samuel seemed not to notice. Layla appreciated this about him. When Layla asked him about it later, as they settled around a table with their clam chowders, Samuel admitted, "I don't have any room to complain anymore. I'm out of prison. I'm here at the Nantucket Harvest Festival with you. What else could I want?"

Layla's heart opened up to the beautiful look in his eyes. Another thought splintered everything else: that if she could be in this man's orbit for the rest of her days, she would always

be happy. Where had that thought come from? Was she going insane?

The afternoon had fallen, leaving a gray and soft blue sky, sharp with chill. Layla could see her breath.

“I want to appreciate things the way you appreciate them,” Layla said quietly. “I want to remember just how lucky I am.”

Softly, Samuel placed his hand around the back of her neck. Layla thought she might crumple to the ground at his touch. Samuel seemed unable to speak, although his lips shimmered only a few inches in front of hers. She could have kissed him. But she wasn't sure she remembered how anymore.

“Why didn't you tell me you'd read my books until today?” Layla asked.

Samuel's smile was crooked. “Honestly, I didn't know when I first met you, not until Bernard told me a couple of weeks ago. After that, I was a little starstruck.”

Layla laughed. “But now you see, there's nothing to be starstruck about.”

“I wouldn't say that.”

Layla's heart stopped beating. For a long time, they stared at one another; the intensity of the air between their noses crystallized with their longing. And then, Samuel pressed his lips upon hers, kissing her the way she'd always wanted to be kissed. And she closed her eyes and felt the world spin around her, taking her off the ground.

Suddenly, Layla felt herself swept up in a story she hadn't planned for. And when their kiss broke, they laughed nervously, and Sam stepped away to buy another round of wine for her and apple cider for him. Layla burrowed herself

in her phone, her head banging with nerves. What was she doing? What kind of mess was she making?

That's when an email dinged in from her editor.

LAYLA! These pages are EXQUISITE! I am literally blown away by them! I cannot wait to read the rest. I have a hunch this will be your top seller. And that's really saying something. I mean, you're Layla Johnson, for crying out loud! Your fans will fall in love!

Layla's stomach stirred with fear. When Samuel returned with their drinks, his lips shining with want for her, she shoved her phone into her pocket and told herself to deal with this another day. Today was for kissing; tomorrow was for figuring out how to distance herself from the only emotion she'd felt in years, if only for the benefit of her career.

She'd already given everything else to her career. Why not this, too? But oh, it hurt her heart to think of it. It nearly split her in two.

Chapter Eleven

Wellesley, Massachusetts: 2010

When Samuel had begun money laundering back in late 2007, he'd spent every single hour of his life in a nervous, manic state. But over the years, as Samuel's money continued to roll in, he'd paid for his house, purchased another in the South of France, felt tremendous love from his wife, and been told continually by his children how much they adored him. These days, Samuel was no longer nervous. In fact, he'd begun to feel as though he floated through life, bouncing from cloud to cloud, reaping the rewards of taking that first horrific risk.

Samuel didn't think of himself as a criminal. In fact, he'd begun to think that almost everyone who had real money, the kind of money that changed your life, committed small crimes all the time. Numerous people he knew evaded taxes. People bribed others all the time for legs up in various industries. Just because he laundered money for a local criminal organization through his own sales firm and smaller businesses he'd purchased, including a laundromat, a car wash, and a burger joint, didn't mean he was more guilty than anyone else. He worked smart, not hard. And he had plenty of time off to devote to his children and wife.

Back in 2008, when the rest of the country had fallen apart at the seams, Sam had moved his family into the biggest house in the neighborhood, the place with multiple swimming pools and what seemed like a million bathrooms and enough space for his wife to feel like a queen. Over time, his family had grown accustomed to the space, even to the point, probably, of boredom. Samuel was still pretty sure they didn't need all those rooms. Still, it was a status symbol, having the best house in Wellesley, and he wasn't interested in giving that up.

When Samuel had first met Rod, the FBI agent who lived down the block, he'd shivered with terror. But now, he invited him over frequently to watch basketball and football games. They talked at length about the concept of marriage, how to strengthen their relationships with their wives and children, and whether or not they should vacation together next year. Samuel had the time, but Rod was needed for the FBI because they were short-staffed. Samuel appreciated how hard Rod worked, and he frequently told him so. Rod often said, "Man, if only I'd gotten into sales!"

Samuel never considered his conversations with Rod to be playing with fire. Nobody else in the world, besides the criminals he assisted, knew he committed any crimes. Samuel had begun to flow seamlessly between his criminal life and his normal one, able to completely dissolve memories of his criminal life the minute he walked back into his house.

It was August, and his children had just started yet another school year. Samuel was selfishly optimistic about his son's future, as he'd just started playing football and demanding many hours of playing catch in the backyard. It was every father's dream to watch his son play beneath Friday night lights. His daughter, Quinn, was nearly sixteen now and very into fashion, boys, and romantic comedies, nothing he knew

anything about. Still, Sam did his best to support her, frequently driving her and her friends to the mall and picking them up afterward. He'd grown accustomed to the smell of their over-used perfumes, lilacs, geraniums, and vanillas. And he liked to laugh about this with his wife, who told stories of her own teenage years, about how silly it had been to be fifteen, thinking she'd known everything about the world.

Samuel had a meeting that night with Sean, one of the top criminal dealers within the industry, who planned to drop off thirty million dollars for Sam to hide and then launder. This was a run-of-the-mill meeting, nothing Samuel thought anything about. He told his wife he had to work late but that he'd be back by ten or eleven at the latest. He then set himself up in his office, watching television on his computer and waiting for Sean to show.

But at seven-thirty, Samuel got a text message from Sean's burner phone, saying that he'd hit a snag with the delivery. He needed to reschedule. This wasn't a problem for Samuel, as he was tired and wanted to go home and eat a real meal. Probably, his wife had already eaten her dinner, but maybe she would sit with him at the table and tell him about her day. Maybe they could watch a movie afterward. Maybe they could make love.

There were a number of reasons why Samuel didn't text his wife he was coming home early. One of them was that he just didn't consider it. Another was that his phone was dying. Another was that he just wanted to get out of that office so badly, to strip off his suit and sit at the kitchen counter in only a pair of sweatpants and a white t-shirt.

But another reason was much more sinister.

It wasn't till years later that Samuel could fully acknowledge it. A part of Samuel suspected something was amiss in his marriage. And he wanted to go home and surprise her. He wanted to prove himself wrong.

Samuel parked his Porsche in the driveway without opening the garage door. This wasn't entirely strange, he told himself. His stomach throbbed with hunger, and he walked slowly to the front door, which he opened with a shaking hand. The house was echoing, empty. He remembered his wife saying the kids were at their friends' places tonight, that they were at "that age" where they preferred being elsewhere. Why had Samuel bought this big house for them if so much of it remained empty? Oh, but it didn't matter.

Samuel didn't turn on any lights as he crept through the house. His ears craned to hear the sound of the television or the creak of his wife's feet as she walked somewhere. But everything was dark. Samuel began to convince himself he was imagining things, that clearly, his wife had stepped out tonight, perhaps to grab a glass of wine with a girlfriend or go to the movies.

That's when he heard the splash.

Samuel took a deep, haggard breath and walked toward the large window that overlooked the outdoor pool. None of the lights had been turned on, but the light of the moon shimmered across the glistening turquoise blue, and he could make out two heads swimming close to one another in the shallow end. One of them had long hair and his wife's profile. Another had a thick head of hair and a strong jawline, not unlike Jefferson Ford's. Something cold and hard dropped into his stomach. For maybe thirty seconds, he was captivated by the image, trying to come up with some excuse. Maybe people had

broken in through the fence to swim in his beautiful pool. Maybe that was his wife's brother from Minnesota.

But then, the two heads cleared the distance between them and began to kiss. Their arms were tight around one another, clinging hard to what seemed to be the only other thing they comprehended. And in that moment, Samuel understood what he'd always known: that his wife had always been attracted to Jefferson Ford, that his wife had yearned for him and then used the brand-new house to lure him closer. Probably, this affair had been going on under Samuel's nose for a long time.

How had he been so stupid?

Samuel stepped away from the window, fearful they'd see him. He wasn't emotionally ready to have that conversation. He wasn't even fully able to remind himself that he'd parked out front and not turned on the lights for a reason. He'd known this would be waiting for him. And now, it was here—and he had to face the consequences.

But what were those consequences? Samuel had to think.

Samuel's vision blurred as he drove away from the neighborhood toward downtown, where a dive bar remained open till three. He hadn't been there in a long time, not since he'd begun making more money than God, and when he breezed through in a suit not meant for such a dank place, he got several strange glances. Someone said, "Is that Samuel Garreth?" And another said, "He looks rough, man."

Samuel ordered a shot of tequila and a beer to start. He sat at the bar, dropped the shot back, and asked for another. He didn't bother with the limes.

It was only eight-thirty, still early. His wife didn't expect him home before ten or eleven, which probably meant she and

Jefferson Ford were still at it. Samuel imagined one option: coming home as planned, slipping into bed beside his wife, and pretending he hadn't seen anything. He could go on playing happy father and husband. But would he be able to stand it?

Samuel ordered a third shot and drank the rest of his beer. The world around him was slippery, breaking from reality. Laughter from the corners came at a higher pitch, and it was hard to remind himself they weren't laughing at him. Except maybe they were. What did he know?

Eventually, a shaggy-haired man of about forty-five approached and clapped his shoulder. "Samuel Garreth? You haven't been in here in ages."

It took a minute for Samuel to remember the guy's name. "Bobby?" It was his ex-coworker, the guy whose wife, Tammy, had cheated on him back in 2007. Samuel hadn't seen him since he'd quit the sales firm and started his own.

"The very same. Can I sit down?"

Samuel's words were slurred. "Be my guest."

Bobby ordered a beer and gave Samuel a side-eyed glance. "Rumor around town is you've done pretty well for yourself."

Samuel wanted to burst into tears. "I don't know about that."

"You should be proud, man. Wellesley is a competitive little place. It isn't easy being the king on the top of the hill, you know? Everyone else wants to squash you. But man, I know you, or I used to. I know you deserve it." Bobby cleared his throat. "When you left the sales firm, I considered asking if I could come with you. Start something new. I should have, because I got fired just a couple of months later."

Samuel shook his head. “That’s terrible, Bobby.”

“I lost everything at once,” Bobby said with a soft smile. “Tammy was gone. My job was gone. And I realized it was a kind of rebirth, you know? I could become someone else.”

“And what did you become?”

“I’m doing lawn care,” Bobby explained proudly. “It isn’t much, you know. But I get to be outside all day long, and I love it. I’ve listened to podcasts spanning so many subjects. My head feels happier than it has in ages. And I met a lovely woman.”

For a strange moment, Samuel was terribly jealous of this ex-colleague, a lawn care worker who made probably five percent of the money Samuel did per year. What was wrong with him?

“I’m happy for you, Bobby,” Samuel coughed. “Really. I am.”

Bobby frowned at the line of empty shot glasses. “Do you want to talk about anything, Sam? I’m here if you do.”

Samuel shook his head and waved his hand for another shot. He wanted to feel obliterated. He wanted to forget his name.

Eventually, Bobby returned to his friends across the bar, getting the hint that Samuel wanted to be left alone. Samuel stared into his beer for a long time, remembering the first day of each of his children’s lives, his body pulsing with sorrow. At nine-thirty, he sent each of them text messages, asking them if they’d consider coming home tonight. He wanted to see them. For some reason, he felt that if he didn’t see them both immediately, he would fall apart.

Quinn wrote back first.

QUINN: Um. Dad? Are you okay?

QUINN: I would totally come home, but we're super busy.

QUINN: I'll be home tomorrow, though. Like maybe after Ashley's birthday party.

Samuel read and reread Quinn's text messages. She seemed like such a stranger. How was it possible she had fifty percent of his DNA?

Eventually, it was clear Ronan wasn't planning on writing back at all. Sam ordered another beer and smiled sloppily at the bartender, who'd probably watched sad men like him destroy their lives at this very counter, day in and day out. Samuel was a part of the great tapestry of sorrowful times.

When it hit ten-thirty, Samuel's wife wrote him. Samuel could barely read the messages, as his eyes were so blurry from drunken tears.

GEORGIA: Hi babe! I hope your meeting went okay. Just wanted to let you know there's Indian food in the fridge if you want that when you get home.

GEORGIA: I'm super tired, so I think I'll go to bed before you get here.

GEORGIA: Love you!

Samuel blinked at the messages, which seemed to be in a language he didn't understand. He'd never felt so low in his life. Now, on his sixth or seventh beer, after so many shots, he'd begun to play out the images he'd seen in his swimming pool over and over again, trying to make sense of them. How long had they held one another? How long had they kissed? Had they been wearing swimming suits? Did his wife still

remember the first time they'd kissed on that rainy day on campus, the way time had stopped around them?

But by the time the clock struck midnight, Samuel found himself circling the drain of his life, considering what had gone wrong. Despite his painstaking efforts to commit truly heinous crimes— crimes that, if he was honest with himself, perpetuated the suffering of all of society— his family still just didn't really care about him that much. He'd laundered billions of dollars for people who moved drugs across the country. He was, in every sense of the word, a bad guy.

It no longer seemed worth it anymore. He wanted to go up the hill and burn that house down. He wanted to destroy everything he'd built.

But instead, he knew, the only thing he could fully destroy was himself. Maybe that would allow him to start over, eventually. Maybe, like Bobby with his lawn care business and his new girlfriend, he would eventually find peace.

Samuel's hands shook as he wrote the text message that would end his life forever.

SAMUEL: Hey Rod. I don't know how to tell you this. I've laundered billions of dollars of money over the past three years. I can give you detailed information about what I've done and how I've done it. But I can't live with the guilt anymore.

SAMUEL: I wanted to let you know that I've genuinely appreciated our friendship. I've hated lying to you. And I hope you bring me to justice.

SAMUEL: I'm going to check myself into the Steve Halloway Motel outside of Wellesley. I'll be there waiting for you tomorrow, ready for the arrest.

SAMUEL: I am so relieved this will soon be over.

SAMUEL: I cannot wait to get a full night of sleep.

Chapter Twelve

Present Day: Nantucket Island

Layla and Samuel walked hand-in-hand back to The Copperfield House, their cheeks chapped with a chill from the Nantucket Harvest Festival. At the door of the residency, Samuel touched her shoulder gently and gazed at her, clearly yearning to say something that would prove the intensity of his feelings. But before either of them could speak, a horrible scream rocketed through the second floor of the residency, and Layla sprung forward, fearful.

“What was that?” she demanded.

“It sounds like one of the girls?”

Layla and Samuel hurried up the staircase to find an incredible scene in the hallway between their bedrooms. There, Evie and Bella glared at one another, both very pale, Bella’s hair twisted into knots. Before Layla could speak, Bella blared, “I can’t believe you! You’re heinous! You’re cruel! You’re...”

“Bella!” Layla cried out, genuinely surprised. Although she’d not known Bella and Evie to be friends, she’d never anticipated a fight like this. She’d thought they were professional.

Bella and Evie jumped at the sound of Layla's voice and stared at her, shocked that they'd been discovered. Samuel stood beside her, looking as though he'd rather be anywhere else.

"I'm just passing through, ladies," Samuel said quietly, pointing toward his bedroom. "Excuse me."

Bella and Evie pressed themselves against opposite sides of the hallway as Sam walked through. They continued to shoot daggers at one another until Samuel disappeared behind his door. Layla stewed with a mix of fear and confusion.

"Ladies? Please. Let's take a deep breath. I'm sure whatever happened, we can work through this," Layla said quietly.

But Evie's hands were in fists, and she glowered at both of them, turned on her heel and stormed back into her bedroom. As her door slammed, Bella crumpled against the wall and fell to the floor, where she began to weep into her hands.

"Bella! Darling!" Layla hurried toward her, staring at Evie's door. The last she'd heard from Evie, Evie had felt terribly lonely, so much so that she wasn't sure she belonged here. Had Bella tried to befriend her? Had Evie said something strange?

"I don't know what to do," Bella blubbered into her hands. "I really don't, Layla."

Layla collected Bella into her arms and helped her to her feet. She'd never seen Bella like this and had always considered her to be active and confident, not the sort of woman to fall to the floor and cry.

"Let's go to my room," Layla breathed. "Come on."

Bella sat at the edge of Layla's bed and mopped her cheeks with a tissue. Layla went downstairs to make them both a cup of tea. She considered making one for Evie, too, but decided she could only handle the wild emotions of one twenty-something tonight. Evie would come tomorrow.

As Bella sipped her tea and stared at the ground, Layla considered the best tactics to get to the bottom of this. As she filled her mouth with warm, ginger tea, she tried to remember what it had been like to be twenty-nine, still caught in the tumultuous era of twenty-something emotions, yet on the way to adulthood, to real decisions.

Bella, being Bella, eventually found the strength to speak.

"I'm sorry for acting so bizarrely," she said, her voice wavering.

"Honey, we all act bizarrely from time to time. But what happened?" Layla asked.

Bella sniffed. "I was writing in the library. I had plans with Victor tonight. We were going to go for a night walk on the beach and then watch a movie in my room. But I couldn't find him anywhere. And then..."

Layla's stomach tied itself into knots. Even before Bella said it, Layla had a hunch about what came next. Bella dropped her head back into her hands, her shoulders shaking.

"I mean, it's not like I've known Victor that long," Bella scrambled to add. "I just really thought we had a strong connection, you know? Like, he told me we could move to New York after this. I've always wanted to, and he has a few friends who already live there. And I pictured us as writers there, helping each other, getting published."

Layla closed her eyes and spoke very quietly. “What did he do?”

Bella seemed unwilling to say it. She punched the bed, and it shook beneath her. “I mean, Evie has barely said three words to us since the writing residency started. Victor always said he thought she was really weird! And, I mean, I always agreed with him!”

Layla winced. Bella was talking in circles, and Layla couldn’t blame her. When people disappointed you this much, it was difficult to make peace with reality enough to say it aloud.

“I mean, Victor says that I’m confused about what I saw,” Bella went on.

“Were they kissing?” Layla whispered.

Bella furrowed her brow and stared out the window. After a very long time, she dropped her chin into a nod. “I mean, maybe they weren’t? Maybe the angle was weird? I had been writing for a long time. Maybe I was delusional. Maybe I was imagining things?”

Layla rubbed her neck, dropping into her own heinous memories. She heard her own voice echoing in Bella’s, a reminder of just how naive she’d been.

“What happened when you entered the library?” Layla asked.

“They jumped up,” Bella said. “And Evie looked at me with her big eyes like I was about to tear her apart. I just started screaming at her like crazy.”

“And where was Victor in all of this?”

Bella raised her shoulders. “He told me I was acting insane and left the library. I blacked out after that, I guess. Evie and I were screaming and crying, at least until you found us.”

Layla sighed and rubbed her temples. When she’d signed up to teach the writing course at the residency, she hadn’t anticipated anything like this. She’d envisioned quiet, studious writers who wanted to talk about craft, drink tea, and go to bed early. But writers came in all shapes, sizes, and emotional clouds. There were enough strange and alienating books in the world to prove that.

“What should I do, Layla?” Bella blubbered. “I was falling in love with Victor! But now, he probably thinks I’m crazy.”

After a long pause, Layla said, “I think you should go to bed, honey. You’ve been through a lot, and you’re exhausted. Let’s talk about this tomorrow morning. We’ll make a plan. Okay?”

Bella closed her eyes and stood on shaking legs. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to sleep,” she muttered before she disappeared down the hallway.

Layla listened intently as Bella walked toward her bedroom, praying that Evie wouldn’t burst out of her room like the bogeyman and start another fight. As soon as she heard Bella’s door close, she hurried down the staircase all the way to the passageway that divided the residency from the family house. After a long pause, she opened the door, searching for the sound of Greta’s voice. Although it was nearly eleven at night, she heard it immediately, coming from the kitchen.

Greta was seated at the kitchen table with Julia, drinking tea and watching the autumn rain splatter against the windowpane. They were talking about people Layla didn’t

know in soft voices, comfortably easing into the night. When Layla appeared in the doorway, they gave her confused smiles.

“Layla! I’m so glad to see you. Sit down, won’t you? I’ll make more tea,” Greta said.

Julia’s eyes were slits. “Did something happen?”

Layla hobbled toward the kitchen table as Greta put the kettle on the stovetop. With her hand on Layla’s shoulder, she breathed, “Are you okay, honey?”

Layla dropped her head. “Apparently, Victor cheated on Bella with Evie.”

Julia’s jaw dropped. “You’re kidding!”

Greta’s face was stony. On the stove, the kettle began to pop and shimmer from the heat. “That is outrageous.” Layla had never heard Greta sound so stormy.

Layla explained what she knew as well as she could— that she’d come home from the Nantucket Harvest Festival to find the girls fighting, that apparently, Bella had discovered Victor and Evie kissing in the library.

“But now, Bella doubts what she saw,” Layla went on, “because Victor told her she’s confused.”

“She’s not confused!” Julia cried.

“This is really something,” Greta grumbled. “We’ve never had this kind of drama at the residency. People have fallen in love here, of course. But this? This kind of rudeness? In my house? No. I won’t stand for it.”

Greta poured Layla a cup of tea and stomped back to her chair.

“I was thinking,” Layla began. “I could sit down with all of them tomorrow and get their sides of the story. If worse comes to worse, I guess we’ll have to ask Evie to leave.”

At this, Greta’s eyes hardened. “Evie? No!”

Layla stalled, confused. “What do you mean?”

Greta sipped her tea angrily. “Victor is gone. As far as I’m concerned, he can pack up his bags right now and hitchhike back to wherever he came from.”

Layla was flabbergasted. “Really?”

“Think about it. First, Victor seduced Bella,” Greta began. “They had their little, cute romance for a month, and then, he decided to spice things up by going after the other one. This is Poisonous Male Logic 101. He wants to win, and he also wants to pit the women against each other for sport. I’ve seen it over and over again in my life, and I won’t stand for it here.”

“I love that,” Julia said. “Take a stand!”

“What about Evie?” Layla asked quietly.

Greta considered this for a moment. “She’s not completely blameless, of course. But, the way I see it, this is an important lesson for her. She and Bella need to find a way to work it out, to see what this man has put them through.”

“What if she doesn’t want to see?” Layla asked.

Greta shrugged. “Then, she’ll be giving up a spot at a coveted writing residency. That’s her loss.”

Layla’s heart pounded.

“And you’ll just have plenty more time to write, I suppose,” Greta added happily.

“The more I think about it, the more relieved I am that Charlie and I got back together,” Julia breathed. “I’ve only really been involved with two men in my life— one I had children with and the other who’s loved and supported me since I was a teenager. I never experienced the messiness of someone like Victor. And for that, I am grateful.”

Layla’s thoughts darkened, and she stared at the door, unable to participate in the conversation. For the first time in her life, she sensed within herself internal misogyny— something she hadn’t understood she had before. It embarrassed her that her first instinct had been to blame Evie, to ask her to leave.

“When I was growing up,” Layla began quietly, “we were told that boys would be boys. That they couldn’t fight their urges.”

Greta’s nostrils flared. “Girls are always told to be modest. To cower to the needs of men. I hate it.”

“I never knew to hate it until right now,” Layla admitted, her cheeks burning with embarrassment.

Greta touched Layla’s wrist tenderly. “You can’t blame yourself for being a product of the society you grew up in.”

Layla nodded and stared at the ground. She felt herself questioning every decision she’d ever made in her life.

“I’ll wake Victor up tomorrow and ask him to leave,” Greta said, interrupting Layla’s reverie.

“You sound like you’re way too excited about that,” Julia pointed out.

Greta waved her hand. “I want The Copperfield House to be known for its kindness, its creativity, and its good, human spirit. People like Victor need not apply. Period.”

Chapter Thirteen

New York City: 2012

The kitchen landline in the Greenwich Village apartment blared. Layla burst from the shower, dripping wet, and skidded through the living room to fetch it. Outside, it was autumn, and the apartment was chilly and damp, in need of a spot of heat. Wrapped in her towel, Layla answered the phone breathlessly.

“Layla Johnson speaking?”

“Layla! It’s Val.” Val was Layla’s editor at Double Day, a woman Layla adored for her obsessive attention to detail and her unique fashion sense. You never caught her looking anything but absolutely knock-out gorgeous or absolutely insane. “I wanted to let you know the books came in.”

Layla’s heart fluttered with relief. “My gosh. We were cutting it close!”

Val laughed. “I know! I was terrified about it. I spent all night shaking in bed. Oh, but your many, many fans will be happy. I hope your hand is ready for a whole lot of signing?”

“I’m stretching it as we speak,” Layla joked.

“See you at six?”

“On the dot.”

Layla hung up and smiled to herself, adjusting her towel higher on her frame. At forty-two, she was still a world-renowned novelist with the backing of a twenty-year career. This was the release of her fifth novel, one that had poured out of her during a recent stint in Italy. She'd titled it *The Venice Affair*, and already, Val reported astronomical preorder numbers. "If you put the word 'affair' in the title, people are drawn to it like moths to the flame," Val had joked.

Before Layla got back to the shower, the front door opened, and her handsome husband, Brad, breezed through. He brought the earthy smell of autumn on his coat, and his cheeks were bright red from the chill.

"What happened to you?" Brad teased, seeing her in only a towel.

Layla laughed. "The phone rang! I was panicked."

Brad removed his shoes and strode toward her, kissing her on both cheeks and the lips. "You're a knock-out, as usual, darling. What was the emergency?"

Layla's heart was near to bursting. "Val says the books came in!"

"Oh, good. We won't have a wild mob at the party later. What a relief."

Layla giggled. "Do you still want a signed copy, Mr. Winston?"

"Only if you write something especially devious, Ms. Johnson."

Layla returned to the shower, shaved her legs, and got back out to prepare for the big night ahead. One hundred and fifty guests were invited to The Strand Bookstore in the East Village to celebrate the big release of *The Venice Affair*. Layla

planned to wear a black turtleneck dress designed by Vera Wang, who was apparently a big fan, and she'd helped Brad pick out a gorgeous suit. "How many more suits are we going to have to buy for your book launches?" he'd joked at the time. "You write faster than anyone I know."

To Layla's surprise, this book launch had a very special guest— her sister, Connie. After the big release of *The Mulberry Tree* back in the late eighties, Connie and Layla's relationship had been spotty at best. But a few years ago, Layla had reached out to Connie, telling her just how much she loved and missed her and how sorry she was that their relationship had deteriorated. Bit by bit, the sisters had developed a bond— one Layla was pretty sure would last for the ages. Layla had even gone shopping with Connie to find a dress for the launch. "It's not every day my famous writer sister releases yet another book," Connie had said proudly.

The publisher sent Layla and Brad a car for pick-up at five-thirty. In the backseat, Layla and Brad held hands and watched the city go by.

"Look at these slackers," Brad said of the people on the sidewalk. "They have to walk and take the subway!"

"We'll never use our legs again. The publisher will just send us a car to take us wherever we want to go."

"A life of luxury," Brad said with a sigh. "Just tell me when I can quit my job."

"I told you you could years ago," Layla said, waving her hand. "You said you like to use your brain."

"That's true. What little brain I have left, I like to use it," Brad said.

Layla leaned across the car and kissed Brad on the cheek, practically swooning with love for him. She'd often wondered why that had never faded within her, why it was so easy to precisely recall the way she'd felt when she'd met him. It was a gift.

The Strand Bookstore had been decorated exclusively for Layla Johnson's book launch. All other books had been shoved into the back half of the bookstore to allow for only Layla's books to be featured in the front. Val was already there, and she sped across the room with her arms open. True to who she was, she wore a ridiculous canary yellow jumpsuit and big hoop earrings.

"Layla, you look exquisite," she said.

"So do you!" Layla beamed and assessed the room, which would soon be filled with adoring fans, literary greats, and anyone else who'd purchased the expensive ticket for the night's event.

"We're going to set you up over here for the signings," Val said, pointing to a long table upon which sat perhaps one hundred copies of *The Venice Affair*. "But that will only take about an hour or so, okay? And we'll make sure your champagne is refilled throughout."

"I appreciate that."

Layla and Brad were given two glasses of wine to loosen up, and they waited toward the back of the bookstore, watching as guests entered, dressed like moneyed New Yorkers. Some of them were considered Layla's "rivals" in the book industry, which was something Layla resented. She read everyone's work, including theirs, and she often adored what they wrote.

“Look at them! They’ve all come to compete with you,” Brad teased.

Layla shot him a look.

“I know. I know. You hate that.” Brad waved his hands.

“I really do.” Layla bit her lower lip, then remembered her lipstick and stopped. “Do you remember Greta Copperfield?”

Brad furrowed his brow. “Sort of?”

“She was a brilliant novelist from Nantucket,” Layla explained. “But she hasn’t been seen or heard from since 1997. I keep wondering whether I should reach out to her or not.”

“Any reason for this hibernation?”

“Her husband went to prison,” Layla explained. “There’s a rumor her children left her behind, too.”

Brad winced. “Betrayals all around.”

Layla squeezed Brad’s hand, swaying with a sudden onslaught of nerves. “Maybe I’ll write her a letter. I hope she knows she’s not as alone as she thinks she is.”

Suddenly, a familiar woman with a face nearly identical to Layla’s entered The Strand Bookstore. She wore a low-cut red dress that made her look provocative and slightly mean, and her legs were sticks attached to very high heels.

“There’s Connie!” Layla’s heart jumped into her throat as she hurried toward her sister. As of late, Connie had been wearing sultry outfits like this, experimenting with her looks during her fortieth year of life. Layla appreciated it and was secretly envious of her bravery. Age was just a number, after all, and they were both childfree, which allowed them to be creative with their lives and their schedules, often going out on

a random Tuesday or skipping the rest of the workday to go to a Broadway show.

“There she is! The woman of the night!” Connie wrapped Layla in a heavily perfumed hug, and Layla was transported instantly to their childhood before the incident with the neighbor— before everything had gotten so sour and dark.

“You look amazing,” Layla told her.

“Not as amazing as you. Vera Wang!”

Val approached a moment later, her earrings swinging. “You two look just like sisters!”

“We are,” Connie announced proudly.

Val tossed her head. “We should hire you for press junctions to give Layla a bit of a break. Nobody would know the difference!”

Connie laughed, her eyes flashing. “I’d have to master her signature!”

“It’s just a scrawl,” Val said, waving her hand. “Speaking of, Layla, you’re needed at the signing table. Are you ready?”

“As I’ll ever be,” Layla said, downing the rest of her wine. “Wish me luck, Con.”

It wasn’t that Layla disliked book signings. Genuinely, she adored her fans, listened intently to their questions, and championed their interpretations of her books. “I think you understood the story more than I did!” is something she often said. But tonight, she wanted the night off to hang on the arm of her handsome husband, chat with her sister, and drink luxurious champagne. She wanted to feel that star-eyed feeling of having really and truly “made it” without being forced to sit in a chair for an hour and swirl a pen over pieces of paper.

“Only an hour,” Val promised her again. “And here’s that glass of champagne I ordered for you. Cheers!”

Layla prepared herself at the table, took a sip of champagne, and raised her pen. On cue, the first person in line bolted forward with his book, explaining he’d been a fan since the mid-nineties and that he’d done one of his best college essays on her book. Layla immediately melted into his flattery, pleased that she’d been such a big part of his university education. It was every writer’s dream.

As the book signing wore on, Layla began to lose track of time. She signed and chatted, signed and chatted, sipped her champagne, and eagerly scanned the crowd for signs of Val coming to save her. But Val was nowhere to be found, and neither was her husband. Eventually, she waved down Connie, who clicked over to her, bent down, and said, “What’s up?”

“Do you know what time it is? I’m supposed to stop signing around eight.”

Connie waved her wrist. “I don’t have a watch, and my phone is dead.”

Layla grimaced.

“I know! Typical Connie, right?” There was a slight edge to her voice, proof they’d had numerous fights in the past and were usually biding their time between the last one and the next one.

“No, no. You’re fine,” Layla said simply. “I’ll get out of this prison soon. I’ll come find you for a drink?”

“Great.”

Connie returned to the masses: women in beautiful pantsuits tossing their shining curls, men adjusting their thick glasses and talking about the state of the publishing industry.

Another fan approached Layla's table with a book, and Layla heard herself ask the woman her name and where she was from. There wasn't a hint of annoyance in her voice, thank goodness. She could still fake it a little while longer.

But twenty guests later, Layla was fidgety and strange. "Do you happen to have the time?" she asked a guy as he left. He searched in his pocket for his cell and said, "8:39," and Layla's heart jumped into her throat. Why had Val let her go so far over her allotted time? Layla thanked him and stood to address the remaining guests in line.

"I've gone over my limit, I'm afraid," she said. "I will be signing the rest of the books here on the table, and they will be available for purchase here at Strand by next week. Thank you for coming out, and thank you for your support. It means so much."

Layla sped to the bar, where she ordered a Manhattan and continued to scan the crowd for some sign of her editor, her sister, or her husband. Numerous people approached her to congratulate her on *The Venice Affair* and ask her what she was doing next, which was a welcome distraction as she sipped her drink. Eventually, Val appeared through the throng, waving her arms as she apologized.

"We had an incident in the back," she explained, breathless. "I couldn't get away."

"What kind of incident?"

"A catering disaster," Val said.

Layla shrugged. "Have you seen my husband?"

"Brad? That handsome man?" Val laughed. "I've seen him here and there and everywhere. But listen, I have to run. One

of my other clients is over there, and he owes me an apology. I'll catch up with you later?"

Layla eventually excused herself from her current conversation, sidling along the edge of the crowd until she reached the stairs. The majority of the party was kept on the first floor, sprawling through aisles of books, but a small group of people had sequestered themselves upstairs. Maybe her husband was amongst them? He tended not to love parties.

Upstairs was a collection of twenty-somethings in the publishing world, presumably there to rub shoulders with people like Layla. They gave her nervous smiles, and one of them started to approach, probably to ask her advice. But Layla didn't have time for this. She made an excuse and returned to the staircase, where she peered out across the crowd, hunting. Brad had never been a smoker, but that didn't mean he hadn't stepped outside for a breath of fresh air. She would try there next.

But just before she slunk back down the stairs, she spotted something— a flash of red peeking out from between the bookshelves. She paused, staring at the color, waiting. A moment later, her little sister emerged, fluffing her hair behind her. Brad followed after her, wearing that goofy, crooked smile Layla loved so much.

Layla's legs were jelly. She nearly dropped to the ground. Just before they returned to the full crowd of the party, Connie turned to whisper something in Brad's ear, and Brad tossed his head uproariously as though she'd just shared the most delicious of jokes. Maybe she had.

Layla didn't want them to see her watching. She hurried back into the crowd and was immediately flagged down by an agent who'd once handled her international book rights, who

told her a story about an affair he'd actually had in Venice. All the while, Layla's hands shook so much that she had to put her Manhattan back down. Was her sister having an affair with her husband? Was Connie really that cruel?

Layla turned through memories, searching for signs, for clues. Connie's outfits had gotten increasingly scandalous; that was true. Had Brad ever commented on them? Had they ever hugged extra long after they'd hung out? Layla wasn't sure. She prided herself on being a writer, the sort of person who "saw things" and who understood the mysticisms of the world and the relationships in it. Oh, she was a fool.

Layla pushed herself through the rest of the night, saying all the right things and laughing at all the right times. Sometimes, Connie or Brad approached and joked with her about this and that, and Layla was amazed at how easy she was with them. Could she pretend she hadn't seen anything? Could she go on, living the life she'd had with Brad, getting drinks with her sister, talking about her sister's love life? Maybe she could. Maybe that was the happiest route.

But unfortunately for Layla, one too many glasses of champagne meant she couldn't keep her mouth shut. As she and Brad entered their Greenwich Village apartment, Brad removing his suit jacket and suggesting a nightcap, Layla placed her hands on her hips sternly, squared her jaw, and asked, very delicately, "Are you having an affair with Connie?"

The look on Brad's face was a work of pure art. His cheeks were slack, his eyebrows stretched high like a clown, and his shoulders were sorrowful and slanted, like a dog who'd been caught going through the garbage again.

Layla expected him to say that it was a mistake. She expected him to tell her he loved Layla and Layla alone, that he'd never see Connie again if it meant proving that.

She expected him to say Connie was a lesser woman than Layla was. She expected so much.

“Yes. Connie and I are having an affair.” Brad said it simply, as though he discussed rain outside or the baseball scores.

Layla felt as though she looked at the world through a very slender telescope. She felt very far away.

“What am I supposed to say?” Layla demanded, willing her voice to be angry and hard. It came out soggy and pathetic, bubbling with tears.

Brad raised his shoulders and slid his fingers through his hair. “We wanted to tell you, Layla. We tried so many times, but it never seemed right. You were working hard on the edits for the book, and then you went on that vacation, and then, it was your birthday...”

Layla's mouth opened wide with shock. For her birthday, Brad had gifted her a vintage necklace from Venice to commemorate the publishing of her newest novel. Connie had treated her to a night out, complete with dinner and drinks and plenty of conversation about her new romantic lead. All the times that Connie had discussed romance with Layla, had she really been talking about falling in love with Brad? It twisted her stomach. Layla thought she might faint.

“What are you saying?” Layla breathed, leaning against the wall.

Brad was ashen. “We're in love, Layla.”

Layla's mouth was dry. She felt she'd never drunk a glass of water in her life.

"I don't understand," Layla whispered. "I don't know what you're saying."

"Listen to me carefully," Brad ordered. "Connie and I have been in love for two years now. We've been sleeping together for nearly four. I wanted to tell you when you went on your book tour, but now is as good a time as any."

Layla didn't recognize the howl that came out of her throat as her own. "Why, Brad? Why?"

Even as Brad gazed at her now, his face contorting with emotion, Layla felt the strength of her love for him. It had never gone away, not since the first moment he'd reached for her hand in a crowded room.

"She doesn't love you, Brad," Layla blared. "She's just using you to get back at me. She hates me, and she always has!"

But Brad just shook his head as though Layla spoke gibberish. Layla collapsed against the wall and wrapped herself up in a ball. Her head banged with a migraine. As she wept, Brad entered the bedroom, removed his suit, and donned a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. He then packed a bag with a few items, including the toiletries Layla had purchased for him at the drugstore just that week. As he cut toward the door, he sniffed down at her, seeming to weigh up whether or not he should help her to her feet.

"You need to get some sleep, Layla," he said. "You need to be good to yourself. You get so obsessed with things, you know? The writing. It's gotten out of control in recent years."

Layla furrowed her brow, completely at a loss. “It’s because I work too much? Is that it?”

Brad rolled his eyes slightly as though he’d completely tired of her now that the lie had been revealed. “We just fell out of love, Layla. It’s as easy as that. And you know what? It happens all the time.”

Brad turned on a heel and left the apartment, closing the door quietly behind him to avoid disturbing the neighbors. Layla sat in the shadows of the hallway for hours, dreading what would happen when she got back up. She assumed, somehow, she’d have to find a way to go on. But that seemed about as unlikely as ever writing another word.

Chapter Fourteen

Present Day

It had been three days since Greta asked Victor to leave The Copperfield House. Layla had called off writing courses for the week, writing separate emails to both Evie and Bella to ask them to each write three poems and a short story to be discussed the following Monday. Although this wasn't officially a poetry residency, Layla adored the way poetry could pinpoint emotions with more specificity than normal prose. She hoped Evie and Bella would find that, too.

Just as Layla finished work for the afternoon, there was a knock on her door. It was Samuel. Nervous he would see her manuscript, she closed the laptop and hurried to hug him, her heart rising in her chest. It had been a long time since she felt at home in a man's arms. They'd only kissed a couple of times at this point, both of them nervously circling each other as though they were teenagers, unsure of themselves.

"Quentin says I can borrow the boat," Samuel announced as their hug broke. "You want to go for a sail?"

On the walk to the harbor, where Quentin kept his sailboat, Samuel explained he hadn't gone sailing since the year of his trial. "I knew I was going to be sent away for a long time, and I decided to go out for a very long sail. I thought about my

life, about everything I'd done wrong, and about everything that I was giving up. And then, out of nowhere, a dolphin leaped into the air about fifty feet from my boat."

"You're kidding," Layla breathed.

"I'm not," Samuel said. "It was truly remarkable. And it shocked me so much that I was almost optimistic about my future. At least, I told myself it was a good thing being locked up. I'd committed a crime. And I believed in the justice system."

"What do you believe now?" Layla asked.

They'd reached the sailboat, a twenty-foot vessel that Samuel marched about with ease, adjusting ropes, and already drawing them away from the dock. It was seamless, as though he'd spent every day right here rather than twelve years away from anything besides cinder-block walls. The boat swept across the quivering Sound, a mighty body of water that glistened with the October sun, and Samuel raised his chin and closed his eyes. The sail fluttered above them, surging with wind.

"I don't know what I believe," Samuel finally answered. "Prison gives you too much time to think. It allows you to consider every side of every argument. I don't know if that's always a good thing."

"You've done more thinking than the average person," Layla pointed out. "Which I have to respect."

Samuel raised his arms so that the sleeves of his t-shirt whipped around his sturdy arms. He'd worked in Charlie's woodworking shop that morning, and Layla imagined him hunkered over a brand-new chair, perfecting the sweep of a leg or the arch of the back.

Although Layla had spent the past five weeks writing about a man who'd just left prison, a fictionalized version of Samuel, it struck her that she knew nothing about Samuel at all. She knew he was kind and hesitant, that his smell made her delirious when he kissed her. She knew he'd once been married and that he had children somewhere. But she didn't know the specifics.

And suddenly, for reasons that had nothing to do with the novel at all, she wanted to know.

Layla waited until they were far out in the open blue, maybe two miles from shore. They sat close to one another, sipping sparkling water and chatting about easy things. Samuel knew about Victor's departure from the island, and he said he was proud of the way Greta and Layla had reacted, asking him to go. Layla admitted it had all been Greta's idea.

"I didn't know what to do," she breathed. "Human relationships aren't my strong suit."

Samuel peered at her curiously. "You write them so well."

"That doesn't mean I know how to do them in real-time," she admitted. "I just sit and stew for a long time, turning things over and over in my head, trying to make sense of them."

Samuel's smile was crooked. "You're an overthinker, like me."

"Guilty."

They were quiet for a moment. Layla leaned her head on the pillow behind her, feeling the supple to and fro of the boat on the waves.

"Why did you come to The Copperfield House?" Layla asked finally, fearful she was probing too deeply already.

Samuel wasn't resistant. "My wife divorced me while I was in prison. I wasn't sure where else to go, and Bernard offered me a room."

"He wrote to you while you were still inside?"

"He did," Samuel admitted. "I had already heard he wasn't guilty, so he was heavy on my mind when he reached out. I couldn't believe he hadn't gone insane. I nearly did, and I was guilty."

Layla remained quiet as Samuel palmed his neck.

"Does it make you nervous, being with someone who's committed a crime?"

Layla shook her head. "Nothing about you makes me nervous. I don't know why."

Samuel's eyes glistened. "I never imagined that. I assumed everyone would be able to see the prison life on me forever. That it would taint me so much that I would have to hide myself away."

"Don't hide from me," Layla breathed, sliding her fingers through his.

Sam blinked back tears. "I knew my marriage was over long before I went to prison," he said, his voice breaking. "But it still tore me up inside when she sent the divorce papers. I felt completely hopeless, just playing over the events of our romance and our marriage in my head. I couldn't make sense of any of it. It was like she was a completely different person."

Layla nodded. She understood so much more than he knew.

"You know," Sam continued, his voice wavering, "I never told this to anyone in prison, but..." He trailed off.

“You don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want to share,” Layla assured him.

“No. I want to,” Sam breathed. “I want you to know I understood what was going on. I was in the wrong. I was a criminal. And, when I found out my wife was cheating on me, I turned myself in. I figured I didn’t have anything left to fight for anymore.”

Layla’s eyes were enormous. Never in her wildest dreams would she have imagined that. It was a perfect plot point in the book she was writing. And yet— she just couldn’t write it. It was Samuel’s truth. It was too pure.

“I was so relieved after I was arrested,” Samuel continued, his voice wavering. “I checked myself into a motel and waited for my FBI friend to come. He did, alone. I couldn’t believe it. I imagined there would be fifteen cop cars behind him, alarms screaming, guns out. The look he gave me when I opened the door was one I’ll never forget. He said he’d never suspected anything amiss in my behavior. That I’d completely fooled him and made him second-guess his skills as an agent. I told him he could tell his boss whatever he needed to about arresting me.”

“Did he make something up?” Layla asked.

“I don’t know,” Samuel admitted. “I googled him when I got out and learned he moved to Washington D.C., which has to be some kind of promotion. Anyway, he looked good. Healthy. I hope my arrest got him where he wanted to go.”

Layla closed her eyes. Samuel’s life tumbled out in front of her, far more complicated and nuanced than the novel she’d tried to write about him. When she opened her eyes and saw his handsome, pained face, it felt as though a knife had gone through her stomach. She knew, without a shadow of a doubt,

that she couldn't write that novel. She couldn't put Samuel's life on display, not even a little bit.

She would much rather fall in love with him.

"How did you stand being in prison?" Layla asked quietly.

"Bernard helped," Samuel admitted. "He took me under his wing. We talked about everything: philosophy, literature, economics. He was the smartest man I'd ever met."

"I'm so glad you had each other."

Samuel wiped away a tear. "There was a prisoner pen pal service as well," he added. "I liked the idea of writing to someone I didn't know, someone who wouldn't judge me. Someone who didn't even know what I looked like."

"You wrote to other prisoners?" Layla asked.

"No. They were volunteers," Samuel explained. "From all over the country. I had a few different pen pals, mostly college students who were probably doing volunteer service for college credit or something. Their letters dried up after their semesters ended. But a few years after I arrived, I was matched up with an older woman who volunteered through a women's community organization. I imagine they all got together and wrote letters with chardonnay, that kind of thing."

Layla's heart rate spiked. "You were close with this woman."

Samuel nodded. "I felt very close to her, yes. We poured our hearts out to each other. Unfortunately, her letters ended after a few years. I was devastated."

Layla shivered with jealousy. "Have you tried to find her?"

“The volunteers weren’t allowed to use their full names, so I’m not sure how I would ever find her,” Samuel said softly. “I just wish I could thank her for all she did for me. She was my light in the darkness for a while.”

“Were you in love with her?”

Samuel shook his head. “At that point, I wasn’t even sure what love was. It was more complicated than that.”

Layla shifted closer to him, placing her cheek on his upper arm. She felt lulled by his voice, by the rocking of the boat. “I can’t imagine not wanting to reach out to you again. I have a feeling you write brilliant letters.”

Samuel laughed gently. “I don’t. But I imagine you do.”

“I don’t have anyone to write to,” Layla whispered. “I haven’t had anyone in my life in a very long time.”

Samuel touched her head gently. For a long time, he was quiet, considering what she’d said. “Bernard told me your husband died. I’m so sorry.”

Layla closed her eyes, and tears dripped down her chin. She didn’t know what to say.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought that up,” Samuel said. “I don’t know social cues anymore. I’m a dunce.”

Layla squeezed his hand. “You’re not. I shouldn’t be so sensitive about it after so long.”

“You’re allowed to feel whatever you need to feel to get through,” Samuel told her. “And I’ll help you if you let me.”

Layla raised her head and kissed him delicately, overwhelmed by the power of his words and the support he offered her. Why in the world did she trust him so much? Why did she feel so safe? These weren’t questions she could

answer, not so far from shore. Out in the open blue, she and Samuel weren't aimless any longer. They were protected. They would carry each other through.

Chapter Fifteen

The following Monday afternoon, clouds rolled over the island and cast shadows through The Copperfield House. Just as they'd planned, Layla met with Evie and Bella in the library to discuss their recent assignment— and, Layla hoped, begin to mend the wounds from the previous week. The women opted for chairs three away from each other, and they crossed their arms angrily, their faces drawn.

“Good afternoon,” Layla began, her heart thrumming with nerves. Why would they listen to her? Why had they even chosen to stay at the residency, given everything that had happened?

Evie and Bella stared at her blankly. Layla remembered how awestruck Bella and Victor had acted around her when they'd first arrived, so thankful to have been selected to work with the “great” Layla Johnson. She was a joke.

“I had the pleasure of reading over your pieces from the past week. You both have incredibly unique voices, and it was wonderful to see you use them to their full potential. Given the circumstances, I know it will be difficult. But I hope we can critique the work and return to our previously held schedules here at the writing residency. We're all professionals, after all.”

Evie and Bella flashed horrible glances at each other.

“Did you read each other’s work?” Layla asked, her own voice jarring in her ears.

Evie nodded. “I read it.”

“Me too,” Bella said.

“Evie, can you say something about Bella’s recent pieces?” Layla asked.

There was a horrible pause, during which Evie flared her nostrils and crossed and uncrossed her legs as though it was impossible for her to get comfortable. Layla considered canceling class for the day, perhaps meeting with the women separately until the end of November. She shouldn’t have expected them to forgive and forget so easily. She was the worst kind of hypocrite.

But suddenly, Evie spoke, startling Layla out of her reverie. “The use of description...” She traced her leg with her thumbnail. “It was emotionally devastating, to say the least.”

Bella’s face glistened with light. She looked genuinely shocked.

“I mean, the stylistic choices were at times gruesome,” Evie went on, her voice wavering. “But you could feel the, erm, heartache behind the words. And I feel that the gruesomeness suited the text.”

Layla could hardly believe Evie’s honesty. It was true that Bella had written a text that revealed the innermost aching of her sorrow in the wake of what Evie and Victor had done. In a similar vein, Evie’s text revealed her own turmoil and guilt.

Both women were close readers. They comprehended the weight of what they’d given each other. And, Layla recognized

now, they'd written both of their texts as a way to heal themselves and apologize to one another—in the language of poetry, which was the only thing they, as writers, fully understood.

Could Layla have found a way to reunite with her sister through writing? No. She couldn't get back into that mess again. A reunion would have been impossible. Her sister had always been hard-headed and hard-hearted, and she'd never strung more than a few words together, certainly nothing that resembled poetry.

“In Evie's text, I loved how she talked about the way men pit women against each other,” Bella whispered, her voice wavering. “She compared it to playing chess, throwing pawns out in front of the queen or bishop to draw them out into the open field of the board.”

Layla had thought that particular analogy was slightly heavy-handed, but she was glad Bella had taken to it. Evie and Bella looked at one another differently, their eyes echoing their shock and their intrigue in one another. Layla knew better than most that taking time with someone's art meant the world. She still remembered the first time she'd watched her husband read one of her novels, the way he'd furrowed his brow and turned the pages eagerly. Her love had tripled in size.

Of course, knowing that Samuel had read her novels in prison opened her heart to him even more.

Bella's anger and Evie's sorrow reflected both sides of Layla in the wake of learning of her husband and her sister's affair. She'd been caught in between those two sides ever since. It was as though that story had sprung back from the past to haunt her.

“Okay. That’s a good start,” Layla said, her voice wavering. “Why don’t we dig into the pacing of each of the texts?” She smiled sheepishly at both of the women, who’d decided, it seemed, to put their anger aside in pursuit of their artistic integrity. “Evie, would you mind reading the fourth paragraph of Bella’s text aloud for us?”

The critique session lasted about two hours, and it offered plenty of snags. As they collected their things to leave for the afternoon, Layla stood from her desk and pulled her hair into a high ponytail, jittery, watching as the two women walked toward the hallway together. Once they reached the shadows, they parted ways and walked in separate directions, but not without nods of respect.

* * *

After class, Layla made herself a cup of tea and returned to her bedroom to look over the recent pages of the Samuel-inspired novel. Ever since their sailing adventure last week, when Samuel had told her tremendously enlightening stories from his past: that he’d been the one to turn himself in, that he’d fallen in a kind of love with his pen pal, she’d stalled on the novel almost completely. The Samuel on the page was stale in comparison to the real version, and she often stopped halfway through sentences to stare out the window, dreaming of real-life Samuel— of the way he held her hand and tucked her hair behind her ear.

Surprising even herself, Layla quickly wrote an email to her editor, Val.

Val,

Do you have time for a quick call today? It's about the current manuscript.

Just two minutes later, Layla's video chat signal rang out from her computer speakers. Val was calling. Layla steadied her psyche, set her jaw, and answered it, bringing the enthusiastic voice of her long-time editor into the room.

"There she is! The beautiful Layla Johnson!" True to form, Val was wearing enormous earrings that swung around her cheeks, and her lipstick was coral and ill-suited to her skin tone. Val was always experimenting, even this late in their lives, and Layla had to appreciate that.

"Afternoon, Val. How are you?"

"The city misses you, Layla," Val said. "But I'm wonderful. I cannot wait to dig into the rest of that book you're so hard at work on."

Layla's heart seized. For a long time, she held the silence, trying and failing to remember how she'd practiced this speech in her head.

"That's why I wanted to talk," Layla began.

Val raised her finger. "I'm sorry, Layla. I really can't push the deadline on this one. The end of November is final. Just send me whatever you have then! We can clean everything up in-house. We just need that extra Layla Johnson spice."

Layla winced. More than anything, she hated when Val insinuated that Layla was barely necessary to the process of her own writing career—that she just needed to cough up a few more words, and they would send it to print. She considered writing to be more sacred than that.

"The deadline is fine," Layla began. "It's just the book that isn't."

Val furrowed her brow. “I don’t understand. The pages you sent are amazing! An ex-prisoner trying to build a new life on the outside? It’s something our readers want to dig into!”

But Layla was adamant. “I’m not going to finish this book, Val. And I don’t give you permission to publish any part of it.”

Val looked genuinely gobsmacked. Stuttering, she tried to talk Layla out of her decision, to remind her of the enormous paycheck coming her way when and if she completed the book.

“I’ve made my decision,” Layla offered, feeling resigned.

“And what are we supposed to do with your decision on our end?” Val demanded. “You know, your books are very important to this publishing house! We have to eat and pay our rent, too, you know?”

Layla’s heart dropped into her stomach. More than anything, she hated disappointing people, especially people like Val, who’d given their lives to her career.

“Give me a reason why, Layla,” Val urged. “I just need to know why you’re throwing this away.”

Layla bit her lower lip, stirring with confusion. Suppose the world turned its back on her. Suppose they forgot all about who she’d once been—the great and talented literary titan, Layla Johnson? Oh, but she was in her fifties now. Her reputation no longer mattered to her, not outside the context of Nantucket Island, not outside the small universe she and Samuel were building.

Val’s face was stony. “Last time you did this, you told me you would never do it to me again.”

Layla inhaled sharply. How had she forgotten that crucial moment in her career? Immediately, she was cast back to that horrific time, explaining to Val that she just couldn't publish what she'd written. Anything else would do. She'd been a blubbering fool at the time, lost in the chaos of herself and her despair.

“Back then, if you remember, I was so understanding,” Val blared, still very worked up, “but this is ridiculous. You can't throw away two beautiful manuscripts. You can't blow up your career.”

Layla wrapped her hand around her throat. She felt as though she couldn't fill her lungs properly. When she did speak, her voice was very small, just a string.

“That's the thing, Val,” she said. “If I want to blow up my career, I can. Apparently, this late in the game, I still have the capacity to destroy everything I've ever built. And that's kind of freeing, isn't it?”

Chapter Sixteen

New York City: 2018

The Greenwich Village apartment had always been in Layla's name, and in the years after her husband left her for her sister, Layla clung to that apartment with a death grip, thinking of it as her final remaining link to reality. Friends and associates were incredibly envious of the space and location and frequently called her "the luckiest woman in New York City." Layla always laughed at that. She hadn't felt lucky a single day since the launch of *The Venice Affair*. She'd forgotten what it meant to feel wanted in the world.

It was October yet again, six years after that horrendous launch party at The Strand Bookstore. Layla wore a billowing army green trench coat and sauntered through her neighborhood, never daring to look at anyone too closely, hoping they gave her the same courtesy. Behind her sunglasses, her eyes were rimmed red. This was her deepest embarrassment: that she frequently woke up crying.

Layla stopped at the corner near a woman in her twenties who wore a nearly identical trench coat. Did that mean the coat was "too young" for Layla? Layla's cheeks burned with embarrassment. The woman, who was a bottle blonde with long legs, removed a package of cigarettes from her trench

coat pocket and lit one with a flourish, and Layla had the strange urge to tell the woman it wasn't worth it, that your skin fought back once you hit your thirties or forties. But who was she to tell someone not to regret their decisions? She was a walking, talking mess.

Layla entered her favorite coffee shop and ordered an Americano and a low-carb lemon bar from the barista. The barista's name was Kevin. He was twenty-five, an art student, and he always talked and laughed with her, regardless of what mood she was in. He'd once told her he'd read one of her books in order to impress a woman, and Layla had really had a good laugh at that. Imagine! Something she'd written had actually helped push a romantic plot forward. It seemed beyond her.

"How's the new book coming?" Kevin asked as he slid the low-carb lemon bar over the counter and winked.

"I can't believe I'm saying this," Layla said, "but I actually don't hate it."

Kevin's smile widened. "That's what I like to hear. I'll make sure to let my girlfriend know. She'll be first in line at the bookstore!"

Layla buzzed to the corner of the coffee shop. It occurred to her that, save for the spontaneous sleep-crying that morning, she'd spent a lot less time in the dumps as of late. The reason was obvious. It was all because of the new book.

On the night of The Strand book launch six years ago, Brad had left her apartment and, presumably, fled to her sister, never to see Layla again. They'd even signed their divorce papers separately. This single act destroyed Layla's psyche forever. In its wake, Layla had begged Val to cancel her book tour, explaining that she couldn't pull herself together enough

to meet thousands of fans across the country. But Val had convinced her that was impossible, explaining that getting out of the city was exactly what Layla needed at a time like that. “Plus, so many of your readers have gone through something similar,” Val had said. “Their sisters stole their husbands?” Layla had asked. And Val hadn’t known what to say to that. Instead, she’d muttered, “No. Divorce is incredibly common, though,” and pretended to type something on her phone.

In a way, Val had been correct. Getting out of the city had helped Layla. She’d journeyed from New York to Boston, to Bangor, to Philadelphia, and she’d read from her book, shaken people’s hands, and grimaced as they’d told her their own divorce stories. She’d wandered through cities she didn’t know, pretending she was someone else, someone who was loved.

By the time Layla returned to New York, she’d received word that Brad and Connie had actually gotten married. They’d gone through with it. By the grace of God, Layla never saw any photographs from that assuredly “special” day. She’d gotten off of social media, asking an assistant to handle her personal author pages for her. And she’d tried to convince herself that she’d never met anyone named Connie Johnson or Brad Winston.

What she couldn’t do was write.

In fact, when she returned from her book tour in mid-2013, she’d decided she would never write again. She spoke with her accountant about retiring early, about whether it was reasonable, and he’d suggested she sell her apartment and move somewhere cheap and abroad, like Spain or Portugal. “That’s impossible,” Layla had admitted, throwing up her hands. “This apartment is all I have.”

In 2014, Layla sold the film rights for two of her older books, which provided an influx of cash that she could float on for a while. During those years, she read books she'd been meaning to read for decades, took a painting class, went to the movies, and tried out new restaurants. A newspaper approached her to write a column about the changes in New York City since her arrival, but, adamant she would never write again, she refused. Val called her frequently, at first, and then less frequently, realizing she'd lost her biggest cash cow. Layla was getting more in tune with who she was as a divorcée, a woman who no longer wrote. She wasn't sure she liked the person she now was, but that had to be okay.

Why, then, had she awoken on a random morning in spring 2017, walked directly to her desk, and begun to write? It mystified her. But as she'd typed through the morning and deep into the afternoon, she felt the knots within her stomach and chest begin to loosen, and tears flowed from her eyes. Within the first couple of days, she'd recognized she had a real story on her hands. She'd called Val nervously, feeling as though she was stepping around a landmine.

"I'm writing about it," she said over the phone, her voice wavering. "About me. About my sister. About my divorce."

Val spoke cautiously, not wanting to get too excited. "Okay. Be careful, Layla. If you get through this, it'll be a bestseller. Absolutely no question. But no pressure, okay?"

Layla fictionalized the story here and there. In the book, the main character was a writer who'd been born and raised in poverty, with a sister she hadn't spoken to in many years. After the death of their mother, they'd met up in their hometown to go through their mother's things and sell the house. The trip went better than expected, with the sisters

seeing eye-to-eye for the first time in decades. The sister decided to move to the city to be nearer to the writer and to be involved in her and her children's lives. But as they grew closer and more codependent, secrets from the past came to the surface. In an act of revenge for what happened in the past, the sister lured the writer character's husband away from her and made him fall in love. At the end of the story, the writer character was alone with her children, contemplating ways to get revenge, yet understanding that any revenge she cast upon them would ultimately destroy her children's lives, too. So, she had to put on a brave face and carry the weight of what her sister had done to her— thus complicating her feelings about her childhood even more.

In essence, the story showed the depths of Layla's suffering. It pitted the blame precisely on Connie. And, through the process of creating it, Layla found her strength as a writer yet again. She took pleasure in descriptions, in developing character backstories. She found herself replaying old stories over and over again in her mind, writing them out, and finding in them a sort of therapy. She'd long since given up on traditional psychiatry. This was what worked for her.

Now, as Layla sat in her favorite coffee shop, hunkered over her computer, editing what was to be her next bestseller, she felt better than she had in years. As Kevin breezed past with a broom, he said, "Give me one hint about the new manuscript, Layla. My girlfriend will love me forever if I tell her."

Layla shivered with laughter. Forever love wasn't something she believed in anymore.

"I can't tell you anything, Kevin," Layla said, feigning sorrow. "My publisher would kill me."

That evening, Layla had plans to meet Gretchen, a friend from university, for dinner at an exclusive sushi restaurant. Layla dropped off her laptop at home, reapplied her makeup, and texted Gretchen that she was on her way. Just as she approached the door of the restaurant, Gretchen pulled up in a cab, and she swallowed Layla in a hug of stormy weather perfume and exquisite leather.

Gretchen and Layla were seated in the back corner of the restaurant, where they ordered cocktails and opened their sushi menus. Gretchen's smile was overwhelming, almost too big for her face.

“What's gotten into you?” Layla laughed.

Gretchen swung her head from side to side, making her blonde bob shake. “I can't hold it in a second longer. I met someone.”

Layla's eyebrows popped up. “Gretchen! Wow. I don't even know what to say!” Gretchen had recently gone through a divorce, as well, and they normally spent these dinners demonizing the concepts of marriage and love. They told themselves it was part of their process.

Gretchen winced. “I know I said I thought the apps were lame. And they are! But this guy I met, Layla...” She paused for brevity. “He's so great. Handsome, with great style. I never could have gotten Greg to wear something like the suit he had on for our date.”

“Greg liked sweatpants too much,” Layla joked.

Gretchen waved her hand, seemingly uninterested in discussing her ex further. She turned her cell around to show off photographs of her new beau, a guy named Liam, who looked to be about ten years her junior.

“He’s young?”

Gretchen laughed. “About six years younger than me. He has two children, both teenagers, and he works as an architect.”

Layla’s stomach stirred. She felt strange, as though Gretchen had gotten back in a race Layla had abandoned years ago.

“Are you going to see him again?”

“We have another date planned for this weekend!” Gretchen said.

Their cocktails arrived, and Layla took a long sip, trying to numb her sorrow. “I’m so happy for you.”

Gretchen nodded. “Let’s make a profile for you.”

“Um. No?” Layla tried to laugh.

“Come on! I have so many beautiful photographs of you from Cape Cod,” Gretchen reminded her. “And you’re endlessly fascinating. Who wouldn’t want to date the famous Layla Johnson?”

Layla grimaced. “I told you, Gretchen. I’m in a post-romance time of my life. I’m devoting everything to writing again.”

Gretchen sighed. Layla wanted to remind her that, just a couple of weeks ago, Gretchen had coined the phrase “post-romance time of my life,” but she didn’t want to push her away. She wanted to be happy for her friend, to toast her newfound exhilaration.

“I’m sure this will end horribly,” Gretchen added of her own dating encounter. “But it’s reminded me of something about myself. Something I forgot. It’s priceless, I think. I don’t

know.” She took a sip of her cocktail, weighing up her words. “I just love you, Layla. And I don’t want you to hate the world any longer than you need to.”

Layla’s smile fell. “I don’t hate the world. I really don’t.”

Gretchen raised her shoulders. “Okay.” She didn’t believe her.

A couple of hours later, Layla sat in the back of a cab, gazing out at the illuminated city and its fight against the inky blackness of the sky. After Gretchen got the dating talk out of her system, they managed to have a pretty nice conversation—but Layla hadn’t been able to shake the judgment she’d seen in Gretchen’s eyes. It was clear her friend thought she was making a mistake.

As though the universe was bent on making fun of her today, Layla’s phone lit up with a call from none other than Brad Winston. She snorted so loudly that the taxi driver turned around and asked if she was all right.

“I’m fine,” Layla said sarcastically, ignoring the call. She’d never considered blocking him all those years ago, as he hadn’t seemed interested in maintaining any kind of relationship. Maybe this was a butt dial, anyway.

But a second later, Brad Winston called again. Layla rolled her eyes into the back of her head as her heart thudded with dread. What had gotten into him? Had her sister suddenly left him for someone else? Oh, she could see Connie doing something like that—making a huge mess and fleeing the scene. That was so Connie.

When Brad tried her a third time, the cab was pulling up in front of the apartment they’d once shared. In a fit of rage, Layla cut the call and blocked the number. She paid the cab

driver with a double tip and got out, feeling more powerful than she had in years. She would publish the book about their story. She would reap the rewards of revealing this to the world.

In her apartment, Layla got into a pair of pajamas, made herself a cup of tea, and broke off a few squares of dark chocolate for a snack. The History Channel was showing a six-part documentary about Laura Ingalls Wilder, and she settled in during the middle of part four, happy to drift to sleep on the couch if it came to that. If Brad had still been around, the television probably would have been set to the Sports Channel. She probably would have taken refuge in their bedroom, reading until she fell asleep.

Layla eventually drifted off on the couch. When the landline blared at eleven-thirty, she coughed awake, blinking around at the living room, which was lit with an eerie green from the television. Why did she still have a landline? She needed to get rid of it.

“Hello?” Layla’s voice was soft and inarticulate.

“Layla! It’s, um. It’s Daisy?”

Layla wracked her brain. “Daisy?”

“From our hometown,” Daisy reminded her. “I was best friends with Connie?”

Layla wrinkled her nose, remembering the freckled face of Daisy and her big gum bubbles, which she was sure impressed the boys.

“I just heard the news,” Daisy said, her voice breaking.

Layla rubbed her eyes. “Daisy, I don’t know how you got this number, but...”

“I just can’t believe it,” Daisy continued. “Is it really true?”

Layla opened her eyes and stared through the greenly lit room. On the television was a commercial for an organic toothpaste. “What’s true, Daisy?”

Daisy sputtered. “The accident. Is she really gone? Oh, Layla. I just can’t take it. I can’t take knowing she’s not here. She was my first best friend, Layla. She was my everything.”

The horrific realization wrapped around Layla’s neck, threatening to stifle her. For a long time, she listened to Daisy blather about what she’d heard, about how Connie had been driving back to the cabin she shared with Brad when she’d hit a truck head-on. All Layla could think of was Connie’s face on the last night she’d ever seen her. At the Strand Bookstore, she’d been wearing that tight red dress, looking vibrant and easy, her hair bouncy as a commercial for Tresemmé shampoo. Layla could still remember how proud she’d been to know her sister back then, how grateful she’d been that they’d mended their relationship. She’d loved her so much, which had made the betrayal stick that much harder.

As Daisy blathered on, Layla removed the phone from her ear, returned it to the cradle, and promptly fell to her knees with shock. She didn’t get up for many hours, recognizing, in her bleary state, that this was precisely how she’d handled the news of her husband and sister’s affair. In times of grief, her legs just couldn’t support her anymore.

Chapter Seventeen

Present Day: Nantucket Island

After Layla told Val she wouldn't be publishing *The Prisoner*, Val refused to answer Layla's emails. Layla wasn't sure she blamed her. She was a washed-up writer with writer's block, no good to anyone anymore. Maybe she could work at writer's residencies across the world, moving herself from place to place as a way to keep herself alive. Maybe she would never write another word again. Maybe that kind of life would be enough.

Two days after Layla's conversation with Val, she met again with Evie and Bella. Instead of three seats away from one another, they sat two seats away, and they no longer cast as many glowering glances at one another. Just as Layla had asked, they'd both reworked their recent assignments, implementing the changes they'd discussed on Monday. They were ready for another conversation.

"Before we get started today, I wanted to come clean about something," Layla said, perching at the edge of her desk and alternating locking eyes with both of them. "Last week's dispute reminded me of something in my own life. Something that I've hidden away from. And the fact that you've both

been brave enough to write about your experiences so openly has proven my own hypocrisy.”

Layla tucked a long curl behind her ear, willing herself to be brave, to be open. Perhaps it would help them.

“Back in 2012, I was at the height of my career. I felt that nothing and nobody could touch me.” Layla sighed. “But during the launch of *The Venice Affair*, I learned my husband was having an affair with my sister.”

Bella’s jaw dropped. Evie’s eyes stirred with confusion and sorrow. Neither of them spoke.

“It destroyed me, obviously,” Layla continued. “My sister and I had had a very hot and cold relationship, but I had thought we were on good terms around then. Perhaps because women are naturally competitive with one another, I found myself blaming my sister much more than my husband. Isn’t that ridiculous? He wronged me just as much as she did. But I was much more willing to hate my sister and romanticize my past with my husband than the other way around. After what happened last week, I’ve been really scrutinizing my own belief systems. It’s been difficult, to say the least.”

Layla closed her eyes, unsure if she had the strength to proceed. “Six years after I learned about their affair, I was on the verge of publishing a book about it. It was fictionalized, of course, but it represented the hopelessness, shame, and anger I felt afterward. Gosh, I was angry! I thought I would never feel like myself again.”

Bella and Evie nodded tenderly. Both seemed to recognize just how small their dispute was in the face of something like this.

Layla bit down on her lower lip. “My sister died in a car accident that year. I hadn’t seen her in six years. And the news completely broke me.”

Bella gasped.

“Is that when your husband died, too?” Evie whispered, her voice very small.

Layla shook her head, her eyes filling with tears. “It’s pathetic to admit this, but my husband, I mean, my ex-husband, is still alive. It’s easier for me to pretend that he died all those years ago, that I’m a widow rather than the pathetic woman whose husband left her for her sister. I didn’t even go to my sister’s funeral because I didn’t want to see him. I wanted to support my own lie.”

Evie and Bella fully looked at one another, both flabbergasted. Neither knew what to say.

“I appreciate how strange this must be to hear,” Layla went on. “I openly lied to you, to Greta, and to almost everyone else I’ve met in the previous few years. Sure, anyone who knows how to dig through the internet could probably figure out that I’m lying. But why would they? I’m a fifty-three-year-old woman. My story doesn’t fully matter to anyone, so I make a different one up.”

Evie scrunched up her face. “It matters to us.”

Bella nodded furiously. “I hate that you haven’t felt comfortable enough with it to say it aloud.”

Layla raised her shoulders, her cheeks warm with embarrassment. But in telling this story, her soul felt clear, cleansed. Maybe this was a first step.

“Where is that book?” Evie asked quietly. “The one about your affair?”

“I told my editor I didn’t want to publish it,” Layla explained. “It was too personal.”

Bella and Evie glanced at one another.

“What are you thinking?” Layla asked, her voice breaking.

Bella gestured toward her stack of papers. “It’s just that you’re always telling us to bare our souls on the page. To tap into what we’re feeling and how we’re processing those feelings.”

Evie nodded. “It’s been a painful process but a necessary one.”

“Maybe you should return to that manuscript,” Bella suggested. “Your sister’s death is a horrible part of your story, but it’s a necessary one.”

Layla dropped her head back, her chest swelling as she recognized the truth in their words. How was it that a couple of twenty-something women had more wisdom than she did at nearly twice their age?

“I don’t know if I can do it,” Layla breathed.

“You have to try,” Evie said. “You owe it to yourself.”

“And to us, your readers,” Bella added.

Layla nodded, feeling thoughtful and soft. “I have to scrap the book I’m writing now, anyway.”

“Why?” Bella asked.

“I realized it wasn’t my story to tell,” Layla whispered.

Bella gestured vaguely. “You already have a story. It’s the one you just told us.”

Evie nodded solemnly. Layla's body thudded with the weight of what she had to do next. She had to return to a manuscript she hadn't looked at in five years. She had to nurse her career back to health for the good of Val, the good of her mental health, and the good of her self-respect.

“We really do have the best job in the world,” Layla said, walking around the side of her desk to find Bella and Evie's manuscripts. “Thank you for reminding me how special it is. It's a privilege to work out my sorrows on the page. And it's wonderful to see understanding and empathy echoed back from the eyes of so many readers. I know, if you both work at it, you'll have fans who look at you like that, too.”

Chapter Eighteen

Samuel scrubbed his hands of sawdust in the bathroom of Charlie's woodworking studio, changed his clothes, styled his hair in the mirror, and strode out into the glittering blue of the October afternoon. He'd spent all morning working on a beautiful secretary desk for a Nantucket vacationer, and Charlie had made his enthusiasm over the piece known. Samuel couldn't remember feeling so confident in all his life — not even when he'd figured out how to launder money, or when Georgia had agreed to marry him, or when he'd graduated valedictorian.

That was the thing about life after prison. It was all about contrasts. Everything “after” prison would always feel a little brighter than anything before it. He just appreciated it that much more.

Maybe because he was the luckiest man in the world, Layla had agreed to go on another dinner date with him tonight. He'd made a reservation at a French restaurant Greta recommended, and he'd decided to buy fresh flowers and a nice bottle of wine. Since they'd begun “dating,” or whatever it was they were doing, Layla and Samuel had spent only one night together— and it had been the single greatest, most exhilarating night of Samuel's life. He couldn't begin to hope for another. He was a puddle of romance and brewing love.

When Samuel returned to The Copperfield House, he asked Julia for a vase for the flowers. She found one immediately, an ornate, vintage green one with a floral design carved into the side. Samuel thanked her and returned to the residency side of the house, where he filled the vase with water, placed the flowers in the vase, and headed up to Layla's bedroom. Ordinarily, she was hard at work at her desk until five, and now that it was five-fifteen, he had a hunch she was eager to take her eyes off the screen.

Layla's bedroom door was cracked. Inside were two voices — Evie's and Bella's. A few days ago, Layla had explained to Samuel that they were mending their relationship and that they'd even begun to like one another's writing. Samuel wasn't any closer to understanding women, but he was grateful to have peace in the residency again. He also loved the light that came to Layla's eyes when she spoke about Evie and Bella, as though they were her daughters and they'd finally begun to get along.

"I love what you did with this line," Bella said to Evie inside Layla's bedroom. "It's so poetic. I'm jealous of it!"

Evie laughed easily. "I think it's a little too cheesy?"

"No way," Bella told her.

Thinking he would just come back later, Samuel took a sharp step back, and the wooden floor creaked beneath him.

"Hello?" Bella stood up and hustled to open the door. When she saw Samuel, she beamed. "Samuel, hi! What beautiful flowers. Wow. Are those for Layla?"

Evie's smile widened. "They're gorgeous."

Samuel suddenly felt thirteen years old. "Um. Yes? They are. But I can come back later."

“Don’t worry,” Bella said. “She went back to the library to look for a book. She’ll be here soon.”

Evie locked eyes with Bella and raised her brows. The two women had a silent conversation in the air between them, one Samuel couldn’t understand at all.

“We’re going to go,” Evie said. “Why don’t you stay and wait for her?”

Bella collected her things and smiled. “Yeah! We’ve kept Layla too long, anyway.”

“We’re turning her into our literary mom,” Evie explained, pulling her bag over her shoulder. “Have a great night, Samuel! See you later.”

And with that, Samuel was left alone in Layla’s bedroom, holding onto the vase, feeling stupid. The girls had left a hint of their floral perfumes, and their laughter echoed down the hallway. Did they think his and Layla’s romance was silly? Maybe. But what did he care? Samuel took a deep breath and walked toward the desk, where he set the vase back behind her computer. But when he stepped back, he became frantic, thinking the vase might topple over and pour water all over the computer. He couldn’t live with it. So, he hurried forward again, collected the vase, and pressed it against his chest. Everything about falling in love felt foolish. He was grateful nobody was there to see him.

But as he pulled away from the desk, something caught the corner of his eye. It was the top of a stack of papers, a manuscript, which had been partially hidden by a stack of books. Curious, Samuel allowed his eyes to scan the words at the top— a title. “The Prisoner.”

Samuel nearly dropped the vase. His heartbeat pounded between his ears, and his tongue was dry as sandpaper. No longer able to resist, he tugged the first few inches of the manuscript from beneath the books to read:

Sam had never believed himself to be innocent. During his twelve years in prison, he'd spent the majority of his days reminding himself of his inability to act like a normal person, to exist in a world everyone else seemed to comprehend with ease. On the day of his release, he stood beneath a colossal blue sky and demanded of himself: "Do I actually deserve this freedom?" And he reasoned he would spend the rest of his life figuring that out.

In Layla's bedroom, Samuel could no longer feel his feet. He thought he was going to throw up. Unable to read another line, he turned on his heel and ducked for the door, dropping the vase along the way. It crashed to the floor and burst into hundreds of shards. Oh gosh. He didn't have the energy to clean that up! He had to get out of here. He had to leave the island and get as far away from Layla as he could.

Layla had manipulated him. She'd gotten information about him, prying him open like a clam and taking what she wanted of him. As he'd fallen in love with her, she'd used his story for her own profit.

He couldn't believe it.

Suddenly, Layla appeared in the doorway. She was just as beautiful as she always was, her reddish-brown hair in wild curls around her glowing face. She smiled at him as though he was the only person she wanted to see in the morning, the only man she wanted to fall asleep next to at night. It was all a farce.

“Oh, Samuel! What happened?” She’d seen the vase, along with the flowers that were splayed out on the floorboards, wilting.

Samuel blinked back tears and pointed toward the manuscript on the table. Layla’s face went slack. Samuel willed himself to say something, but there was glue in his throat, and he couldn’t make his voice box work.

“Samuel, I can explain,” Layla said immediately.

But Samuel couldn’t take it. He bucked around her, storming down the hallway, away. He’d been foolish to believe he could carve out a real life for himself. Everything in his world had always been doomed. Maybe it was better if he just went back to prison.

Chapter Nineteen

Halloween was on a dark and alienating Tuesday. Cold wind burst across the white sands of the beach along The Copperfield House, blasting against the old Victorian home, making the windows shiver. Layla was bundled up in a plaid button-down and a thick coat, roaming the beach alone, watching the gray waves leap onto the beach and recede into the froth. She had one month until the end of her time at The Copperfield House, one month until she'd promised Val her newly updated novel—the one about her sister and husband's affair rather than the one about the prisoner. Her time in Nantucket had been life-changing in many ways, but it had also been heartbreaking. She hadn't known her heart was still capable of that.

Layla returned to The Copperfield House, where Greta had promised her fresh scones and hot tea. They sat at the kitchen table, watching the blustery beach, sharing the dark morning. James, the only high schooler around right now, burst in and out of the kitchen, grabbing toast and kissing his grandmother's cheek before he left. He was already late. Afterward, Anna, who was now very pregnant, waddled in for yogurt and a hot water bottle before waddling back out again. There was always someone to talk to in The Copperfield House, always another story to hear.

Bernard appeared not long afterward, tugging his beard nervously and pouring himself a fresh cup of coffee. “How’s it going, ladies?” He sounded stiff, even as Greta and Layla said their pleasantries, welcoming him to their morning.

After Bernard retreated back to his upstairs study, Layla put her face in her hands. “He’s been treating me so strangely since Samuel moved out.”

Greta wrapped her hand around Layla’s wrist and held the silence for a moment. “Bernard isn’t the best at socializing, is all. I explained to him what happened. He knows it was a misunderstanding.”

Layla sighed. “But it wasn’t. Not really. I did have plans to publish that book.”

“But you’d already told your editor you didn’t want to anymore,” Greta pointed out. “The fact that Samuel saw it in the first place was a horrible mistake. But it happened.”

“I know. And I understand why he doesn’t want to see me,” Layla breathed. “But it still hurts. So much.”

Greta nodded and closed her eyes. “Maybe he’ll come around.”

Layla couldn’t imagine Samuel coming around. Almost immediately after he’d discovered the manuscript on her desk, he’d spoken with Charlie about renting a cabin on the opposite end of town, a supposedly gorgeous place with a single bedroom and a view of the water, protected by the road with a thick line of pine trees and oaks. She imagined him sequestered alone out there, probably surrounded by books, growing a thick beard, and listening to the waves wash up on shore. Her heart shifted.

“I’ll go back to the city at the end of November, anyway,” Layla said softly. “I belong in Greenwich Village. Besides, Evie and Bella are both planning on moving there by January, and I told them I’d be their Mother Hen in the big city.”

“I can’t believe how quickly they’ve become friends,” Greta said.

“I hate to say this, but I think my past pain brought them together,” Layla said.

“Do they know what happened with Samuel?”

Layla hesitated. “They noticed how upset I was last week, and they demanded to go out for drinks. I wept the whole thing to them at the wine bar downtown. They were wonderful listeners.” Layla tried to laugh at herself. “For years, I told myself I was in a post-romance time of my life.”

“It’s funny what we tell ourselves,” Greta said. “During all those years I spent in The Copperfield House alone, I told myself I didn’t need anyone. Now, look at me. I’m devastated if I don’t see James before he goes to school!”

A moment later, Julia and Alana entered the kitchen, alternating between squabbling and teasing each other. Layla watched Greta involve herself, weighing in on Alana’s new theater play. After school, teenagers gathered at The Copperfield House, where Alana taught them acting—a force for good in Nantucket. Julia was helping this time around, too, as she had a calmer publishing schedule this autumn. “I learned how to delegate!” she announced proudly. “I don’t think I’ll go fully insane this year.”

After Alana and Julia left, Layla sipped her tea, trying to quiet her anxious, stirring thoughts. Then, she remembered

something. “The girls want to go out tonight for Halloween. Are you game?”

“Of course! Alana and Julia already asked about that. They said they have a costume all ready for me,” Greta said. “I can only imagine what it is.”

Layla giggled. “I don’t have anything!”

“I’ll tell Alana to put something together for you,” Greta said. “We’ll paint the town red.”

* * *

Alana appeared outside Layla’s bedroom that afternoon with a cardboard box and a mischievous smile. Layla answered the door with a pencil between her lips, which she immediately removed, laughing at herself.

“Sorry. Sometimes when I start writing, I forget how to be a real person,” she explained.

“Lucky for you, it’s Halloween. You’re not allowed to be a real person today!”

Alana laid out the potential costumes for the night ahead: a flapper outfit complete with a white feather boa, a baseball uniform with a skirt, a la *A League of Their Own*, an orange sweater and a pair of thick glasses, “To go as Velma from Scooby Doo,” Alana explained.

Layla dug through the box, hunting until she discovered a traditional bonnet, one that immediately reminded her of *Little House on the Prairie*, an old favorite.

“I don’t have anything that goes with that,” Alana said.

“I might.” Layla tip-toed toward her closet, where she found a long floral dress with buttons that went all the way to her chin. Back when she’d bought it, the prairie look had been “in” again amongst young women, and she’d spent a fortune.

“Who are you supposed to be?” Alana sounded doubtful as Layla stretched the dress over the bed.

“Laura Ingalls,” Layla explained quietly. “She’s one of my literary heroes.”

Alana shrugged. “You’re just like the rest of my family. You’d rather go the way of your literary hero than wear a feather boa! I’ll never understand it.” She winked as she put the rest of the items back in the box, adding, “We’re meeting on the family side of the house at seven sharp. Don’t be late!”

At six-forty-five, Layla met Evie and Bella in the hallway of the residency. They were giggling excitedly, both dressed up. Evie was a vampire in a long, slender velvet dress, with fangs hanging from between her lips, which suited her emotional writing. Bella was a dead cheerleader, with big bags she’d painted under her eyes.

“Where did you get that Nantucket High School cheerleading outfit?” Layla asked with a laugh.

“We went thrifting,” Bella explained, throwing her arm around Evie’s shoulders.

“Are you Laura Ingalls?” Evie asked.

Layla’s heart lifted, and she touched her bonnet tenderly. “I wasn’t sure anyone would get it.”

“My mom read me those books when I was little,” Evie explained. “We even made maple candy with snow.”

Layla's eyes filled with tears. Immediately, she was drawn into a memory with her little sister, back when they'd both adored Laura Ingalls.

"My sister and I made that, too," she explained, blinking rapidly. "We ate too much and made ourselves sick."

What she didn't add was that her parents had been so angry at their stomach aches that they'd banned them from their shared room. Connie had cried for hours.

Not for the first time that autumn, Layla had begun to unpack the general abuse her parents had demonstrated throughout her and Connie's childhood. No wonder their relationship had been so strained over the years. They'd never had appropriate models for love.

In the living room of The Copperfield House, Greta, Alana, and Julia were ready to go. Alana had opted for the feather boa and flapper outfit, and Julia wore a ridiculous and ostentatious mink coat, a big wig, and enormous sunglasses.

"Who are you?" Layla asked Julia with a laugh.

"I'm an heiress," Julia explained. "I'm tremendously unhappy, and I've been married nine times."

"That's so typical of Julia," Alana explained.

"What?" Julia demanded.

"You always invent a dramatic backstory for your costumes," Alana said.

"She's a writer, Alana," Greta reminded her, flashing Julia a kind smile.

"Greta, you look incredible!" Layla said.

Greta, who'd somehow constructed a large teapot nose and handle from a beautiful cream-colored dress, was pink-cheeked and happy. The hat on her head was meant to be the top of a teapot.

"You're Mrs. Potts from *Beauty and the Beast*?" Bella suggested.

"The very same," Greta said. "I hope I manage to sit down in this dress!"

They took two cars: Layla, Evie, and Bella in her rental and Alana, Julia, and Greta in Julia's SUV. They drove to a downtown wine bar called The Grapes of Wrath, where they snagged a table in the corner by the window to ensure they could watch all the dressed-up children out the window. Just like them, several other adults had decided to dress up and head out to bars and restaurants in the area, and they spotted several Where's Waldos, Carmen Sandiagos, princesses, Medusa statues, Statue of Libertys, and even one other flapper. Layla was secretly pleased that nobody else was dressed like Laura Ingalls.

"I think we should toast," Greta said, raising her glass of wine. "To a truly successful first two months of the writing residency. Layla, I can't thank you enough for taking time out of your normal life to come here."

"Yes!" Bella and Evie cried in unison.

"You completely changed my writing," Evie breathed. "I don't know what I would have done without you."

Layla's heart fluttered. She'd never imagined wanting to be someone's mentor. "You've changed my writing, too," she told them. "I never would have found my way back to my current manuscript without you."

The women drank. They laughed. They shared stories and gossip and dug into the silly details of their ordinary lives. Frequently, Julia paused to text Anna to make sure she was all right, all alone at home that night, so pregnant that she hardly did anything but get up to go to the bathroom.

“I hate how nervous she is,” Julia said, chewing her lower lip.

“Where’s Charlie tonight?” Layla asked Julia.

Julia looked contemplative. “He’s with Dad, Jeremy, Quentin, and Samuel. At Samuel’s new place.”

There was a studied pause. Layla sipped her wine and told herself not to feel strange. “I’m sure it’s lovely there.”

“Charlie showed me pictures,” Julia said. “It’s gorgeous.”

“I’m so glad he has your family,” Layla breathed. “I don’t like the idea of him being by himself out there.”

Nobody knew what to say, not until Evie asked Greta a question about how she’d assembled her costume, and Greta described a horrific incident with her hot glue gun and her fear of losing her fingernail. Everyone laughed, grateful to be distracted from Layla’s broken heart—including Layla.

But, for some reason, Layla soon found her thoughts turning back into the darkness in her head. Ever since she’d been forced to reconsider her relationship with her sister, she’d begun, strangely, to think about Brad. For many years, she’d pretended he was dead as a way to make herself feel better. But what had actually happened to him?

Layla excused herself to the bathroom and looked up Brad on social media. A part of her was surprised he even had it, as he’d never felt like the most modern of men. In his profile picture, he had his arm around the waist of a woman a little bit

younger than him. They looked to be on a boat somewhere, and the woman wore sunglasses and tilted her forehead against his ear. Anyone who met them probably thought they'd been together for decades.

All this time, Layla had allowed her husband and her sister's affair to get between her and happiness. Why had she forced herself into solitude? What had been the point of it?

For the thousandth time that month, Layla considered texting Samuel, asking if she could explain again. But Samuel had made his boundary, and she had to respect that. The warmth he'd had in his eyes for her was no longer there. She had to pick herself up, wipe herself off, and head back to the city to try again.

After her sister's death, Layla had fallen into a horrific depression— one that had demanded she cease writing completely and hibernate for more than two years. Around the time her depression had loosened up, the COVID-19 pandemic had hit, and she'd been forced to remain inside all the more, reading and wracking her brain for some idea, any idea. She'd already felt washed up then— and that had been three and a half years ago.

But toward the beginning of the pandemic, when people had been overly eager to reach out to one another, asking if they were holding up okay, Layla had received a small cardboard box from Brad. In it had been items that had belonged to her sister. Brad had included no note, and Layla had shoved the box into the corner of her closet without looking too hard at anything inside.

Probably, Brad had sent the box as a way to force himself to move on, to put both Connie and Layla in a metaphorical "box" so that he could date again. Layla had seen it as selfish

and confusing at the time. But for the first time, Layla felt the urge to peer into that box. Maybe something within would show her something about her and her sister's relationship, something that would clear the darkness in her soul.

When Layla returned to the table, Greta ordered them another bottle and explained excitedly that they'd just seen an entire herd of little kids and their mother, dressed as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*. Layla delighted in her easy laughter. She pressed her glass across the table to be refilled and set her sights on the future. There was so much to look forward to.

Chapter Twenty

Samuel hadn't expected any trick-or-treaters. When he'd invited Bernard, Quentin, Jeremy, and Charlie to his place for Halloween, he'd envisioned them out on the front porch, Samuel with a glass of iced tea and the rest with beers, watching the moon glisten over the water. Instead, the doorbell rang every ten or fifteen minutes, bringing flocks of very cute children in a smattering of outfits. He saw Marvel characters, Disney characters, princesses, fairies, evil villains, and even Snow White and the Seven Dwarves.

"Good thing I bought candy," Samuel joked as he returned to the porch with the Copperfield clan.

Jeremy removed the wrapper around a Baby Ruth, giving him a mischievous smile. "I was thinking the same thing."

"Man, I ate too many already," Charlie groaned. "Butterfingers are my kryptonite."

"I just saw a little Superman, actually," Samuel said, collapsing in the chair next to Bernard.

Jeremy palmed the back of his neck. "It makes me nostalgic for when I took my daughter trick-or-treating, honestly. It was always such a special night. Her eyes were as big as saucers, and she got so nervous before ringing every doorbell."

Samuel's heart opened with memories of his own. "Quinn and Ronan were killer trick-or-treaters. After we finished with our neighborhood, they had me drive them to the neighborhoods surrounding ours for an even bigger haul."

"Wellesley houses must have been the real deal when it came to candy," Bernard offered.

Samuel nodded and took a Reese's cup from the bag, which he slowly unwrapped.

"I didn't realize you were from Wellesley," Quentin said, giving Samuel a look that made Samuel's spine shiver. He still hadn't gotten accustomed to having Quentin Copperfield from the nightly news around.

"Wellesley is a gorgeous place," Jeremy added.

Samuel raised his shoulders and bit down on the candy, filling his mouth with chocolate and chalky peanut butter. After a pause, he said, "The competition of that little place nearly killed me. I'm from a small town, you know, and I never had very much money growing up. I never knew what it took to exist in a place like Wellesley."

There was silence. Jeremy and Charlie exchanged glances, and Samuel was suddenly frightened they would make an excuse and flee.

"I've been meaning to ask you," Jeremy said. "Are your ex-wife and children still there?"

Samuel blinked several times, weighing up how to speak about the single greatest heartache of his life.

"Man, I shouldn't have brought up your kids," Jeremy added. "I'm sorry."

“No. It’s okay.” Samuel crumpled the trash in his fist. “My wife remarried the man she was having an affair with. I think they still live in the same neighborhood. What a scandal, right?”

“That’s rough,” Charlie said.

“Based on my limited research, my daughter, Quinn, has children,” Samuel added, trying to smile, although it slid off his face immediately. “I’m a grandfather.”

Bernard tilted his head. “You never said so.”

Charlie frowned. “Do your children not know what happened? They don’t know the whole story?”

Samuel raised his shoulders. “The whole story is that I broke the law, abandoned the family, and went to prison.”

“It’s not, though,” Jeremy insisted. “Your wife was having an affair. You turned yourself in because you didn’t know what to do.”

“She didn’t break the law,” Samuel reminded him. “And I would have been caught eventually. I’m very sure about that.”

That last part was a lie. The FBI agent, Rod, had said he wasn’t on to him at all. But Samuel didn’t like to wonder how much longer he could have lasted. It made him sick to his stomach.

They were quiet for a moment. Bernard sipped his beer and gazed contemplatively at the water. Samuel ached to hear Bernard’s opinion, his wisdom, just as he had back in prison.

“There’s no straight way forward,” Bernard finally said. “And no way to know if they’ll answer you if you reach out. But it seems like such a shame to give up now that you’re free. You have a second chance at life.”

Samuel was quiet for a while, watching the frigid waves lap against the dock. For not the first time, he considered how lucky he was that he'd been able to rent this place on such short notice, thus allowing him to hide from Layla back at The Copperfield House. He never would have been able to do that without Charlie.

"Maybe I should have let Layla publish that book," Samuel added, his voice tentative. "That way, the entire story would be in print, and my children could decide to believe in it or not. Isn't that foolish? What a coward I am."

Bernard shook his head. "Layla knew what she was doing was wrong. She wasn't going to publish it."

Samuel furrowed his brow. Bernard had told him that before, of course— but, for him, the entire idea that she'd spent hours and hours writing about him, about the greatest trauma in his life, felt like a boundary they couldn't overcome.

"It was wrong, man," Charlie agreed. "That wasn't her story to tell."

"That doesn't mean you can't forgive her," Quentin added nervously.

"I don't know," Samuel said, feeling tentative. "I think I might be better spending a few years alone to think about what comes next. I don't want to jump into anything rashly. And I want to trust whoever I decide to be with. I don't know if I can trust Layla anymore."

Around ten-thirty, long after the final trick-or-treaters had gone home to have crazy, sugar-addled dreams, Samuel remained awake and alone in his cabin. He filled a glass with water and sat at the edge of his bed, trying to remember what

it had felt like to be a married man, to always share his bed. Truthfully, since he'd left prison, he'd struggled to sleep in a room alone. It was the first time he had in his life, as he'd always shared a room in childhood.

For the tenth time that month, Samuel pulled up Quinn's social media profile on his phone and scanned through the photographs he could see without the necessity of "following" her and giving himself away. There were only a few public photos: one of her and her husband, another of her and her children. One of her kids looked remarkably like Georgia, which didn't hurt as much as Samuel thought it could have. His heart felt blotchy with love for them.

Samuel considered the evening he'd just had with Bernard, Quentin, Charlie, and Jeremy, and how Bernard had told him his return from prison had been a very long and rocky process. "They didn't welcome me back. In fact, nobody was really here!" Bernard had explained. "It took a while for the children to come back to The Copperfield House. Now, it's hard for anyone to believe we haven't been together all this time."

It was a miracle. Could Samuel believe in miracles for his own life?

Before he chickened out, Samuel asked to "follow" his daughter on social media. He was allowed to send a message along with the request, and he pondered for ages over what to say.

Ultimately, he went with something simple.

"Hey, honey. It's Dad. I know this is a tricky situation we're in, but I would love to speak to you sometime soon. Let me know if you're up for a phone call. No pressure. Love, Dad."

Even if his daughter agreed to a call, Samuel knew he would never tell either of his children about his wife's affair. He would never throw her under the bus like that. He'd once loved her with his entire heart, mind, and spirit. That didn't just go away.

Chapter Twenty-One

The first week of November, Layla received word from Gretchen, her longtime and very dear friend, back in New York City. She was moving spontaneously to Maine; could Layla come to the city for a goodbye dinner?

“It’s so sudden!” Layla said over the phone, her heart pumping. “I thought I’d return to the same city I’d left at the beginning of September! What happened?”

Back in 2018, on the night Layla had learned of Connie’s death, Gretchen had told Layla about a new love interest named Liam— her first in the wake of her divorce. As it turned out, Gretchen’s love for Liam had only grown, and now, they’d purchased a house on the coastline, far from civilization, where they’d decided to live out the rest of their days. Layla felt several tears drift down her cheeks.

“I don’t know how to do New York without you!”

“You do,” Gretchen insisted. “You know how to do everything by yourself.”

Layla spoke with Evie and Bella about the remaining weeks of the residency. It was up to them to submit the first fifty pages of their novels, which Layla, Bella, and Evie would critique over the final week of the month, days before their departure. Because Bella and Evie needed plenty of time to

work, Layla had space to head up to New York City that weekend to say goodbye to Gretchen one final time.

Gretchen threw immaculate dinner parties. She always had, which had resulted, for a twenty-five-year time span between 1993 and 2018, in some of the most extraordinary cuisine and dining partners Layla had ever met. As Layla breezed through the door and wrapped her arms around her friend, she considered the numerous years wherein Gretchen had been her one and only rock, her safety in the midst of the storm that was “being a middle-aged divorced woman in a very big city.” She couldn’t blame Gretchen for finding happiness.

Gretchen sat Layla down with a plate of appetizers and a glass of Malbec and demanded she gush about her “two months in Nantucket.” As Layla waxed poetic about the endless days of writing and her two beautiful young students, Evie and Bella, she felt Samuel creep into her mind’s eye. He was never far from her thoughts, no matter how big the distance between them seemed to get. He wanted space from her, maybe forever. And she had to respect that.

“Have there been any men?” Gretchen demanded under her breath. “Any Nantucket fishermen? An attractive film producer? A wine connoisseur?”

“I kicked my writer’s block,” Layla said with a laugh. “That has to be enough for now. Writing is my one true love, anyway. Men can come later if they come at all.”

It was remarkable to be back in the city, Layla thought, although she wasn’t entirely comfortable. She spoke to other dinner party guests about her upcoming novel release, not daring to give any of the details away, and listened to them talk about shows they’d gone to, books they’d read, or films

they'd recently seen in the cinema. Throughout, Layla couldn't help but think back to the coziness that awaited her at The Copperfield House. Was it possible she'd shed some of her traditional "New York" values for islander ones? She would have to fix that as soon as she returned properly at the beginning of December.

After a divine meal of duck and a cheesecake dessert, Layla had one last glass of wine, hugged Gretchen as tightly as she could, and wished her well.

"You'll visit me in Maine?" Gretchen asked, cupping Layla's elbows.

"I'll be there," Layla assured her. "And I'm always just a phone call away."

Layla took a cab back to the Greenwich Village apartment, the one she'd purchased as a very young newlywed, a writer in her prime, a woman with her finger on the pulse of the world. As she sat in the living room with a cup of tea, the bones in her knees began to creak, and she felt further than that twenty-something version of herself than ever. Had it been a mistake not to move out of this apartment when Brad had left? Oh, but she couldn't get bogged down in regrets. Not now.

Suddenly, she remembered it: the box of her sister's things. Did she have the strength to look at it now? She floated, ghost-like, across the living room, entered her bedroom, and dropped to her knees in the closet. She'd thrown ten sweaters and pants she'd outgrown atop the box, but it remained there, still hardly touched after Layla had initially opened it. Layla could hardly breathe. She carried it to her desk, where she put her glasses on and re-opened it. It was nearly one in the morning, and she felt as though she was dreaming.

It was immediately clear why Brad had put these items in the box and sent them Layla's way. Nearly everything was related to Connie's childhood—a time, Brad presumed, Layla felt romantic about. There was Connie's little doll, which she'd carried around everywhere at the age of five. Layla remembered sewing the arm back on after it had been torn off from overuse, stitching as quickly as she could so that Connie would stop crying. There was a little book filled with pressed flowers, which Connie and Layla had picked together. And there were even a few little diaries, which Connie had written in at a young age—talking about the adventures she and her sister, Layla, had gone on.

Reading the misspelled words filled Layla's eyes with tears, and she staggered away from the desk. How she'd loved her little sister! How she wished she was still here!

A larger journal lurked in the bottom of the box. This one was from Connie's later years, and it had never been finished— with the final entry written three days before she'd died. Connie hadn't gotten very insightful or poetic in these final entries. She'd talked about needing to pick up a suit for Brad at the dry cleaners. She'd bemoaned the fact that she'd recently gained a few pounds after their vacation. She hadn't mentioned Layla once.

Toward the back of the diary was a folded stack of papers. Layla expected them to be phone bills or grocery lists, anything banal you found yourself tucking between the pages of a diary. But as she unfurled them on her desk, she realized the stack was filled with letters. The handwriting wasn't Connie's. It was masculine and hard, but they'd been written to Connie, each one beginning like this:

Darling Connie,

Thank you again for writing back to me so quickly. You can't know how I wait for your letters. They mean the world.

Layla frowned. Had Connie been cheating on Brad? It wasn't the strangest idea. Brad and Connie hadn't exactly started out on legal terms. Maybe Connie had had enough of Brad, had used him to get back at Layla or prove something, and she'd realized she hadn't loved him after all. Instead of anger, Layla felt sorrow swallow her, and she forced herself to take three deep breaths before reading through the first letter.

In it, the man who wrote to Connie detailed what he called "a deep well of guilt," which he felt he would drown in. Was he referring to his affair with Connie?

Layla continued to read.

I don't know how to get up some mornings. But that's the thing about places like these. You're forced to go on living, even though you don't know why. Everything you ever lived for is outside these walls. And you lose your identity, bit by bit.

Layla blinked several times. What was he talking about? What four walls? She flicked to the next letter and read:

Darling Connie,

Thank you for writing back to me so quickly. I was watching the guard like a hawk, waiting for him to pass out the letters. I feel sad for the other guys, who are so often abandoned by their pen pals. They wait and wait, and nothing comes. But is it wrong of me to think of you as more than just a pen pal at this point? I feel like I've written you everything in my heart and soul. You're the only person who really knows me. Even my wife, whom I still love so much, has never known me this way.

I've had a lot of time to think (ha) about your recent letter. Thank you for your kind words about my guilt. "You can't let the guilt eat you up until there's nothing left," you said.

And it's time for me to say the same to you.

You've hinted here and there about what happened between you and your sister. You said you were always jealous of her, that you resented her for always getting what she wanted. But you also know those aren't valid reasons for having an affair with and then subsequently marrying her husband.

You said you love your husband but that you know your sister loved him more. Does this make you want to stay in the marriage? Or do you feel that it got off to such a rocky start that you'd prefer to wash your hands of it and start over? Now that my divorce has cleared, it's occurred to me that people get divorced all the time. People break up. People start over. And maybe it's not the worst thing in the world to find yourself with nothing—and try to figure out who you are.

My advice: if you really want your sister back, you need to leave your husband and tell her how much you love her. I don't want this guilt to swallow you the way mine has been swallowing me. Your relationship with your husband doesn't sound worth all the pain it's caused you.

I hope what I'm saying isn't too harsh. You've been very straight with me about my situation, and I've appreciated that. A friend of mine here in prison, a man named Bernard, told me that the only friends we can really trust in this life are the ones who tell us the truth. As a man who went to prison for his lies, I'm trying my best to stare my truth in the face. It's not always a pretty sight.

I truly cannot wait to hear how your trip to Italy goes. Would you mind paying extra attention to the food and describing it to me? I used to pride myself on eating and cooking delicious food. That part of my life is over now.

All my love,

Samuel

Chapter Twenty-Two

Layla drove the torturous five hours back to Hyannis, parked the car on the ferry, and bolted to the top deck. Up there in the frigid November winds, she wept openly, her heart busted open, as the Nantucket Sound surged beneath them, wave after wave ducking against the body of the boat. She felt like four times the woman she'd been two months ago when she'd journeyed to The Copperfield House to begin the residency. She also felt shattered.

Layla left her suitcase in her rental car and entered the family side of The Copperfield House, needing company and sound Copperfield advice. Greta was the only one around, stationed at the kitchen table with a notebook in front of her. Rumor had it she was working on her own novel, but she was keeping it close to her chest— not the sort to reveal her secrets. Layla respected that.

“You’re back early!” Greta stood to hug Layla, then frowned. “What’s going on? You’re clammy. Are you sick? Do you want some tea?”

Layla collapsed at the kitchen table, removed her sister’s diary from her bag, and placed the stack of letters from Samuel on the desk. “I finally went through my sister’s things

last night,” she confessed. “And I made the strangest discovery. I don’t know what to do.”

Greta adjusted her glasses and began to read. As she went, a look of horror descended upon her face, and she leaped to her feet, touched Layla’s shoulder, and rasped, “This is impossible.”

Layla felt as though she floated above her chair. “Greta! My sister and Samuel knew each other! They loved each other!” Her eyes filled with tears, and she erupted with sobs, overwhelmed with emotions she couldn’t fully name.

Greta rubbed her temples as Layla quieted. “You have to tell him.”

Layla groaned. “He doesn’t want to see me again.”

“He will when you show him these.”

* * *

An hour later, armed with a pep-talk from Julia and a brand-new make-up job from Alana, Layla returned to her rental, set her sights on Samuel’s cabin, and prayed the entire drive there. Over and over again, she considered Connie and Samuel, both so alone in their lives, both panging with regret and guilt. No one else in the world knew Connie’s inner mind during her final years the way Samuel did. Even Brad hadn’t known Connie planned to leave. That is unless he’d read Samuel’s letters. Layla had no plans to ask him. She would never know.

Layla parked along the line of pine trees, checked her reflection in the mirror a final time, and considered driving away, back to the ferry, back to New York, out of this mess. But she couldn’t keep hiding. She couldn’t stop living her life.

The cabin was squat and made entirely of wood, all the way down to the mailbox, the shutters, and the porch swing. It was quaint, nothing like anything from Layla's previous life in New York City. It made her think of *Little House on the Prairie*.

Layla's hand shook as she knocked on the door. A moment later came the shuffle of a person, followed by the sturdy footfalls of who could only be Samuel. When he appeared in the doorway, his face was stony, yet his eyes swam with curiosity. He'd basically asked her to stay away. Why hadn't she gotten the hint?

"I need to talk to you," Layla whispered.

Samuel dropped his chin to his chest and stared at the ground. "I don't think there's anything to say. I'm sorry about that, Layla. I really am."

But Layla had no plans to give up. Just as he began to close the door between them, she shot her hand forward, braced it against the door, locked her eyes with his, and said, "Connie was my sister."

Immediately, Samuel's face transformed. He was pale, his cheeks slack, and he looked as though he swam through thousands of memories.

"Excuse me?" Samuel whispered.

Layla dug through her purse as the November winds bit the back of her neck and tangled her hair. She whipped the first letter forward, the one in which Samuel told Connie to leave Brad, and she held her breath as he took it. His hands shook violently. Slowly, he beckoned for her to enter, shuffling backward until he collapsed on the sofa. Layla came in and

closed the door behind her but remained standing, her arms crossed over her chest.

For a long time, neither of them spoke. Layla sensed Samuel had been catapulted back into his memories and that he couldn't fully acknowledge her right now. That had to be okay. Slowly, he raised his eyes to hers and breathed, "Your sister?"

"My husband sent me a box of her things after she died," Layla breathed. "I never looked at the letters until last night."

Samuel closed his eyes, and his shoulders shook. "I thought something had happened to her. Something that prevented her from writing me back. I'd hoped she'd just stayed over in Italy or divorced her husband and run off."

Layla sighed. In all her years of writing novels, she never could have come up with a story like this.

After another long pause, Layla removed her cell from her back pocket, cleared her throat, and said, "Do you want to see a photograph of her?"

Samuel's eyes opened to slits. "I do. Very much."

Layla positioned herself on the couch nearly a foot away from him, conscious that he didn't want to be touched. She brought up a photograph of herself and Connie about a year before she'd learned of the affair (when Connie and her husband had been falling in love). In the photograph, Connie and Layla drank Cosmopolitans and wore nearly identical navy blue dresses. Maybe they'd been in a wedding? Layla couldn't remember anymore.

Samuel sniffed. "You look similar."

"People always told us that growing up," Layla said. "We loved it for a while."

Samuel set his jaw and continued to stare at the photograph. “This is the strangest thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“Me too.”

Finally, Samuel looked up at Layla, and in his eyes, Layla found that peace she’d so craved ever since she’d met him that fateful day at The Copperfield House.

“I loved her letters,” Samuel continued. “She wasn’t as good a writer as you are, but she was very attentive to me. I think she was lonely in her own way.”

“I’m beginning to see that, too,” Layla breathed.

Samuel folded his letters and continued to look at her unabashedly as though he wanted to memorize her face. Layla wanted to hold his in her hands, to kiss him. But she held herself back.

“I never should have written about you,” Layla whispered. “I had terrible writer’s block, and something about you inspired me so much. I just started writing as a way to chase my own blues away. And then, my editor loved the story, and I just ran away with it.”

Samuel nodded. “Bernard told me you’d told your editor not to publish it.”

“It still doesn’t take away what I did.” Layla swallowed. “I wrote about my sister during our childhood, and she hated me for it. I should have learned my lesson the first time. I can honestly say I’ve really, really learned it now. Because, Samuel, I’ve never met anyone like you. You’ve given me a sense of peace and joy that I thought wasn’t allowed for someone like me anymore. And I threw that all away— for my career?”

Samuel was wordless. He placed his hand on hers, and it was protective and warm. Layla hadn't slept at all last night, and she had the sudden urge to place her head on his shoulder and fall into the deepest slumber of her life.

"I'm going to publish a book about my own experiences instead," Layla whispered. "About my sister and my ex-husband. These letters reveal a piece of my sister I never knew before."

"Use them," Samuel urged. "And let me know if I can help you put together the pieces at all. I know your sister made horrible mistakes. But she had a lot of love to offer the world. I just wish she'd found a way to bring it back to you before she was taken."

Layla couldn't say anything else. Overwhelmed, she placed her head on Samuel's shoulder and felt his strong arms wrap around her. Outside, the wind and the water were violent, thrashing against the dock and through the trees, threatening to tear everything apart. In that little cabin, away from the rest of the world, Layla felt safer than she had in years. Maybe this was the comfort she'd been searching for since childhood. And ultimately—her sister had found this comfort in Samuel, too. Even in death, Connie felt closer than ever.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Layla completed the edits for her new book, *My Sister's Secrets*, two days before Thanksgiving, sent it off to Val, and spent the next couple of days in an anxious tizzy. Val had been very displeased with her as of late, and she hoped that this newfound direction would help mend their relationship.

To distract herself, Layla did whatever she could to help Evie and Bella, both of whom were at the tail-end of finishing their first fifty pages for the end of the writing seminar. They'd gone in very different directions, yet both appreciated what one another had done, complimenting each other's use of dialogue and character development. It was clear jealousy was a thing of the past for them.

Once, when Layla was one-on-one with Bella, Bella informed her that Victor was going to have his first book published with Penguin. Layla winced at that and gave her a look.

"He's good," Layla said with a shrug. "I hate that he's good."

Bella waved her hand. "He was always going to make it. But I don't care anymore. I'm going to make it, too— on my own terms, without him."

Layla beamed with pride.

On the night before Thanksgiving, Layla met Samuel in the Historic District in downtown Nantucket for dinner. Although tourists had long since fled the island for “normal” lives elsewhere, the evening before Thanksgiving brought out all kinds of Nantucketers, prepared to celebrate every last bit of the holiday season. Layla and Samuel were seated at the Italian restaurant right away and eyed one another nervously over the menu.

Layla remembered what Samuel had written in his letter to Connie, asking that she detail the food experiences she’d had in Italy. Since then, she’d had a secret goal to take Samuel here, to this very place, if only to watch his face as he tasted everything. She would order half the menu if it pleased him.

It wasn’t that she and Samuel had jumped back into their romance immediately. Like everything good, it required time. They’d gone on beach walks, talking about everything from their favorite breakfast foods as a kid to the trauma Samuel had felt when he’d read Layla’s manuscript to the sorrow Layla had gone through after Connie’s death. With every conversation, they’d drawn each other closer and closer, hardly able not to touch. About a week before Thanksgiving, Samuel had finally kissed her again, cupping her chin with his hand.

“I got everything in the book wrong about you,” Layla had confessed quietly. “I never could have imagined someone as amazing as you.”

Now, at the Italian restaurant, Layla suggested they order three dishes to share. “Lasagna, tortellini, and gnocchi?”

“Do you think we can handle that?” Samuel teased.

“We have to prepare for tomorrow,” Layla said. “Greta is cooking the biggest feast either of us have ever seen.”

“Don’t scare me,” Samuel said.

As they waited for their meal, Layla sipped her wine slowly as Samuel drank water and Diet Coke. They held one another’s gaze, lost in the bizarre yet wonderful nature of their newfound love. Layla thought that one day, she would have to find a way to write about it— but she wouldn’t write about him specifically. She would just write about the enormity of finding love again in her fifties. That was something to shout from the rooftops.

“I heard back from Quinn,” Samuel said suddenly, palming the back of his neck.

Layla sat straight up in her chair. “You’re kidding!”

Samuel looked like a blushing kid. He removed his phone from his back pocket and showed the message from his daughter, responding to what he’d written on Halloween.

QUINN: Hi, Dad. I’m so glad you’re okay. I have been thinking about you lately.

QUINN: Maybe we could find a time to talk this weekend? It’s crazy with Thanksgiving, but I might have an hour or two on Saturday when my husband takes the kids to the zoo.

QUINN: Thank you for reaching out, Dad. I don’t know if I would have been strong enough to do it.

Layla leaped from her chair, hurried around the table, and wrapped her arms around his neck. A tear trickled down his cheek as Layla kissed his forehead and his ear. Several people in the restaurant gave them confused smiles until Layla forced herself back into her seat. She propped her chin up on her fist and sighed. This was the sort of man who deserved to know

and love his grandchildren. This was the sort of man who deserved a second chance.

* * *

The following morning, as Layla put on lipstick in preparation to join the Copperfields downstairs for the iconic Thanksgiving celebration, popping her lips to coat the color evenly, her phone dinged with a message from her editor.

VAL: OH! MY! GOSH!

VAL: It's so good. It's the best thing you've ever written.

VAL: The changes from 2018 are absolutely perfect. My heart is breaking.

VAL: I just have a few minor changes for you to make. I talked to my boss, and we can give you till the end of the year to make them.

VAL: Does that sound okay?

Layla smiled to herself, brimming with a sense of hope that seemed to float her from the hardwood.

LAYLA: Of course. That's wonderful, Val. I'm ready to be back on top.

VAL: That's my girl.

In the kitchen of The Copperfield House, she found Greta, Alana, Ella, and Julia huddled around the table, squabbling about this and that. Ella and Will were back briefly from tour to celebrate Thanksgiving, and, in the living room, numerous Copperfield grandchildren were singing songs, laughing,

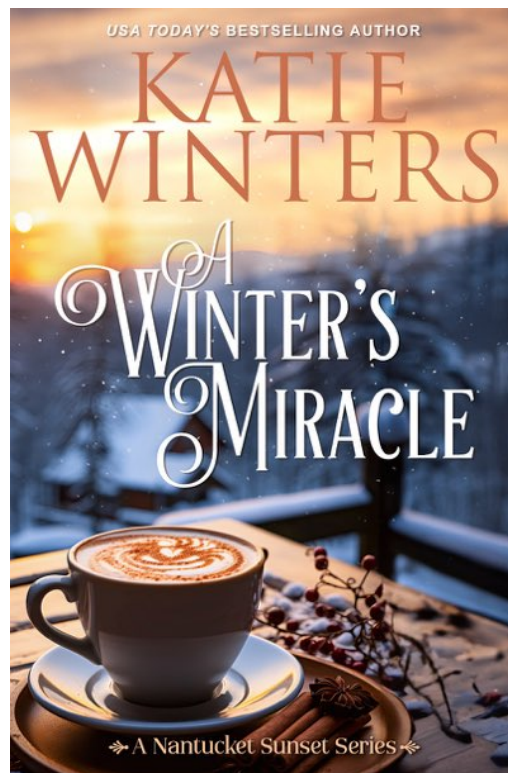
telling stories from their universities, or, in the case of the pregnant Anna, already eating.

Not long after Layla's arrival downstairs, Samuel appeared at the door. He carried a bouquet of flowers and a fresh baguette from the artisanal bakery, the one with the French theme that Greta gushed over. He wore a pair of dark jeans and a dark button-down, and his salt-and-pepper curls were gelled to make them more defined. When they spotted one another over the heads of the Copperfield grandchildren, Layla felt as though time stopped. She bolted past the baby grand piano, past Bernard telling his grandson, Danny, about a wild time he'd had in Morocco, and past Rachel and Scarlet chatting about Proust – all the way to Samuel's arms. And as he swung her around on the porch, the November winds swaddled them, making the air between their faces the warmest thing Layla had ever known.

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