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MAINE CHARACTERS

a novel



HANNAH ORENSTEIN

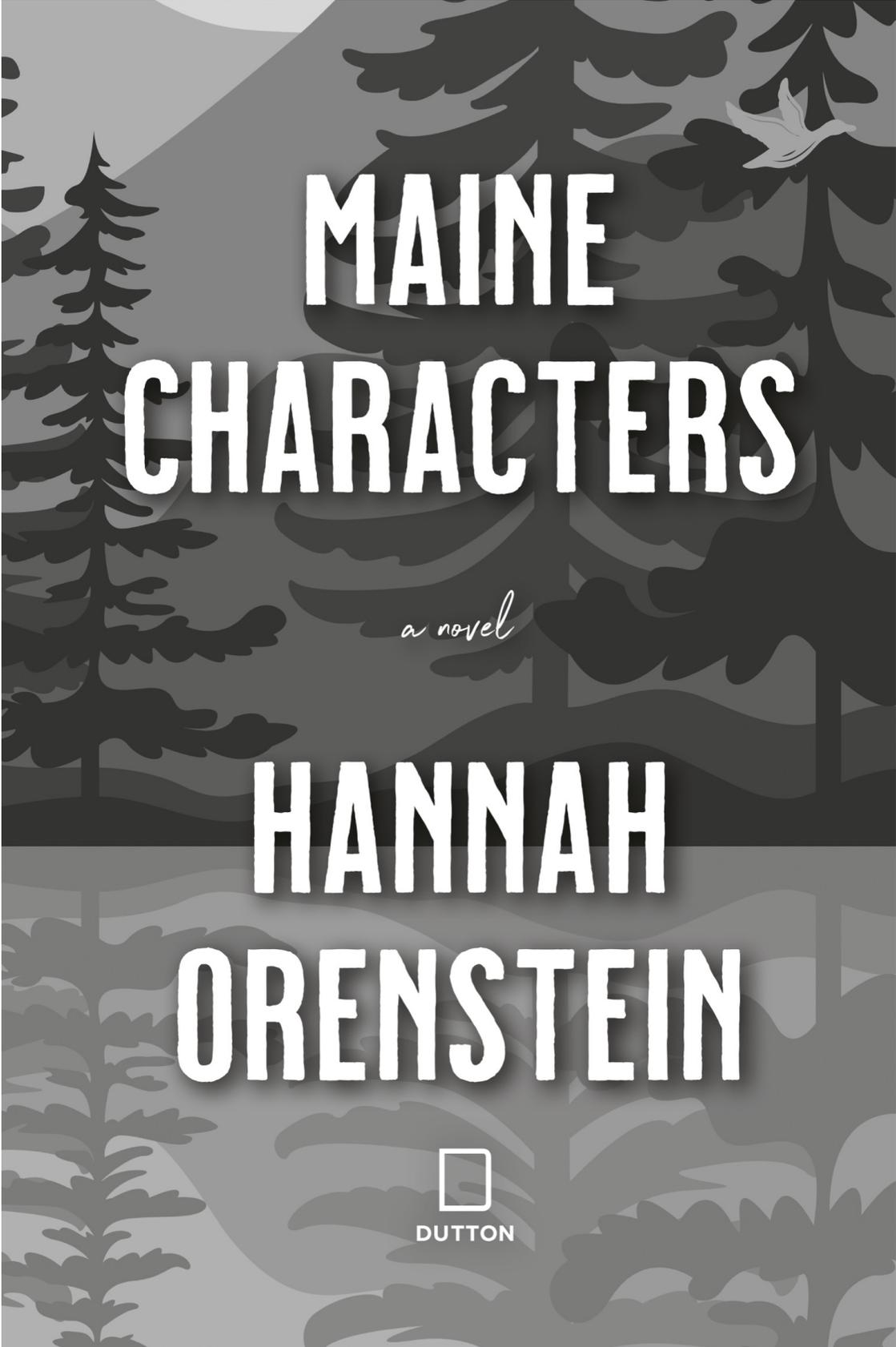
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Love at First Like

Head Over Heels

Meant to Be Mine



**MAINE
CHARACTERS**

a novel

**HANNAH
ORENSTEIN**



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For my family

Chapter One

VIVIAN

The exit off the highway is so sharp, Vivian Levy throws her hand over the urn so it doesn't topple off the passenger seat. She's never liked to drive these dangerous roads, but she had no other choice. She needed to get out of New York City, get out of her head—fast.

She'd unearthed her dad's ancient truck from the garage that morning; it hadn't been used since last summer. Seven hours later, she'd finally made it to Fox Hill, Maine. The town center slips by with blink-and-you'd-miss-it speed. Everything is tucked within two blocks: There's the pub with peeling paint and a packed parking lot, the ramshackle market, Miss Pancakes across from the bank, and the seafood shop that closed down three years ago. The storefront's sign, featuring a faded cartoon lobster, still sits in the darkened window. The busiest intersection doesn't even have a stoplight.

As she takes the tight bend around the lily-splattered pond, the radio crackles between stations. A John Mellencamp song ends and a biblical sermon begins. Vivian punches it off, even though there's been too much grim silence lately. She misses the murmuring hum of the dinner rush, the warbling busker on the West 4th Street subway platform, and even her opera aficionado neighbor in 5F.

The cracked pavement road turns to dirt as she winds through a thicket of trees, rolling past a field, a buckling white fence, an imposing clapboard

house with a sign claiming 1797 construction. The steep hill dips and rises like a roller coaster. She (barely) learned to drive here.

When she reaches the clearing at the top, lush scenery splays out in front of her: the cookie-cutter shapes of emerald pines, the long-shuttered little red schoolhouse on the dusty road, and, beyond it all, the sapphire waters of Fox Hill Lake under a bright sky dolloped with clouds. The first glimpse of this technicolor view catches her off guard every summer. New York City's concrete sidewalks, gray skyscrapers, and grime make it easy to forget Maine's vivid colors.

The GPS cuts out, but Vivian doesn't need it anymore: left at the barn, right at the fork. She crawls along at ten miles per hour, watching out for potholes and deer. Their house—*her* house, she corrects herself—is most of the way down the dead-end street. She's not ready to keep up a place like this. She doesn't know the first thing about winterizing the dock or fixing the boiler when it breaks. The responsibility is too much for one person, especially Vivian.

Turning into the driveway, she sighs at the familiar sight of the three-story honey-colored house. One apple-red shutter hangs askew—something her dad had been meaning to fix. Arriving after a year away is like slipping into a well-worn but not particularly beloved old sweatshirt. This time, though, an unfamiliar Chevy sedan is parked out front. Vivian's pulse ticks up as she notices the house's lights are on. Hank was an only child who inherited this property after his own parents' untimely death; she doesn't have any aunts or uncles who could be poking around the house. Nobody should be here.

It's a humid eighty degrees, but dread turns her blood cold. Steeling herself, she gets out of the car. Her breath is shallow as a stranger pushes through the screen door. The woman squints at her through pale pink-rimmed glasses; then her warm brown eyes widen. She looks about Vivian's age, with a blond ponytail and a furrowed brow. The uninvited, though admittedly not very threatening, guest jogs down the front walk, flip-flops thwapping against the concrete, and stops short in the driveway.

"Hi," she says, wringing her hands.

Vivian's heart beats faster. She removes her oversized sunglasses. "Can I help you?"

The blonde gapes, then finds her voice. "Do you know who I am?"

A haughty response tumbles loose before Vivian can think it through. "No. Should I?"

The woman's posture wilts like a week-old bouquet. "I guess not," she says.

Guilt flashes through Vivian, but she has every right to stay guarded. This woman was in her house, after all.

The stranger takes a deep, shuddering breath and pauses to compose herself. When she looks up again, her jaw is set. "I'm Lucy Webster."

She scans Vivian's face as if she's hoping for a flicker of recognition.

Vivian stiffens. "Okay. And?"

"I...I'm just..."

As she grasps for an explanation, Vivian's anger surges up like bile. This woman is solid, three-dimensional, alive, close enough that Vivian can watch the pink creep into her cheeks. Unless she's wildly mistaken, Lucy is proof that she wasn't crazy—she was lied to, again and again.

"I'm sorry, this is my property," she snaps. "You need to leave."

"Wait," Lucy says desperately.

But Vivian can't. The shock is simmering under her skin, ready to boil over; she could scream.

"I'm serious. Go."

Sixteen years of secrecy and gaslighting are about to erupt. She needs to be alone when she falls apart.

"No," Lucy says, looking surprised by her own strength.

Vivian glares, incredulous. "No?"

"Please. Listen."

It would take ten seconds to push past Lucy into the house and lock the door behind her, but then Vivian might never have a chance to learn the truth. Lord knows she won't get it from her mother.

She exhales. "What?"

"You're Hank Levy's daughter?"

Vivian crosses her arms. “Yeah.”

With a nervous smile, Lucy says, “So am I.”

So there it is. With a sharp bark of laughter, Vivian says, “You have to be fucking kidding me.”

Lucy’s face pinches in something like pity or disappointment. “I’m not.”

Vivian is dizzy. It’s one thing to have a wild theory about her dad’s shady behavior; it’s another to have it confirmed. She goes on the offensive.

“Prove it.”

Lucy looks around the overgrown yard. “His name is actually Henry. He was born in Newton, Massachusetts, on August 20, 1970. He went to Columbia, he owned a—”

Vivian interrupts, rolling her eyes. “Congratulations on googling him.”

She’d imagined this moment would feel victorious, but instead, it’s sickening.

“He...he’s allergic to walnuts! He’s played poker with the same group of guys for twenty years, and last time he won, he got a pair of tickets to the Yankees-Sox game. He bought the living room speakers in there with his first bonus check from his first-ever banking job. And—”

No. Vivian doesn’t want to hear this. Any of it. She takes aim with her only weapon.

“You don’t even know, do you?”

Lucy tilts her head. “What?”

She fires. “I’m sorry to be the one to tell you this,” Vivian says, not feeling very sorry at all. “He’s dead.”

LUCY

Lucy has been submerged in a suffocating kind of despair ever since Memorial Day weekend. Vivian’s words yank her up, force her to focus.

“He’s dead?”

Vivian crosses her arms. “Gone.”

“When did it happen?” Lucy manages.

“Two weeks ago.”

Lucy’s jaw sags. She should’ve noticed something was wrong sooner. Hank never returned the voicemail she left on Father’s Day, and he didn’t answer her texts about his upcoming annual visit, either. Under different circumstances, she would’ve thought more of her dad’s silence. But for the past six weeks, Lucy has barely been able to peel herself out of bed. She’s spent her days trudging through the motions of teaching classes and grading final exams, but it all feels wildly wrong, like she’s a ragged sea urchin trapped behind aquarium glass. Each night has been a forty-year stretch of insomnia. When school let out at the end of June, she burrowed under the covers in her childhood bedroom at her mom’s house and stayed there for a week, avoiding the filtered daylight slipping through the blinds.

She’d been jarred back to reality when she finally noticed the calendar had melted into July, the month she and her dad always spent together at the lake. She tried calling again to coordinate their plans. She wanted to know when he would arrive or if his schedule had changed. Again, nothing. Her mom told her not to worry. “Wouldn’t be the first time he disappeared,” Dawn had said with a sigh.

That didn’t make Lucy feel any better. Finally, this morning, she drove across town, praying the whole way that she’d find him here. Instead, the house was locked. Dark. Quiet. She pulled the spare key from under the terra-cotta planter; Hank kept saying he’d make her a copy but never got around to it. Inside, she flicked on a light in the shadowy kitchen, illuminating a fine layer of dust over the linoleum floors.

“Dad, are you here?” she called. “Dad?”

She prowled upstairs, more anxious with every step. The loftlike space has few interior walls and doors, which made Lucy’s exercise of checking every inch somewhat pointless. The only places for privacy are the two bathrooms. It’s a terrible house for keeping secrets.

Panic prickled Lucy’s skin as the final bedroom turned out to be empty. Should she call the police? File a missing person’s report? How could she have languished in a miserable stupor for so long that she failed to notice

that something was wrong? Then she heard tires crunching on gravel. She darted to the window, relieved beyond belief to see Hank's pickup truck pulling into the driveway.

Except it wasn't her dad—it was Vivian. Lucy's never glimpsed a celebrity, but she imagines it would feel like this: a nerve-racking smack of one-sided recognition. Vivian is tall like Lucy, but thinner, with a mane of smooth, dark brown hair. Diamond studs wink from her ears, and a buttery leather bag dangles from the crook of her arm. Her voice is a touch higher than the cool alto Lucy's been imagining all these years. She'd fantasized countless times about what it'd be like to finally meet her, but none of those scenarios looked like this one. She'd always pictured Hank introducing them.



Lucy sinks to the driveway. Crumbling in front of Vivian is mortifying, but she can't help the tears. Vivian steps back; her mouth twists in contempt. Shuddering, Lucy wipes her cheeks, then instantly regrets it. The concrete's dirty residue transfers to her damp skin. Rubbing it away with the back of her hand only spreads it, which makes her feel even more pitiful.

Vivian exhales hard. "Look..."

Lucy blinks up at her, embarrassed and afraid. "What?"

She has no problem leading a class of twenty, but one-on-one, up against a woman she's daydreamed about for so long, her confidence is paper thin.

Her half-sister glances around uneasily. Lucy isn't sure if she's hoping that someone else will magically appear to deal with this mess, or if she'd be humiliated if the neighbors witnessed it. She comes over, drops to Lucy's level, and freezes. They stare at each other. Lucy's head feels like the swampy sludge at the bottom of the lake—thick, grimy, like she could be sucked under the muck. She can only imagine what this polished New Yorker thinks of her saggy cutoffs and greasy ponytail, and wonders if Vivian can see the familial resemblance. It's there. At least that's what she

tells herself. Up close, Lucy notices there are heavy, shadowed half-moons under her eyes.

Vivian gives Lucy's shoulder a brusque squeeze. "I'm sorry."

VIVIAN

Vivian is flooded with dumbstruck fury. She doesn't like watching Lucy weeping over "Dad"—Vivian's dad!—before shuffling inside to rummage for lemon-ginger tea bags like she owns the place. She resents when Lucy takes the chipped yellow mug with the New York City skyline, the one Vivian always uses. It's so old, the Twin Towers still balance on the southern tip of Manhattan.

Vivian had been at work for barely fifteen minutes when she got the news. It was 2:30 on a Sunday afternoon, earlier than she normally worked and busier than usual because of Father's Day. She'd been relieved to have a hectic workload, which would keep her too occupied to stew over what had happened that morning. Her phone buzzed in her back pocket as she printed off the final version of Della's new summer wine list—there's the Portuguese albariño she can't get enough of, and a buttery white Burgundy that's guaranteed to sell well. It was only Celeste, her mother, so she ignored the call. She'd just seen her parents an hour ago at their own family brunch. Chaos aside, holiday shifts are easy money: People are happy to throw around tips. That day, the dining room was a sea of dads and grandpas; some were in ties and blazers while others tried to look cool in high-end sneakers. Colorful tissue paper poked out of shiny gift bags. A table that appeared to seat a man's first *and* second wife had racked up the weekend's highest alcohol bill thus far.

Her phone went off again as a waiter summoned her to a table interested in prosecco. When she left to grab the bottle, she texted Celeste, *At work.*

But then it rang again. This scared her. They rarely spoke on the phone—they typically didn't have much to say to each other. She ducked into a

corner of the kitchen to answer the call.

“*What* is so urgent?” she hissed. Behind her, pots clanged, plates clattered.

She heard her mother suck in a breath. “I don’t know how to tell you this.”

Her shaking voice was all the information Vivian needed. “Tell me what?”

A sob caught in Celeste’s throat. Vivian had never heard her mother cry like this before.

“It’s your father. I just got a call. He’s gone.”

“Gone?”

“Dead. He collapsed on the subway.”

“No,” Vivian whispered, welling up.

This couldn’t be happening. He was fifty-four. Healthy. He’d been right there in front of her that very morning. If she had known those would be her last words to him, she wouldn’t have been such a massive bitch. What had she done?

She slid down the wall and curled over her knees, but she didn’t cry. Through hiccupping sobs and incomprehensible wails, Celeste relayed everything she knew—which wasn’t much. Vivian took it all stoically. One of them had to keep it together, and anyway, this was all her fault. The kitchen was eerily silent when she stood up. She could sense four pairs of ears straining toward her.

“Well, happy Father’s Day, everybody.” Her voice cracked. “My dad just died.”

If she’d said anything more sincere, she would’ve lost it. The kitchen staff clambered to comfort her. Through the crush of bodies, she saw her boss, Oscar, do a double take as he walked by.

“Is everything all right?” he asked, entering the kitchen cautiously.

A cook filled him in. Vivian shot Oscar a warning look, hoping he wouldn’t come any closer. The last thing she needed right then was the burden of pretending she’s only his employee.

She assumed he'd find a way to be with her that night, but no. Instead, he told her to take off as much time as she needed. At first, she protested. She'd barely taken a vacation day since she was a *stagiaire* at Le Bernardin, ferrying the wine director's coffee and paperwork. The only exception was time with her dad; they'd spent all of August together at the lake when she was young, though as an adult, she'd whittled it down to one tight week. If there was ever a time to rest from work, however, it would be now. She reluctantly agreed.

Every single part of the funeral sucked. Vivian white-knuckled through the service, wishing Oscar could join her in the synagogue's front row rather than lingering in the back.

Celeste delivered a knockout eulogy, reminding any mourners who could have possibly forgotten that *yes*, she's a bestselling novelist (or, rather, used to be), and *yes*, she can write a deeply moving speech with forty-eight hours' notice, even while swimming through unimaginable grief. (Two weeks earlier, she'd published her twenty-fifth book, *Bored Housewives in Bora-Bora*, about three suburban moms who indulge in saucy flings on a girls' trip.) She trotted out polished anecdotes that portrayed their relationship in a flattering light.

The rabbi had asked Vivian to speak, too, but she turned him down. You can't call a dead guy an asshole. She didn't want to strain for fuzzy childhood memories to paint a pretty picture for the crowd. Instead, she silently dug her nails into her thigh as they spoke and clocked the requisite compliments, all lies: He wasn't a loving husband and father. He hadn't been warm—at least not to his family. He was no mensch.

When they sat shiva, Celeste's writer friends crowded around her in the living room while Vivian picked at a stale bagel in the kitchen. Their Upper West Side classic six was packed with (supposedly) their closest loved ones, but she'd never felt more alone. It seemed that the more distant the relative, the longer they spent offering condolences and making painful small talk with her. "Are you seeing anyone?" seemed to be everyone's favorite question. Still, she preferred that to one-on-one time with her mother.

After most of the guests trickled out, Vivian and Celeste were left with a lingering neighbor, seemingly oblivious to the caterers packing up around them.

“You didn’t want to speak at the funeral?” she asked Vivian, sitting a little too close on the couch.

“She should’ve,” Celeste interjected.

Vivian’s grip tightened on her wineglass. “I’m not the public speaker, she is.”

“It’s not a TED Talk,” Celeste said. “You would’ve been fine.”

“Mm. Well. Too late now.”

“I can’t believe he’s really gone,” the neighbor said. “At least you have each other.”

Celeste glued on a tight smile. “At least there’s that.”

Grieving together felt staged, like each hug or sympathetic comment was scripted in one of Celeste’s books. There was a time when Vivian had craved a stronger relationship with her, but that’s long gone. She’s old enough to know that certain things will never change.

Fifteen interminable minutes later, the caterers left, and the neighbor excused herself to walk her dog, apologizing that she couldn’t stay any longer. After Celeste closed the door, she tipped her forehead against it, shuddered a sigh, and began to cry. Vivian should’ve hugged her, comforted her, anything. But she didn’t know what to say.



Vivian gets up to uncork some wine, just to have something to do besides sitting around, fantasizing about life in hell, which—for all its drawbacks!—probably doesn’t involve watching her dead dad’s secret daughter grieve at her kitchen table. He didn’t want to confess his affair to Vivian? Fine, whatever, she made her peace with that long ago. But apparently, he had no problem trusting Lucy with knowledge of his double life, and *that* is too

bizarre to process. It had never occurred to her that she might not have the upper hand.

She'd brought a few bottles from the city, knowing her best option around here would likely be cloying Barefoot Pinot Grigio. Tonight she selects a Marlborough sauvignon blanc with an acidic punch of passionfruit and lime. She opens it with one practiced twist of a wine key.

"You want some?" she asks.

Lucy clutches her tea closer. "No, thank you."

It didn't slip Vivian's attention that Lucy had known exactly which cabinets held the tea bags and sugar.

Vivian grabs an awful plastic goblet and, with a shaking hand, sloshes out a hefty pour. That's not exactly how she learned to do it in her Court of Master Sommeliers program when she was twenty-two: pour with the label facing outward, serve in a counterclockwise circle, cradle the bottle at a forty-five-degree angle in between guests. She'd offered a million times to source nicer glasses for the lake house, but Hank didn't want to have anything fragile when they mostly drink aboard a boat.

She retakes her seat at the head of the table, nerves sizzling like she just barely survived an electric shock. Lucy sits with her back against the stone chimney under a ledge filled with sentimental trinkets: a black-and-white framed photo of their long-dead grandparents; four carved wooden loons posed as if swimming in a line, a tribute to the loons that live on Fox Hill Lake. Hank liked to tell the chimney's origin story: His parents had it built with smooth gray rocks pulled from these very shores.

The confrontation outside was too intense for Vivian to really take Lucy in, but inside, she comes into clearer focus. Frankly, it seems like a stretch that they'd be related. She doesn't have the Levy olive complexion, dark hair, strong nose, or thick eyebrows, and she wears a silver claddagh ring. She looks like a goy. Her dropped Rs are straight out of *Good Will Hunting*.

"What happened to him?" Lucy asks.

At least Vivian knows *something* Lucy doesn't.

"Heart attack. It was on Father's Day, if you can believe it."

"That's so horrible," she croaks.

“I had brunch with him that day. We...”

Vivian suddenly can't think straight; her memories are too loud. She sees the disgusted way his jaw dropped, his indignant seething as he took in her accusations. She'd felt like a monster.

“We'd gotten into a fight right before it happened, actually. Apparently, the people on the subway tried to help, they called 9-1-1 right away, but...”

Lucy winces. “A heart attack is a quick—” She trails off with a shudder, as if uttering “death” is unbearable. “It's fast, isn't it?”

“I think so.”

He had been pronounced dead upon arrival at Mount Sinai West. Vivian had been somewhat comforted by that. He was far from a perfect parent, but he didn't deserve to suffer.

Misery wafts off Lucy like an overpowering perfume. She slides her fists into her hair and stares down at the table hard.

“I should've known something was wrong when he didn't call me back.”

Vivian grimaces. “You talked? Like, regularly?”

It's hard to picture, Hank choosing to engage with his secret daughter when he already had so little time for the family he lived with.

“Of course, he was my dad,” Lucy says, like it's obvious.

There's a smidge of something else in her voice—defensiveness? Or pride?

“Sure.”

“He really was! Here, look.”

Lucy searches for something on her phone, then triumphantly spins it around so Vivian can see a photo of them together down at the firepit. It's dated to last summer.

Nauseated, Vivian asks, “Was he sending you money?”

It's a nasty question, but Vivian can't bring herself to apologize. She can't interrogate Hank about this anymore; this conversation is her next best option.

“Of course,” Lucy says, taken aback. “Some.”

“How much?”

“Enough.”

“Enough for what?”

“Enough to be comfortable,” Lucy says uneasily.

That could mean anything. Vivian has no idea what comfort means in a place like Fox Hill. Growing up, she was hardly considered rich by her classmates’ standards. She had friends whose parents thought summering in the Hamptons was tacky, so they bought small, tasteful private islands in the Mediterranean instead. She’d once gone to a bat mitzvah held in the ballroom of the Waldorf Astoria where an actual pop star performed. Each goody bag contained a Cartier bracelet.

Then another thought occurs to her. “Wait, there aren’t any more of you, are there?”

“Like siblings? Oh my gosh, no, it’s just me and my mom.”

Small blessings.

With a hint of pride, Lucy adds, “People say we’re like the *Gilmore Girls*.”

Vivian couldn’t relate less.

“He really didn’t tell you anything about me?” Lucy asks.

“Not a single thing.” Technically, Vivian isn’t lying.

“Oh.” She shrinks back in her chair with a ragged inhale as her eyes water again.

“Why, did he talk about me?” Vivian asks.

“Barely.” It’s enough to sting. “He told me your name and said we were around the same age, but that was pretty much it. I think he kept us separate because he didn’t want to hurt you and your mom.”

“So, cheating on your wife and stashing a secret family five states away is fine as long as we don’t find out? Cool.”

Lucy recoils. “He wasn’t cheating! It wasn’t like that.”

Vivian isn’t sure what to believe. The idea of her dad deceiving his wife for decades is bleak, but if Hank really was faithful to Celeste, then maybe Vivian had treated him more harshly than he deserved. She tries to straighten out the timeline.

“How old are you?”

“Thirty-one. My birthday was in April.”

Which means Lucy's older, but barely—they're six months apart. She had to have been conceived right before Hank and Celeste's wedding.

"I'll be thirty-one in October."

"I know," Lucy says reluctantly.

Vivian rolls her eyes. Of course Lucy knows.

"So he *did* cheat."

"I guess once, technically," Lucy says, wincing. "But he and my mom were never that serious."

"Great," she says coolly. "And your mom is...who, exactly?"

"Her name is Dawn—Dawn Webster. You know Miss Pancakes? She runs it now. They met in 1989, right on the lake, actually. They had a few summer flings and broke up before I was born."

Vivian racks her brain. Has she heard of Dawn? Hank had mentioned a few girlfriends he dated before meeting Celeste, but none of them had ever seemed particularly significant to him.

"They kept seeing each other, though, right? I mean, they must have if you spent time with him."

"No, not really. They just talked logistics—school, doctors' appointments, handing me off—and that's it. I spent every July here with him."

Obviously Vivian had long been suspicious of Hank's annual lengthy business trips.

"He usually visited a few other times a year, but summer was the best," Lucy says.

Her voice wobbles as she slumps over the table with her face in her hands. That's what kills Vivian—not Lucy's tears or the way she practically recited his Social Security number. It's this, the way Lucy is genuinely moved by the memory, like they had something special. She makes Vivian feel like an outsider in her own kitchen.

Vivian wants to rewind to that Father's Day brunch or, better yet, to sixteen years ago, before she saw Hank for who he really was. But she can't. All she can do is accomplish what she came here for.

“So, here’s the deal,” Vivian announces. “I’m here for two reasons. Number one, he wanted his ashes scattered in the lake.”

He had said as much a few times over the years, usually on quiet boat rides or while admiring the view from the deck with a beer in hand. Vivian had ignored his wishes before—majoring in art history instead of business, shaving down their father-daughter time at the lake to a single week—without a drop of guilt, but this is different. Final. She isn’t heartless.

Lucy’s nose wrinkles. “Really? He never told me that.”

“I brought the ashes in from the car. They’re on the mantel over the fireplace.”

Celeste had chosen a simple charcoal-gray urn. It was only temporary, after all.

“Mm.”

“And number two, I’m selling the house.”

Lucy’s knuckles go white around her mug. “What? But it’s *home*.”

Vivian doesn’t have the patience to argue over this. Although the cabin was Hank’s personal slice of paradise, Celeste didn’t care for it and rarely visited, and the lake’s peaceful beauty is wasted on Vivian. Sure, it’s a nice place to swim and sunbathe, but she doesn’t have time for that, and she can’t relax in the middle of nowhere. She’s always antsy about potentially missing something—or someone—back home.

That’s especially true now. Though she’d rather be in New York, death doesn’t give a shit about her desires. Vivian has more flexibility than her mother does right now. There’s no good time for your middle-aged husband to die, but for Celeste, June was particularly inconvenient.

Her book tour kicked off that month, plunging her into a parade of fans and signings and selfies (though the crowds have never been as big as they were for *Naked in New York* nearly twenty years ago—she’s hell-bent on reaching that level of success again). Her publisher had offered to postpone the string of events, but she insisted the distraction would do her good. Before she left, she told Vivian that if she could handle selling the lake house, she could keep the profits. Celeste had enough work on her plate

with his estate. For Vivian, the timing was impeccable. Not that Celeste knows it, but she needs a *lot* of money, and she needs it soon.

LUCY

The ground gets ripped out from under her again. This house is special, unusual. It's an overgrown cabin built to accommodate several generations under one roof, though that never materialized for the Levy family. The blond wood A-frame is built post-and-beam style around a stone fireplace and chimney. Three levels of large windows overlook the lake. The grand living space is open and airy, triple height, with raw beams stretching lengthwise overhead. The sagging cream sectional was purchased sometime during the Vietnam War, and the rest of the furnishings and appliances aren't much newer.

A deep red Persian rug sprawls across the floor, and a bronze bucket filled with hand-chopped logs sits by the fireplace along with wrought iron pokers. A box of VHS tapes collects dust underneath the ancient TV, and sun-bleached baseball caps hang from scattered nails. There's a curled, yellowed strip of a grocery list her dad thumbtacked to a wooden beam in the kitchen and forgot about at least twenty years ago. The last time the landline was in service, Lucy had braces.

This isn't just a house. To Hank, who'd rather see the inherited furniture sag and fray than replace it, it was the temple where his parents could live on. To Lucy, it's the one place she never had to be embarrassed about her relationship with her dad. Here, she didn't have to ignore whispers or twist the truth to protect his reputation. Secluded in the woods, flanked by out-of-towners who didn't know or care about Hank and Lucy, they had barbecues, card games, movie marathons. It was the backdrop for long, meandering conversations out on the water at sunset and heartbreaking silences when she asked to visit him in New York.

This year in particular, she needs this place as a refuge. Lucy has been sleeping at Dawn's ever since Patrick asked for a divorce. Her childhood bedroom has become infested with gloom. The sheets are sweaty, the mattress is depressed from overuse. A daunting pile of worn clothes tumbles from the chair to the ratty carpet, which badly needs to be vacuumed. Dawn would never kick her out. (Just the opposite—Lucy suspects she's secretly glad to have her around again.) Lucy would've been more comfortable staying here at the lake, but she hadn't been ready to tell her dad that her marriage was over.

She'd been planning to ask Hank if she and her mom could both stay here this fall, once he was back in New York with the famous wife he never talks about—not that she'd ever say that last part out loud. Her mom finally saved up enough money for long-overdue home repairs and had been expecting to stay on Lucy and Patrick's couch while the construction took place. Both of the Webster women had been banking on Hank saying yes.

"You can't sell," Lucy pleads.

"It's not your call to make."

"We're both his daughters. We have equal claim to this place."

Vivian takes a sip. "Actually, we don't. The house is now technically my mother's. And no offense, but she's probably not looking to do a time-share with you."

Lucy gapes. She loathes confrontation but can't let this go. "When are you selling it?"

"As soon as possible. I'm here to get the house ready to go on the market, and then I'll go back to the city. My boss gave me some time off work, but I can't stretch that out forever."

Lucy's heart sinks. "So, you're going to scatter his ashes here, then give this up to some stranger and walk away for good? Doesn't this place mean anything to you?"

"It's just an old house."

"But it's *our* old house."

Each summer earns another layer of lived-in charm. Every sun-bleached, worn-down, threadbare inch of it is proof her family has gathered here year

after year. The house is a time capsule embalmed in grief but also in love. She loathes when cabins bursting with vintage character are torn down to be replaced with stark, bland new construction. The white trim around the windows is always a little too bright.

“People sell houses all the time,” Vivian says, seemingly unbothered.

Is she actually enjoying staying calm as Lucy reels?

She tries another tack. “This was our grandparents’ place. We’re the third generation here. That’s special.”

“‘We’? There is no ‘we.’”

Lucy takes in Vivian for who she is: thirty, lanky, with thick eyebrows and a hint of crow’s-feet, but that’s not who she really sees. To her, Vivian will always be thirteen, scrawny with slick lip gloss and flat-ironed hair streaming out of a scarlet knit beanie. Despite all these years of obsessing from afar, Lucy never would’ve imagined she’d be this cold. If anything, she always assumed Vivian was the kind of daughter any father would dote on. She’d seen that once for herself. It had been excruciating.

“Please. You had his whole world. This was all I got.”

It’s a dramatic guilt trip, especially because of the way her voice cracks at the end, but it’s also the pathetic truth.

“I’m sorry,” Vivian says haltingly, pushing away from the table. “That’s not my fault.” She pours another enormous glass. “I’m going to be staying here for the next few days, so...”

“But it’s July!”

“So?”

“It’s my month. It’s my turn to be here. Your month is August.”

Lucy wishes she had less of a juvenile response, but what else is there to say? She doesn’t want to be anywhere else tonight, and beyond that, she really needs this place. Patrick doesn’t want her. Going home isn’t an option; she doesn’t have the strength to relay this to Dawn today. She’d crash with her best friend, Paige, except it’s her anniversary. Paige and Kyle haven’t had enough nights out together since Nora was born eighteen months ago, and Lucy isn’t going to ruin that. Caleb, her best guy friend,

would take her in, but it's the last night of his camping trip. He's still in Acadia.

Vivian's nostrils flare. "He's gone, okay? Whatever twisted ideas he came up with to hide you away, they're over now. It's my house, not yours."

Lucy stands, too, appreciating the extra inch she has on Vivian.

"I'm staying. I'm sure you can afford a hotel."



As it turns out, there are some things money can't buy. It's the week of July Fourth, the height of the summer season, which means every rental on the lake has been booked for a solid year. Vivian dials a bed-and-breakfast in Kennebunkport and a few hotels in Portland before finally locating a room for \$400 a night. But by that point, three glasses in, she says she doesn't trust herself to make the hour-long drive in one piece. Lucy certainly isn't going to volunteer to chauffeur her around, not even if it means having the house to herself.

Vivian scrounges through the cupboards and freezer to find anything edible to sober her up. Hank apparently did a thorough job emptying out the kitchen at the end of last summer, though, because all she finds is an expired jar of peanut butter and a half-empty bag of brittle potato chips.

Resigned to the fact that Vivian isn't going anywhere, at least not immediately, Lucy sinks onto the couch in a daze. She stares at the snag in the carpet and the whorls in the wood, committing every detail to memory before the house is no longer in her life. Gone like her dad. It's unthinkable.

She stands abruptly. "I'm going out," she tells Vivian. "I'll be back in a bit."

Lucy makes it halfway to her car before the weight of her dad's death finally crushes her. She sucks in uneven, gasping breaths, crumples over the steering wheel, and sobs. Losses stack up on top of each other like a looming tower: Her husband doesn't want her anymore, her dad is dead, the house will soon be gone, and the childhood fantasy she once had of finding

a platonic soulmate in Vivian has shattered. That woman has the warmth of an executioner.

Just when Lucy thinks she can catch her breath, she bursts into another round of tears. She's used to her dad's absence, but not like this. The grief is complicated and overwhelming, and Vivian's nastiness stings. Lucy feels small, like she's been reduced to a stereotype, illegitimate hillbilly spawn.

Lucy is grateful when her growling stomach nudges her focus away from this nightmare. Finally steady enough to drive, she rolls past the familiar houses lining Loon Road: a 1970s bungalow still wearing brown paint and avocado-green shutters; a weathered, cedar-shingled cottage with a pair of colorful Sunfishes flanking the dock; a two-story house with the whole extended family's cars crowded in the driveway, one with the tailgate open and a pile of sand-streaked beach chairs inside. She imagines what it'll feel like in the near future when she can no longer call this street home.

Up the hill and around the bend, her spotty cell service kicks in again. She places an order of chicken wings from Foxy Roxy's, her comfort food since childhood. This meal has been on heavy rotation since Patrick confessed he was done. A spontaneous flash of guilt pushes her to add, "Two of those, actually." She hates the idea of buying Vivian dinner, but walking back into the lake house with only takeout for herself requires a selfish brazenness she doesn't possess. She was raised to be better than that.

In the pub's parking lot, Lucy jams a baseball cap on low and steels herself for a quick dash in. She doesn't have the strength to make it through small talk with anyone she bumps into—and considering this is the only place in town to get a meal, chances are high she will. Foxy Roxy's can get sleepy during the offseason, but now whole families are crammed into booths. Twenty-somethings are crowded around the bar, letting loose under the blare of an '80s rock song. The walls are covered in license plates and signs promoting various beers. The menu lists "clam chowda" under "Soups 'n Salads: Light Fare!" Ten years ago, there was an uproar when the new manager tried to revamp the place. He draped every booth with white tablecloths; the cheesy potato skins and buffalo chicken dip vanished in favor of a vegetable medley with hummus; he even took out the pool table.

People revolted, and he was forced to restore the pub to its former casual glory.

The hostess recognizes her and goes to retrieve her order. Lucy scans the room. She grew up with a quarter of these faces and has since taught another quarter; the rest are probably summer people. Actually, Wimbledon is on the TV hanging over the bar—definitely summer people. Nerves sink into actual dread when she spots Patrick in a corner booth with his friends. Brody seems to be telling a story over the spread of burgers and pints, and the other guys are laughing, but Patrick’s attempt at a smile isn’t convincing. His dirty-blond buzz cut is freshly shorn; she misses running her palm over its soft bristles. The sight of him makes her chest ache. She never thought he had the capacity to hurt her.

When he notices her, he offers a hesitant wave. No wedding band. She wasn’t prepared for the sight of his bare hand. She still wears hers, though her mom has gently suggested she take it off. She prays he won’t come over, even though he’s the only person who could possibly comfort her. If he does, she’ll fall apart again. Her sinuses start to throb, the telltale sign that tears aren’t far off.

Still waiting for food, Lucy pretends to check her phone. Although she feigns intense concentration, she manages to see Patrick rising in her periphery. He glances in both directions before crossing the room.

“Hi, Luce,” he says quietly, shoving his hands into the pockets of his cargo shorts.

His shoulders are hunched, and he’s wearing the old Red Sox T-shirt he now reserves for the last possible day before laundry.

It’s the first time they’ve seen each other since she moved out. He’d dropped the bomb on her on Friday night of Memorial Day weekend, and she’d protested, negotiated, and pleaded all through Monday afternoon. He’d purposefully left the house when she came back a few days later to haul out her life’s possessions. A hand would’ve been nice. Everything—truly everything—is different now, but his soft sea-glass-green eyes are the same as always. That’s what had reeled her in when she was fifteen. He was

the high-school-sweetheart fantasy wrapped up in a cozy plaid flannel and tied in a bow. Until he wasn't.

She swallows. "Hi."

She feels shyer than she did around Vivian earlier—a high bar.

He scratches his arm. "How's it going?"

Their old intimacy has morphed into something painfully rigid. It's horrifying, just another thing to grieve. She can't lie to Patrick, but the truth is too awful to say out loud. She opens her mouth to insist everything's easy, breezy, fine, but she can't do it. Not to his face.

"It's been a bad day," she admits.

He nods. "Mm. Sorry."

In a tiny voice, she tries saying it for the first time. "My dad died?"

She's right; she couldn't do this.

His jaw drops. "Luce, oh my God."

He slings his arms around her and holds her close. One hand cradles the back of her head; she hides her face in the crook between his neck and shoulder, savoring the familiar comfort as she chokes up a humiliating sob. He hesitates, then relaxes and rubs soothing circles over her back. She hasn't been touched like this in weeks.

"I'm so sorry. What happened?"

She glances around the crowded pub, hyperconscious of the gossip mill that keeps small towns humming. In Fox Hill, there are no sports arenas, no shopping centers, no museums, no movie theaters. Scandalous stories get passed around as the ultimate form of entertainment. Lucy knows this better than most. Growing up, she overheard classmates referring to her as a "love child" more than once. She's sure people know she's separated now, too. She's grateful she never changed her name; changing it back would cause more of a stir. Patrick gently steers them toward the door, out of most tables' earshot and line of sight. It doesn't matter—at least one big mouth has probably already seen her crying on his shoulder.

Her voice comes out as a whimper. "He had a h-h-heart attack."

"Here?"

"In New York."

“But it’s July,” he says, confused.

Lucy is a little embarrassed that her tears have puddled on his T-shirt, but she sinks into another hug anyway. The door whooshes open behind them as a couple walks in. She badly wants to tell him the whole story, but not here.

The waitress hands over her takeout. Lucy gives Patrick one last squeeze. “I need to go,” she says, swallowing the “I love you” that’s right on the tip of her tongue.

She drives back to Fox Hill Lake with the enticing aroma of the barbecued chicken wafting through the car. For the first time, it’s not enough to comfort her.



Lucy had hoped Vivian would’ve taken off by the time she got back, but the truck is still in the driveway. She finds her sipping another glass of wine in a weathered Adirondack chair on the back deck, morosely staring out at a pink-streaked sky. Wasn’t the entire point for her to sober up?

Vivian barely turns around. “I called the hotel back ten minutes ago. The room’s gone.”

It’s hardly the worst thing Lucy’s heard all day, but still, she grinds her teeth. She’d like to eat dinner outside—alone. For as long as she can remember, Lucy has capped off every dry July day outside, on the deck or the boat, watching the afternoon’s glorious slide from dusk to twilight. She and Hank analyzed sunsets the way other families got caught up in football. They tracked sundown times and weather reports, made predictions about how colors and cloud formations would evolve over the course of the evening, and admired the loons. “Just another family out to watch the sunset,” she’d say, which made him smile, though he never repeated the F-word. The morphing sky was enough to keep the conversation afloat, letting them avoid thornier subjects. It is—was—their favorite time of day. The idea of giving it up, even for a single night, prickles.

“Here, I got you dinner,” she says, handing over the box.

Vivian looks surprised. “What is it?”

“Foxy Roxy’s chicken wings.”

Vivian’s nose wrinkles. “Oh. Thanks. What’s your Venmo?”

Not only does Lucy know Vivian’s Venmo username, she’s also tracked the flow of dollars and wine emojis between Vivian and her friends for ten years.

Exasperated, Lucy gives it to her and retreats to the kitchen. It’s strange, sitting inside at sunset. She’ll never have another one with her dad again, and she’ll never hear his voice again, either. He spent his childhood in a well-to-do Boston suburb, the kind of place that isn’t always infused with the *pahk yah cah in Hahvahd yahd* accent, but traces of it would come out whenever he poured himself a Scotch and settled onto the couch for one of their movie nights. “Pass the clickah,” he’d say. She liked those moments best, when they could pass for a real father-daughter pair, not just a temporary family cobbled together during summers and long weekends. Most of the time, though, he sounded as mainstream as a newscaster, like Vivian does.

The back door slides open; the bathroom door clicks shut. Seconds later, a shriek pierces the air as the toilet lid clangs against the seat.

“Are you okay?” Lucy calls, not moving from her chair.

Vivian darts into the kitchen. Her shoulders tense toward her ears.

“There’s a rat. In the toilet bowl. I think it’s dead.”

“Well, yeah. It’s the start of the season. They crawl up the pipes every winter.”

Vivian stares in disgust.

“Just toss it outside.”

Vivian blanches. “Right. Okay. I can do that.”

She doesn’t look so confident. She retreats to the bathroom with a pair of rubber gloves. There’s a long, pathetic silence before she rushes through the kitchen, prissy and squealing, and hurls the bloated rodent into the woods. It’s all very dramatic. Isn’t New York City famous for its rats?

Paige is calling. She must know something is up; she typically prefers texting to a phone call, though these days, it's mostly voice memos with occasional interjections of "No, don't put that in your mouth!" Lucy is deeply happy for her best friend and adores her goddaughter. But sometimes—mostly when she's wistful about the family she could've had by now, had life gone differently—she misses what their friendship used to look like.

She slips outside to answer. "Hello?"

The sky is nearly navy now. Only a few embers glow above the hills on the horizon.

"Patrick told me what happened. Lucy, oh my God. I'm so sorry."

"Yeah. I didn't mean to tell him and not you—today has just been a lot, and I ran into him, and—"

"Don't you dare apologize right now. Most importantly: How are you? I mean, terrible, obviously, but..."

The overpowering warmth of Paige's voice makes her feel a fraction of a percent better. She'll take it. She recounts the full story, starting with Vivian arriving at the house. Paige has participated in several Facebook-stalking sessions over the years and calls Vivian's plans to sell the house "sociopathic."

They talk for nearly an hour while Lucy meanders the grounds, making her way down the forty-seven wooden stairs to the waterfront. Each flight of steps zigzags down the sloped hill behind the house, and at two of the landings, there are wooden benches. Hank used to say they're "for the old folks to catch their breath on the climb up." He made it sound playful, but she used to wonder if the sight of those benches made him sad. There weren't ever old folks here in his lifetime. He was barely out of college when his parents died in a car crash. And now, of course, he's gone, too.

Dangling her feet into the lake, Lucy cries again, though this time, it's more of a gentle trickle than a desperate howl. She isn't alone. Paige is there to murmur all the right things. She chimes in with what she loved most about Lucy's dad, even though she barely ever saw him.

Paige finishes with, "And he was so thoughtful. I mean, the blanket..."

“I know.”

He had it monogrammed in lilac embroidery that matched Nora’s nursery. It’d been Lucy’s suggestion.

“Vivian hasn’t cried once since she’s been here, and I’ve been a wreck,” Lucy says. “I feel like she’s judging me, as if I don’t have the right to be upset.”

“Only a monster would judge you for crying right now.”

“I know, but—”

“He was your dad just as much as he was hers.”

Lucy bites her lip, hating that Vivian is making her question that. “Yeah.”

She warns Paige to keep this quiet for now, since she hasn’t told her mom yet. This shouldn’t get to Dawn before Lucy can break the news herself.

“Of course. And I’ll text Patrick to keep his mouth shut so you don’t have to.”

“No, I can call him,” Lucy says.

“You sure?” Paige asks.

Lucy hadn’t told her how good it felt to curl into Patrick’s arms today, how it was easier to breathe when her cheek rested on his shoulder.

“I’ll be fine.”

More than fine—she’s relieved she has a reason to talk to him again.

“But I’m not up for the bonfire tomorrow,” Lucy adds.

Hank’s annual Fourth of July gathering was her favorite tradition, not to mention the one time a year he let her bring her friends into his world.

“Don’t worry about that. I love you so much, Luce.”

“Love you, too.”



During what felt like a different life, Lucy and Patrick dated long-distance while she was at UMaine in Orono and he stayed behind for a four-year

carpentry apprenticeship. They carved a groove in the three-hour stretch of I-295, shuttling back and forth on weekends and breaks. She missed him terribly. Seeing the stress her new friends' love lives caused them, she was extra appreciative of caring, reliable Patrick. One night, her roommate dulled the pain of a breakup with tequila shots at Half Acre, apparently scream-singing the chorus of Icona Pop's takedown of older men—"You're from the '70s, but I'm a '90s bitch"—despite the fact that she was a '94 baby, and her ex was only three years older. Lucy didn't see it. She was in the parking lot with one finger jammed into her ear, listening to Patrick on the other end of the line. Even shivering in her parka, she felt a sturdy sense of peace just by talking to him.

Their plan was to find jobs in Portland after graduation. Lucy would teach in a classroom with big windows that let in briny seaside air, while Patrick would reel in city prices fixing up the old Victorians. They'd live together for the first time in a snug place in the West End, maybe get a cat. She fantasized about it constantly: the quaint brick sidewalks warped with age, taking the ferry over to Great Diamond Island for hiking and picnics, lazy Saturday mornings at the Holy Donut, a new brewery each Sunday afternoon—they kept popping up. And then, someday, a proposal by the lighthouse in Cape Elizabeth. She was more excited about the city than he was, but he liked the idea of making more money there, and besides, they'd only be an hour from Fox Hill. They compromised: a few years in Portland for Lucy, then back home when it was time to start a family.

Then, during Lucy's last semester of college, Dawn was diagnosed with stage-three breast cancer. Lucy moved home right after graduation to help care for her. She had loved Patrick for years by then, but once she realized he'd been driving Dawn's trash to the dump and mowing her lawn without being asked, without mentioning it, she knew he was more than just a boyfriend. He was family.

By the time Dawn was in remission, Patrick's calendar was fully booked six months out with carpentry jobs, and Lucy had just begun her second year of teaching at Fox Hill High. They rented a tiny two-bedroom house on rural Quaker Road, and he bought a truck that would never fit into

Portland's narrow street parking. Moving made even less sense the next year, while they were saving up for their wedding. They got married, and momentum took over. Now Lucy saw moving away from home like driving cross-country in an RV or piercing her nose—fun to think about at twenty-two, but not practical as a real adult.

At thirty, Lucy felt ancient and boring. For the thirteenth year of her life, she was spending Monday through Friday, September through June, reporting to the same two-story brick high school she'd once attended. Patrick liked to watch ESPN after work, but she could only take so much of it. Often, she'd go off to read or watch *The Great British Bake Off* in bed and fall asleep before he turned in for the night. She'd wake up with a crick in her neck. Rinse and repeat. Dinner was their time to truly connect, but the ease of those conversations had slipped away, too. Now she strained for interesting things to say. Ashley, the history teacher in the next classroom, was planning her sister's baby shower. The washing machine was making that noise again. Was the chicken two minutes overcooked?

Sometimes, the sameness of it all was comforting. She had an easy, predictable life with the man she loved. She was grateful. Other times, the prospect of decades slipping by this way felt like the entire high school wrestling team was sitting on her chest. Kids would change things—she wanted a big, lively family—but Patrick's answer was always "Maybe next year."

One night, over frozen pizza, she said, "I think two of my students might be dating."

She'd been looking forward to telling Patrick about them. On the drive home, she'd imagined how she'd tell the story, finessing the punch line. It was a good one.

"Remember that kid on the hockey team, Zach, the one who never pays attention or takes notes?"

He looked up from his phone. "Always texting under his desk or staring off into space, right?"

"Or at least I thought! I have him for third period, and Ashley was telling me about this girl in *her* third period who has the same kind of thing

going on. She had to confiscate the girl's phone because she wouldn't put it away after being asked twice. She didn't mean to see, but there were all these texts from Zach."

"Huh."

"Wait, this is the good part. I realized that neither of them are staring off into space. You know how the door between my classroom and Ashley's has that glass panel? They've been staring at each other!"

Patrick nodded and chewed. "Cool."

This was where he was supposed to tell that charming story about working up the courage to flirt with her at her locker half a lifetime ago. Instead, wordlessly, he went back to his phone. She watched him scroll. She hated that she was sensitive enough to wish for a more enthusiastic reaction. The silence stretched out and out.

"Patrick, we're having dinner."

"Yeah."

"And so I want to talk to you."

His eyes flicked up. "Okay."

"Don't you want to talk to me?"

"Of course I do."

"Do you think we still have things to talk about, though? We're not old enough to have run out yet."

"We have plenty to talk about. But, Luce—" His voice was heartbreakingly gentle. "This is normal. We've been together forever."

"I know," she said defensively.

"We don't need to entertain each other every minute of every day." Patrick leaned across the table and took her hand. His fingers brushed the inside of her palm. "Hey."

She was too comfortable with him to ever be truly embarrassed, but this came close. "I'm sorry. I just...miss how things used to be. We didn't used to be this boring."

"I could get a kilt," Patrick joked warmly. "And a sword. You'd never be bored around Jamie Fraser."

He was talking about *Outlander*, one of the few shows they'd both gotten sucked into; it was the romance and history for her, the action and suspense for him. Patrick liked to tease Lucy about her obvious crush on the male lead. Except, as a thirty-year-old wife with a pension fund and a flossing routine, she was too old to hold a real flesh-and-blood human to the standard of a fictional heartthrob.

"No, seriously."

"What do you mean, 'boring'?"

She'd already googled plenty of advice on this and knew what to suggest. "What about doing a date night? Just once a week. We can take turns planning it."

He frowned. "We need to schedule hanging out? What's next, scheduling sex?"

That wouldn't hurt, either. "Never mind."

Maybe the problem was just in her head. She felt frustrated, though she wasn't sure by whom.

"No, no, I'm sorry—you're right," Patrick said, softening. "Let's try it."

Just like that, they had plenty to talk about over dinner: what to do together next.



Mosquitoes force Lucy back inside. Vivian carries linens into Lucy's bedroom, the one adjacent to their dad's. Something dawns on Lucy, spurring her up the spiral staircase.

"You sleep in that bed, don't you?"

"Yeah, this is my bedroom," Vivian says, stretching a pale green fitted sheet over the queen-sized mattress.

Lucy's favorite patchwork quilt is folded on top of the dresser. "Mine, too."

"Oh." Vivian bristles. "Well..."

There are plenty of other beds: two rooms with twins on the third floor, plus Hank's, of course.

"I don't want to sleep over there," Lucy says, tilting her head toward their dad's bedroom.

Her instinct is to leave it untouched. She's never slept there, and starting now would only serve as a painful reminder of why she's not in her own bed.

"Neither do I," Vivian protests.

"You could sleep upstairs," Lucy points out.

"On a twin? I haven't done that since college."

Lucy did it last night. And the night before that. And the one before that, too. Besides, Vivian got a cushy New York upbringing in a two-parent household. All Lucy wants is her bed.

"It's July. It's my month. This is my bedroom. I'd like to sleep here."

Vivian sighs. "You know what? Fine, you take it. I'll sleep upstairs."

She drops the linens—one corner of the fitted sheet springs back across the bare mattress—and sweeps past Lucy without a glance. It's Lucy's first tiny victory.

She brought plenty of her own pajamas, assuming she'd stay for the whole month, but now she'd rather wear something of Hank's. She winces at the threshold of his closet, taking in the sight of faded jeans and rumpled flannels he'll never wear again. She riffles through his clothes, running her fingers over the sun-bleached T-shirt bearing the color-blocked logo of his private wealth management company. She holds the fabric up to her nose in case she can get a whiff of his sunscreen and Scotch. Instead, all she can detect is the faint scent of laundry detergent. It hits her again: He's gone. She slips the shirt over her head. Lucy is the first one to turn in. She doesn't bother saying good night.

Chapter Two

VIVIAN

Vivian wakes up in a stormy mood. She never rises before nine, but the morning sunlight floods the house at 7:30. It's disorienting to wake up in an unfamiliar bed, especially when she remembers why she's here. To make things worse, she'd barely heard from Oscar yesterday. She'd texted him walls of messages, the kind you need to scroll down to read in full, but he only shot back a short response: Oof. Will call tonight. She waited up for him for hours.

Lying in the dark, her head spun with furious monologues. She imagined ripping into her dad, berating him for being a cowardly liar and slimy hypocrite, cataloguing his failures, and watching him squirm with shame. There was one part of the mental script she couldn't get quite right, though: She had this embarrassing urge to ask why he'd told Lucy about Vivian but not vice versa. Why didn't he respect Vivian enough to give her the truth? It was a pointless exercise that only made her more resentful. She'd never know. She fell asleep clutching her phone and missed Oscar's call at 1:18 a.m.

Vivian is used to stretches of silence or absence here and there—she can't blame him for those. She knew full well what she was getting into when she fell for Oscar. But if a woman's ever allowed to demand attention, it's times like now. He wouldn't be crass enough to think this way, but he has a seven-figure reason to text back. There's money at stake that will have

life-changing consequences for them both. The longer she goes without connecting with Oscar, the more anxious she gets. This is why, after what happened with her ex, she used to keep her relationships light and shallow—if it was never that serious, she couldn't get hurt. Well, look at how that panned out. Oscar's absence throbs.

In the kitchen below, Vivian hears footsteps, the rush of the tap, clattering drawers, a whistling kettle. The door to the back deck slides open and shut. Once Lucy's outside, Vivian pries herself out of bed. She moves slowly downstairs and brews coffee, then remembers they have no milk and resigns herself to drinking it black on the front porch overlooking the scrubby lawn. There's no wind today, only a flat, oppressive sun, the kind you could bake under. She hates the heat and can't escape it—the house has no air-conditioning.

Unfortunately, it's probably time to call her mother. She hasn't exactly been rushing to tell Celeste about Lucy, but she needs to do it eventually. She can't recall a time before their relationship was a source of frustration. Celeste published her first novel, *The Mistress in the Mountains*, when Vivian was five. As a kid, she had no interest in Celeste's work; she knew her mother wrote grown-up books she wasn't allowed to read yet. It wasn't until Vivian was eleven and overheard her mother discussing her next novel, *Naked in New York*, that she began to pay attention. Naked? Ew!

"You can't do this to me," Vivian wailed. "It's too gross. And embarrassing."

"I'm sorry, I signed a contract," Celeste said, unfazed.

Vivian tried appealing to Hank to see if he'd listen to her reasonable concerns. She could barely get the word "naked" out in front of her dad; she mostly made her plea to the rug beneath her feet. He only said, "Aw, hon. Nobody you know is going to read it. Promise."

He was very wrong. *Naked in New York*—a barely fictionalized erotic novel about a frisky pair of Columbia coeds named Celine and Hal—debuted at number five on the *New York Times* bestseller list. It stayed there for a life-changing sixteen weeks in a row. Celeste became a household name. The most obnoxious boys in Vivian's grade swiped copies from atop

their mothers' nightstands and quoted mortifying passages out loud to her between classes. The publication of the book instantly eclipsed Calhoun Middle School's previously most talked-about scandal, that time Tabitha Zhu got stage fright while performing the lead role in the spring musical and accidentally peed during her biggest solo.

It wasn't the last time Vivian resented Celeste's career. The next year, after her mother had returned from a busy book tour, Vivian had asked her to sit side by side at the kitchen table, where she was doing a math worksheet. Vivian had missed her, and the click-clacks of Celeste's typing alongside the scratch of her own pencil was nice. When she got to a question that stumped her, she asked for help.

"Mom?"

Nothing.

A little louder, "Mom?"

Nothing.

Vivian tapped on Celeste's laptop, and a moment later, her mother peeled her gaze from the screen. "Sorry, were you saying something?"

The times Celeste *did* pay attention to Vivian, it didn't necessarily go well. She was typically self-conscious about her grades in English, but when she earned an A on an essay about Shakespeare's portrayal of female ambition in *Macbeth*, she was proud to hand it over to her mother. Celeste returned it covered in red ink. Whenever Vivian ordered fettucine alfredo at her favorite Italian restaurant, Celeste pointedly ordered the plain salmon. Once, in the dressing room at Abercrombie & Fitch, Celeste explained in detail why Vivian didn't look good in low-rise jeans. She was twelve.

Celeste was naturally shy and awkward, but her fans would never know it. To prepare for the launch of her debut novel, she hired an acting coach to help her summon confidence, poise, and charisma for interviews and events. She practiced smiles in her bathroom mirror. The more time she spent posturing for fans, the more her public persona seeped into her regular life. The fervor around *Naked in New York* gave her impenetrable armor; depending on your perspective, she comes across as either regal or absurd.

Hank was more even-keeled, but less present—he said he worked hard all year so he could vacation with Vivian at the lake in peace. They ate dinner as a family, but after his final bite, he’d retreat to his home office. Aside from August, quality time was crammed into slivers of weekends. He’d take her to the Central Park Zoo, or Mars 2112, or the new Apple Store on Fifth Avenue, or wherever seemed cool to Vivian that year. They’d go to Pinkberry for fro-yo, and he didn’t say a word when she loaded up on toppings. He asked about her schoolwork, her friends, which song from his generation *Glee* had covered that week. Back then, she was too naive to appreciate their bond. It didn’t occur to her that it could change.



Before Vivian loses her nerve, she punches her mother’s name into her phone. When it comes to her conversations with Celeste, dread is nothing new. This time, though, it’s agonizing. As a teenager, she’d been tormented by the question of whether she should confess her suspicions about her dad. Ultimately, she decided to keep quiet. Celeste clearly loved Hank, dedicating book after book to him. Some notes were coyly intimate; others displayed earnest gratitude. Vivian didn’t want to be responsible for ruining her parents’ marriage.

A bead of sweat trickles down her spine as the phone trills. Is this how her mother felt when she delivered the news about Hank? She picks up on the second ring. Vivian almost wishes she hadn’t.

“Vivian? Is everything all right?”

“Yeah! I’m fine.”

Celeste’s voice wilts with relief. “Oh, good.”

Vivian needs to burn off her nervous energy. She charges down the driveway onto Loon Road. To her right, a lush emerald forest stretches tall. To her left, sun-dappled water glitters beyond a row of ramshackle old cabins. A brilliant orange monarch butterfly flaps by lazily. The whole scene is blanketed by an aquamarine sky. It’s a sharp contrast to New

York's crammed concrete blocks. Portland—Maine's largest "city," with sixty thousand people—is a happy medium between the two, though she and Hank rarely bothered to make the hour-long drive.

"How are you?" Vivian asks. It was a useless question. Obviously not well.

"Brilliantly," her mother deadpans.

Oh, Celeste's day is only going to get worse.

"So? What's up?"

"Something...strange happened yesterday. At the house."

She waits a beat to see if Celeste jumps in to explain, but she doesn't.

"When I showed up, somebody was already there," Vivian continues.

Her mother gasps. "A burglar?"

Hank used to lock up at the end of each summer, but during those languid, relaxed August days, security never felt like an issue. The doors weren't just unlocked—half the time, they'd forget to pull the sliding doors shut or would leave the garage door wide open. Anybody could've sailed right in. But getting to the house required winding through narrow, bumpy back roads and a thicket of woods, down a dead-end street. If there was a burglar in town, there were plenty of more accessible places to steal from.

"No, nothing like that. Some girl. I didn't recognize her." Again, she pauses, waiting for Celeste to jump in. Her chest is tight with anticipation.

"Her name is Lucy."

She can't tell if the silence is steely or shocked.

"I told him so many times, it's not safe to keep that place unlocked."

"Mom," Vivian says, a little more sharply. "Does that ring a bell? Daughter of Dawn Webster?"

"No, should it?" She sounds defensive.

At events, when journalists or avid readers approach her, she has a habit of darting discreet, pointed glances at her agent or publicist, meaning, *Am I supposed to know this person?* Based on their subtle nods or tilts of the head, she'll warmly say, "It's so lovely to meet you," or, "Oh, fabulous! You're here!" She encounters an endless parade of people. But she wouldn't forget Lucy or Dawn—she couldn't.

Vivian exhales. This is it. “Lucy is Dad’s daughter. His other daughter. They spent every July together at the lake.”

There’s a bark of stunned, uncomfortable laughter. “No. No, that’s not true.”

She recognizes the shift in Celeste’s voice—it’s richer, a hair louder, and every syllable is enunciated with precision. It’s the same tone she puts on in front of a crowd.

“Mom,” she says, exasperated.

Celeste plows on. “That’s a scam. I did a storyline like that in *Trouble in Tahiti*. A well-off man dies, a piece of scum finds the obituary and shows up, pretending to be a long-lost relative to get a slice of the pie.”

“She hasn’t asked about money.” Yet, Vivian thinks.

“Yet,” Celeste says. Then she sniffs. “Of course you’d know that if you actually read *Trouble in Tahiti*.”

Vivian ignores that jab. She’s read several of her mother’s books, but there are dozens. And while it’s true that Celeste enthusiastically supports Vivian’s work, ordering bottles of her favorite Sancerre is not exactly a burden.

“I’m serious. She knows all about him. There are photos of them together. Not even Meryl Streep could fake a reaction like that when I told her he died.”

Her mother waves this off. “It could be Photoshop.”

“Lucy and I are six months apart. He cheated on you right before you got married.” Vivian doesn’t enjoy pressing this point, but it has to be done.

Celeste digests this information silently for long enough that Vivian has to ask, “Mom? Are you still there?”

She can imagine her mother whipping off her glasses and rubbing one temple, eyes pinched shut in irritation.

“Don’t talk about Dad like that,” she snaps.

Vivian’s jaw drops. “That’s what you care about right now? Shouldn’t you be shocked? Furious?”

“Don’t tell me what to feel.”

“You knew.”

This conversation is veering sickeningly close to her final conversation with her dad. The last time she accused a parent of lying, it didn't go well.

"So? He was my husband, of course I knew."

"Then why pretend you didn't?" Vivian explodes. Her voice bounces between the trees.

Her whole life, she'd kept quiet to avoid hurting her mother—and for what?

"Why are you entitled to know private things about my marriage?"

"Oh, don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Shut me out!"

She's stewed over Celeste forever, but never thought she'd throw something like that in her mother's face.

"Vivian," Celeste says flatly, "you're being very dramatic."

"You're doing it again. You're not actually listening to me."

"I'm listening to you right now, and I'm telling you, this isn't up for discussion."

"You always do this. You don't think I'm worth paying attention to."

"That's not true. But I'm busy. I can't spend all my time thinking about you."

Vivian squeezes her phone and holds it away in disgust, shaking. She's enraged enough to fire off something cruel and hang up, but a deeper part of her wants to keep digging.

All she says is "You're insufferable."

"Don't be rude. I'm feeling very dehydrated, this isn't a good time for me to talk. Let's—"

"Mom."

"I think I've got a migraine coming on."

"Don't go."

"Thank you for calling, but I have some work to do, so—"

She's been having trouble writing her next novel, *Pleasure and Spain*. She's desperate to deliver a knockout success; her agent has warned that if she doesn't, her publisher likely won't offer another book deal.

“Mom, please!” Vivian’s voice cracks. “Just listen!”

“What?” Celeste spits out.

Now that Vivian has her mother’s attention, she’s nearly at a loss for words. “How did you find out? How long have you known?”

“About the girl?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, it’s been years.”

“Dad told you?”

“He didn’t have to.”

The vagueness is infuriating. “So then why did you let him keep this from me? Why did *you* keep it from me?”

Celeste takes a shaky breath, all airs of imperiousness gone. “Because... it wasn’t your business. You had a fabulous childhood. I didn’t want to ruin it.”

“What about when I was older?”

“I don’t owe you every answer, Vivian.”

She recoils. “Do you know how I found out? It wasn’t just because I ran into her yesterday.”

Her mother sighs. “No. I suppose you want to tell me.”

“If you’re not too ‘dehydrated’ to listen,” she says bitterly.

“Oh, Vivian, grow up.”



It was a Saturday night when Vivian was fourteen. She was at her friend Cleo Vega’s apartment for a sleepover—not that they still called it that—discussing their upcoming eighth-grade graduation ceremony. Vivian had been campaigning hard for her parents to let her celebrate at Pastis with some friends. A party at their apartment would’ve felt kind of babyish. A dinner out, where they could order mocktails and wear slinky tops with 7 for All Mankind jeans, felt more glamorous. Her parents had been promising to discuss it for weeks.

Important conversations aside, she and Cleo embarked on their grand plans to watch all four hours of *Titanic*, which was really just an excuse to watch the scene in the fogged-up carriage. Before they got there, though, Cleo's dog, a Yorkie named Cashmere, managed to eat an entire package of prosciutto, plastic included. Cleo went with her family to the emergency vet, and Vivian walked home.

Her mother was away on a "writing retreat"—her term for jotting down ideas in between mimosas and happy hour while vacationing with her author friends. Hank's home office was just off the foyer, and when Vivian walked in, she heard a voice on speakerphone.

"Do you think you'll come?" It sounded like a girl her age. "Mom didn't know if you'd make it."

She crept closer. The door was half open.

"I told Mom that—"

Hank paced into view. They made bewildered eye contact. Vivian froze. He yanked the door shut, but it didn't fully block out the sound.

"Hey, hey, one sec," he interjected. The speakerphone cut out. "Let's talk later, okay?"

When he opened the door, his cheeks were pink.

He loosened his tie and cleared his throat. "What happened? I thought you were staying over."

"Cleo's dog got sick. Who was that?"

He glanced down at his BlackBerry. With the press of a button, the screen went dark. "Tim's daughter called. She couldn't reach him and thought he might be with me."

His partner at the firm had a girl about Vivian's age.

Time slowed. For a moment, she had perfect clarity. The girl had said "Mom," not "my mom." Vivian could pretend nothing had happened or she could pry. No matter what she did next, she had the eerie sense that the decision would have life-changing consequences. It felt like stumbling into a movie, only she'd never been handed a script.

"Really? It didn't sound like her." She crossed her arms so he couldn't see her hands shaking.

Hank clenched his jaw. “You haven’t seen her in years. She’s grown up, just like you.”

Vivian felt painfully young right then, unsure what to do. “Did you call her mom ‘Mom’?”

He furrowed his brow. “What? No.”

She was at a loss for words.

He took the opportunity to change the subject. “Did you eat dinner? There are leftovers in the fridge.”

She lied and said yes just so she could get away from him. In the safety of her room, she locked the door and sobbed. Up until then, she hadn’t ever given her parents’ marriage much thought. Sometimes they bickered, yes, but most of the time, they said “I love you” to each other before hanging up the phone. They weren’t divorced like some of her friends’ parents. But neither did they hold hands while watching embarrassingly sexy French art films in the living room, like Cleo’s parents.

Over the next few weeks, she tried to guess her dad’s email password (no dice), snoop through his BlackBerry (impossible, it was always on him), and riffle through his home office (nothing). She worried she’d misread the entire situation, but her dad seemed tense—that had to mean something. With no real leads, she figured he’d be more likely to have a secret daughter in Fox Hill than anywhere else, but that didn’t help her much, either. What was she supposed to do, wander around town asking strangers to point her toward the local love child?

Ultimately, she got the dinner at Pastis with ten of her friends. There were sparkling lemon mocktails garnished with fragrant sprigs of mint, towers of jumbo shrimp cocktail, and an array of black tube tops showing off freshly spray-tanned shoulders. The table buzzed with conversations about camp: which hot CITs were coming back as counselors; whose crushes from last summer had growth spurts; the rumor about the two swim instructors who got fired after they got caught drunk, naked, and all over each other in the hot tub after lights-out. By the start of July, Vivian had settled into a top bunk in the oldest girls’ cabin, and Hank had left the city for his annual business trip to San Francisco.



When Vivian unearths it all for the first time in her life, she heaves a sigh. Celeste had interrupted a few times, but Vivian had successfully quieted her with “I’m speaking.” She’d been mindlessly pacing the same stretch of the road. Now she keeps going.

“You could’ve said something to me,” Celeste says. Her earlier haughtiness has deflated.

“I didn’t want to risk hurting you,” Vivian admits.

“Oh, please. I’m fine.”

Celeste’s father, a Holocaust survivor from Austria, apparently had several affairs that were an open secret. After everyone and everything he’d lost, his wife wasn’t going to pry him away from his mistresses, too. He died when Vivian was young, but she has a few memories of him: his gruff, accented English; the serial number inked on his arm; the tufts of white hair indicating he was twenty years older than everyone else’s grandparents—time had been stolen from him. Maybe Celeste is used to this particular kind of forgiveness.

“And—” Vivian bites her lip, anticipating that Celeste won’t like hearing this. “I didn’t think I could tell you.” She can practically hear Celeste frown.

“You can tell me anything, I’m your mother.”

Keeping her relationship with Oscar secret came naturally to Vivian because she’d had years of practice burying the truth.

Vivian sighs. “That’s the thing—I can’t.”



Vivian stews in resentment until she reaches the end of Loon Road. At the entrance of the street, there’s a tree with a dozen hand-painted signs nailed to its trunk indicating which families live where: McCormick, Foley,

Bouchard. Hank never wanted to put one up. “Call me paranoid, but there’s no reason to make it so obvious where the one Jewish family lives around here,” he once said. Since then, Vivian hasn’t been able to see those signs without thinking about it.

She needs a distraction from her bitterness. On the way back, she calls the Realtor. Celeste had passed along his number last week. When Hank was growing up, he was friendly with another kid who also spent summers on Fox Hill Lake. They stayed in touch, and the friend gave Celeste a condolence call when he heard the news. He owns a real estate brokerage in Portland now, so Celeste told him she’d send Vivian his way. After five rings, Vivian thinks it’ll go to voicemail. Instead, someone picks up.

“Gray Realty,” a smooth voice says.

“Hi, I’m looking for Eric Gray?”

“I’m his son.”

“Oh, could you pass along a message?”

“Yeah, but we actually work together. Maybe I could help.”

Vivian introduces herself, explaining the connection. He clucks his tongue with sympathy at her name.

“Oh, I heard you might be calling. I’m so sorry to hear about your dad. I never met him, but my dad has nothing but great stories about him.”

Her face automatically slides into the pinched smile she wore during shiva. “That’s nice to hear, thank you.”

“So, the place is on Fox Hill Lake?” he asks.

“Yeah. With my dad gone, it’s more upkeep than my mom and I can handle. He was always more into it here than we were,” Vivian says, like she has to justify her choice.

Guilt flashes through her. “Always” isn’t quite right. She remembers the August afternoons of her childhood: diving off the dock, seeing how far she could swim, having fun making pizza from scratch because she missed home. Those days are behind her, though. The shift happened slowly. As she reached high school, a full month away from her friends felt like torture. She spent more and more time indoors, collaging together her back-to-school shopping lists with photos clipped from *Seventeen*, *Teen Vogue*,

and *Nylon*: liquid leggings, red skinny jeans, headbands blooming with rosettes.

After she heard that phone call, things changed between them. She occasionally baited him. At his firm's holiday party, she positioned herself within earshot of her dad and chatted with Tim's daughter. "Was my dad helpful that time you called him?" she asked.

The girl said, "What?"

Another time, she suggested visiting in July instead of August, and kept pressing the issue even after he said no. She was waiting for him to come clean, but he never did. By the time she left for college, it was too late to fix what had broken. Whenever she visited the lake, she dreaded sunset. She didn't want to sit side by side with him in painful silence.

The Realtor's son asks some questions about the property, some of which she can answer (number of bedrooms: four, though none has any privacy) and many of which she can't (lot size: "I guess...big?"). He says he'll come by soon to measure.

"When would you like to sell?"

The sooner she has the money, the sooner her next chapter can kick off. "Immediately?"

"We'll work as fast as we can. On your end, start getting the house in order—clear out the clutter, fix anything broken."

"On it."

By now, she's made it back. Lucy meets her on the front porch. "That was the Realtor?"

Vivian braces herself for another unpleasant encounter. She doesn't relish being the bad guy.

"It was," she says evenly.

Lucy leans against the shingled exterior and crosses her arms. Her eyes are puffy from crying.

"It's really upsetting that you're selling the house."

It's like she's daring Vivian to be heartless enough to take this away from her, poor Lucy, who subsisted on leftover scraps of Hank's attention.

"It's more complicated than that. There are practicalities to consider."

“Practicalities?” she echoes, sounding bitter. “It’s not like you really need the money.”

Heat creeps into Vivian’s cheeks. “That’s none of your business.”

“But you *don’t*. Not that badly.”

“You don’t know that.”

“A single year of tuition at that private school you went to cost thirty-six thousand dollars,” Lucy snaps.

She recoils. Did it? That sounds like the right ballpark for Calhoun back then, though frankly, she doesn’t know for sure.

“It’s more like sixty thousand now,” Lucy adds.

Vivian stands as tall as she can. “Look, yeah, I grew up comfortably. I’m not going to pretend I didn’t. But I work in the restaurant business—I don’t make a fortune. My parents’ money isn’t *my* money. And...” She inhales; this part probably won’t go over well. “My dad’s money is all going to my mother. I’m not directly getting an inheritance. But she’ll let me keep the proceeds from the sale if I handle all the logistics.”

Lucy purses her lips. “That’s a pretty big payout for not much work.”

“I really do need the money. Trust me.”

She scratches her arm, uncomfortably aware of how this could ring false while she’s wearing four or five thousand dollars’ worth of jewelry. (Most of those pieces were gifts, but it’s better if she doesn’t explain that to Lucy. It’s not cute when the rich girl doth protest too much.)

“Please,” Lucy says, sounding closer to begging than either of them would like. “I love this place more than you can possibly imagine. Why would you just give it up?”

Vivian can’t tell Lucy the full story, but anything short of that will sound precious and entitled.

“It’s personal.”

“This is personal to me, too!”

Vivian sighs. “My boyfriend and I need the money to open a business together, okay? A bar. I’m going to oversee the wine program, he’ll manage the place.”

Without the influx of cash, they'd need to find another source of funding. The angel investor who made Oscar's dream of opening Della a reality—his wife Carla's dad—is absolutely out of the question. Oscar can never ask him for another cent. She hates that her dad's death is the thing that will pad her bank account and make the bar possible. It's less of a silver lining and more like emotional handcuffs that will link her dad's legacy to the new business forever.

Although she's barely seen Oscar since Hank died, she did get the chance to tell him about the arrangement she'd made with her mother. It wasn't something she mentioned lightly. This was serious cash, money that could be entirely Vivian's. By investing it in a business with Oscar, she would be quite literally investing in their future as a couple. She needed to know if he was all in, the same way she was. His answer had made her glow. The bar is more than just a business. It's a path to a new life, he'd said, one they've craved for so long. Lucy can't take that away from them.

Lucy holds up her hands. "I'm not here to judge your life."

Sure.

"But if we're talking 'practicalities,'" she continues, "I'm newly separated. My ex is staying in our house. My only other option is staying with my mom, and that's only through the summer. Neither of us will be able to stay there in the fall, when she's getting repairs done on her roof."

Vivian's head aches from arguing all morning. "I'm sorry. I'm sure you'll be able to figure something else out."

Lucy looks hurt. "Dad would say this place is as much mine as it is yours, so...I'm not leaving."

It takes real effort to avoid scoffing. Lucy calls herself Hank's daughter the way NYU freshmen claim they're New Yorkers, as if insisting upon it makes it true. If she were really equal to Vivian in Hank's eyes, he would've done something about it—own up to Celeste, get divorced, split his time evenly, brought his daughters up together, *something*.

"I'm not, either. I don't have anywhere else to stay up here," Vivian says.

"Then don't sell it."

“Don’t be ridiculous.” The haughtiness of her own tone is jarring. She sounds eerily like Celeste.

“You know Dad would hate to see the house go.”

“I don’t care what he’d want! I don’t owe him anything. He lied to me my whole life.”

Lucy crosses her arms. “It’s like you’re not even upset that he’s gone.”

Anger flares through Vivian. She throws up her arms. “And you’re not upset that he hid you away up here?”

“He didn’t—”

Vivian strides past Lucy, snatches the urn off the mantel, and carries it down to the lake. She isn’t reckless; she doesn’t run. She isn’t doing anything other than exactly what Hank asked for.

Lucy, dumbstruck on the porch, sputters into action. “Wait! Wait, you can’t do that!”

Vivian ignores her.

“Please!” Lucy thunders down the stairs.

Vivian walks faster toward the end of the dock. Adrenaline pounds in her ears. She stands at the edge, watching the hypnotic motion of waves rising and falling below.

“Stop!” Lucy yelps. “I didn’t even get to wish him a happy Father’s Day, you know that? He didn’t pick up my call, and I bet it’s because he was with you.”

Vivian turns. Her shoulders tense. “That’s not my fault.”

“But it’s not fair, either.”

“Nothing about this is fair!” Vivian explodes.

Her voice echoes over the water, making her wince. How many people are listening to their showdown right now? That flash of self-consciousness snaps her back to reality. This is absurd. Hank wouldn’t want his ashes scattered like this. Regardless of how many secrets he kept and lies he told, he still deserves better than going out amid a screaming match.

With a long exhale, Vivian takes herself down several notches, from soap opera star to sensible person. “Okay. I won’t. Not now.”

Lucy sighs in relief. “Thank you.”

“However,” Vivian says sharply, “I *will* be selling the house and scattering the ashes at some point.”

A shadow crosses Lucy’s face. “Will you at least let me scatter them with you?”

Vivian’s not cruel enough to shut her out entirely. “Sure.”

“Let’s make it like a funeral. We could have a little ceremony on the boat.”

“Oh, no. His funeral was last month. I’m not doing it again.”

“I didn’t even know it was happening,” Lucy says. “You got closure. I didn’t.”

“You can get the *Times* up here, can’t you? His obituary was in the paper,” Vivian says acidly.

“Oh, yeah? How many daughters did it say he had?”

“Come on,” Vivian groans.

Lucy’s voice shakes. “I’m his daughter, too.”

Vivian hates to bend—as a Scorpio, she considers grudges her love language—but she does it anyway. She has to remember she’s angry at her dad, not Lucy. Her half-sister didn’t ask to be born into this mess, either, and acting like some entitled, territorial, basic hanger-on isn’t technically a crime.

“Okay, fine. But let’s not call it a funeral. Celebration of life?”

“Deal. Not right here, though. It would be creepy. We don’t really want him washing up by our house.”

It won’t be “our” house for much longer, but Vivian doesn’t protest. “Fine.”

“Can we drive around today and figure out where?”

It’s a real schlep to get the boat in the water, but the sooner they work this out, the sooner it’ll all be over. Reluctantly, Vivian agrees.



The garage is three times the size of Vivian's West Village apartment, big enough to house the old truck, the boat on its trailer, the Jet Ski on a smaller trailer, a pair of jumbo trash bins, an array of life jackets, a pile of disintegrating pool noodles, two deflated rafts, and a pair of vintage water skis with plenty of room to spare. Most of it is filthy with offseason grime: dust, dirt, dried insects that died long ago.

Dealing with the boat is a two-person job, and while Vivian makes out okay as Hank's sous chef in the whole ordeal, she's never been responsible for the process on her own. She tended to follow his instructions on autopilot, not committing much of it to memory. Hitching the boat to the car is complicated, and if they miss a step—say, forgetting to secure the right straps or locking the latch into place—they'll be in serious trouble: expensive danger for them, the boat, and the car, not to mention everyone else on the road. She doesn't want to seem like a useless city girl in front of Lucy.

Thankfully, Lucy takes the lead on backing the truck up to the trailer. She maneuvers the car into place on her first try. Show-off. Hands on hips, Vivian stares at the equipment, willing it to make sense.

"So, this...socket? It definitely has to get winched down onto that knobby thing," she says, gesturing to two heavy items currently parked three feet apart.

"...Yeah."

It's like there's a neon sign flashing over Vivian that spells out "clueless."

Lucy flicks through her phone. "Here, watch this. Years ago, Dad had me record him doing this whole thing."

He did that for Lucy but not Vivian? She takes the phone and hits play. The video shakes slightly along with her hands. There's a little more hair around his temples and fewer lines crinkling across his forehead than when she saw him last; this was probably filmed five years ago. He's in swim trunks and a T-shirt, an outfit that never looked quite natural on him. She grew up accustomed to his suits and ties. She watches Hank demonstrating

how to flip the lock into place and how to transmit the car's brake signals to the back end of the trailer.

On screen, he says, "'Kay, Luce? You wanna get a close-up of this next part?"

"Yep, recording this for posterity," she says, like she's only humoring him, like she doesn't believe she'll ever need to replay this.

"For people watching from the future, keep in mind: This is a real demonstration coming to you from 2020, not an outtake from *Green Acres*."

It hurts to hear their ease together. When Vivian thinks Lucy isn't watching, she hastily wipes away a tear.

LUCY

Once they're all set up, Vivian insists Lucy drive. She's apparently never driven with the boat attached and is too afraid to start now. Lucy sits ramrod straight and crawls the hilly back roads to the launch at ten miles an hour, hoping Vivian doesn't notice her nerves. She's never done it, either.

"It's so packed," Vivian says when they arrive.

The line of cars snaking toward the water is practically backed up to the road.

Lucy groans. "Gosh, I can't believe we forgot. Today's the boat parade."

"The what?"

"The parade. For the Fourth."

"They do that?"

"Every year."

Vivian peers out at the mass of people gearing up for the festivities. "I didn't know."

Lucy inches the car forward. Vivian glares and drums her fingers against the door. The silence between them is suffocating. Lucy tries to think of something to say, but none of her ideas feels right. She doesn't want to ask about Vivian's life. She knows enough of the answers, and the one-

sidedness of it all is pitiful. Asking about the funeral she missed would be too painful for them both. Instead, she flicks through radio stations. She skips past a Sam Hunt earworm she likes, not wanting to give Vivian the satisfaction of labeling her a country bumpkin.

Eventually, they reach the front of the line. They unhook the boat from the trailer and back it into the water. Vivian jumps in and lowers the engine. Lucy will drive the car back to the house as Vivian zips across the lake.

“You’ll pick me up in five?” Lucy asks.

If she were doing this with Hank, she wouldn’t even need to ask.

Vivian yawns. “Yep.”

Back at the house, Lucy’s almost surprised when she sees their boat cruising toward her. Vivian waves and even offers a tight smile—not with her teeth, but it’s something. Maybe all they needed was a minute to cool off separately.

Once Lucy’s on board, Vivian takes a hard swerve to the left and zooms away from shore. Wind blasts Lucy in the face, making her tear up even from behind her glasses. She wants to tell Vivian to slow down but keeps her mouth shut.

They’ve barely gone two hundred feet when Vivian cuts the engine.

“What’s wrong?” Lucy asks.

“Maybe this is the right spot. Between the house and the island.”

Directly in front of their property, a quarter mile out, there’s a tiny island just big enough to house four scrawny trees and a few shrubs. The water is shallow and rocky around its perimeter, making it accessible only by kayak, or, as Hank liked to do with Lucy once every summer, by swimming there and back. It isn’t grand or impressive or remotely habitable—but by virtue of its location, it’s always felt like theirs.

Lucy dreads conflict, but this decision feels important. She’d hate to let Vivian steamroll her.

“Too close to home.”

“But the island’s, like, ours.”

It isn’t.

“Not here, please?” Lucy tries to summon a firm statement, but it comes out like a shaky question instead. Still, her effort pays off.

“Fine. Do you want to drive?”

She doesn’t mind. “Sure.”

Lucy takes the wheel. The roar of the engine relieves them from the pressure of conversation. The lake is more crowded today than it’ll be all year, swarming with mostly summer people and some locals. A line of boats circles the perimeter. They pass a pontoon draped in an American flag and a skiff with a hand-lettered sign that reads “God Bless America.” Another sign taped to a speedboat proclaims “FIVE generations growing up on Fox Hill Lake!” There are dads everywhere, clutching beers, cranking up classic rock, fishing with their little life-jacketed kids, steering their spouses through the sunshine. One cruises by on a Jet Ski with a full-grown golden retriever in his lap. Lucy has never been less in the mood for a parade in her life.

Actually, she thinks, feeling bittersweet nostalgia washing over her, *that’s not true*. The summer she was nine years old, there was almost nothing she loved more than marshmallows. She’d eat them for every meal if she could. The morning of July Fourth, she secretly tucked a bag of Kraft Jet-Puffed in her lap beneath the kitchen table. Over breakfast, whenever Hank was immersed in *The Economist*, she’d cram another one into her mouth.

They had barely boated into the lake when the gentle rocking turned Lucy’s stomach. She threw up over the side. Hank went out to get a box of Fla-Vor-Ice popsicles and a carton of apple juice to settle her stomach. Outside, the sky was a spotless blue and the sun danced across the water, but they spent the rest of the day together watching another *Star Wars* on the couch. As much as she enjoyed it, she was sad to miss the parade.

The morning of July 5, before Lucy was awake, Hank hung red, white, and blue streamers from the boat’s windshield and loaded up the back seat with the signs Lucy had made with Magic Markers two days prior: “Happy birthday, America!” and “May the Fourth be with you!” (featuring—what

else?—a painstakingly drawn illustration of Princess Leia wearing a George Washington wig gathered into space buns).

“You know, the parade’s not over yet, Lucy Goosey,” he said over breakfast.

She scowled. “Yes, it is.”

“You don’t believe me?” His eyes shone with mischief.

She’d been skeptical, but by the time they were out on the lake waving at the other boaters and swimmers, even though they were the only ones honking and cheering, her doubts were long forgotten. Even back then, she knew her dad had another daughter out there somewhere, one he spent nearly all his time with, which made her feel like the last-picked kid in gym class. But that day on the boat, she felt so special.

Lucy and Vivian pass the quaint white house with blue shutters where Dawn’s best friend, Cindy Monahan, used to live. Lucy never sees the Monahans around the lake anymore—they rent out their property for an arm and a leg to a different family every week from Memorial Day to Labor Day. When she was growing up, there weren’t quite so many out-of-towners, but since Airbnb took off, plenty of Massholes have discovered Fox Hill Lake. The more they fall in love with it, the more longtime locals are tempted to sell their properties for outrageously inflated prices. Now “For Sale” signs dot the lake. For the first time ever, the locals are dealing with litter and obnoxiously loud wake boats.

Vivian peers at a row of modest homes on the more affordable end of the lake. They’re smaller and more run-down than their own house, and many of them are only comfortable as seasonal cabins instead of year-round buildings. Some have peeling paint; others have no-frills utility boats tied up to their docks, or no boats at all. Lucy wonders if Vivian’s proud to have one of the nicer spots around, or if it doesn’t even occur to her to be grateful. Hank sent money to Dawn every month and paid for most of Lucy’s college tuition, so she was better off than some of her classmates. Even so, the wealth gap between her and Vivian is significant—less of a gap and more of a canyon.

When other boats pass by they wave; the other passengers return the gesture. It's the language of the lake. To strangers, maybe they look like real sisters. Off in the distance, loons float by: two parents with their signature striking black heads and white-flecked wings, and between them, two babies covered in downy dark brown fluff. They always travel in groups. Perfect, intact families. This early in the summer, the little ones could easily fit in Lucy's palm.

Motoring through all of Hank's most beloved spots takes forever because of the parade. When the crowd thins out, they drive past Wilson Cove on the southern side of the lake and into the Narrows, a peaceful stretch of three small basins with a five-miles-per-hour speed limit. With the engine barely rumbling, one of them will eventually have to break the ice first.

"So, you're a wine director?" Lucy prompts, using the title she spotted on Vivian's LinkedIn rather than risk mispronouncing "*sommelier*." "What's that like?"

Vivian cocks her head. "He told you that?"

Lucy admonishes herself for being so obvious. "I googled you once."

"I run the wine program at Della." When Lucy doesn't immediately nod in recognition, she adds, "Which is a Spanish-Mediterranean fusion place in the West Village. So, that means I select which bottles we carry and make recommendations to our guests."

"Do you ever wait on celebrities?"

In a bored, matter-of-fact tone, Vivian rattles off a list of names Lucy doesn't recognize, then says, "Leo DiCaprio came with a date recently. I think they were celebrating her twenty-first birthday. They ordered a French rosé."

"Ew."

"What do you do?" she asks languidly, as if she doesn't really care about the answer.

How many hours has Lucy spent studying Vivian online? For close to two decades, she's lurked on Vivian's Facebook statuses and Instagram posts, scrolled through tweets and abandoned Pinterest boards, stalked her

friends and developed theories about whom she might be dating. She's kept tabs on every job Vivian's ever had. Lucy still remembers the twinkly pink background of Vivian's MySpace.

In twenty-four hours, Vivian hasn't displayed the slightest inkling of curiosity about Lucy.

"I teach high school English." She praises her favorite parts, trying to sell it: the unparalleled satisfaction she gets when a lesson clicks for a student who had been struggling; the ones who geek out about books the same way she does. "My kids are juniors and seniors, so they're starting to think about what's next. It's interesting, watching them figure it out."

Lucy doesn't have the heart to tell them that deciding who to become is the easiest part. Making it happen is another problem altogether. When she was that age, she wanted to study at a liberal arts college, somewhere with a grassy quad ringed by stately buildings dripping in ivy. She wanted to spend four years immersed in classic novels, influential feminist texts, and new titles by emerging geniuses who would shape the face of twenty-first-century literature. Then she'd go off to Portland, or even New York. She'd write, or work in publishing. What a life that would be: a ticket out of Fox Hill based on sheer passion for books and a dash of intelligence. A dream.

Obviously that did not pan out. Even with some academic scholarships and help from Hank, she still felt it was more practical to turn down Bowdoin and Colby for UMaine. Lucy likes to teach. She's good at it. She has no right to complain about her circumstances. But on dull days, it's hard not to wonder what her life would look like now if her dad had given her the same opportunities he lavished on his other daughter.

"Maybe here," Vivian suggests.

They've cruised slowly into a particularly pretty section of the third basin. It's quiet here, with a lush stretch of uninhabited woods and no parade. People think trees are just plain forest green, but packed together so tightly like this, the variety is visible if you care to look for it. There are teardrop-shaped elm leaves the color of sautéed spinach, bristling pines tinged silver-blue, sun-bleached ash trees that soar like vibrant stalks of celery, and all the shades and textures in between: emerald, kelly, fresh-cut

grass, even streaks of lime on bright afternoons. The basin is scattered with tiny islands, giving the impression that a few miniature forests have sprouted up from the lake floor at random. Maine has a million people and five billion trees.

“He used to fish over here,” Lucy recalls. “With his dad, I think.”

She contemplates the area. The water glitters a luxurious steel blue; the clouds above have turned a thick, pale gray. Grief rises up like bile in her chest. Losing someone, she’s heard, isn’t something you ever get over. Instead, you learn to live with it. The pain becomes a sidekick you can’t shake.

“We could do it on his birthday at sunset.”

Vivian grimaces. “You want to wait all the way ’til August?”

“I think it’d be nice. And we could play some of his favorite music.”

Vivian looks skeptical.

“Like ‘Blackbird.’ He used to play that all the time around the house.”

“He was really more of a Billy Joel guy.”

“We can pick out the exact songs later. No need to worry about details now,” Lucy says, frustration rising. They sound like her students squabbling over a group project. “And there should be readings.”

“Like what?”

Lucy has only been to a few funerals, for her grandparents, Caleb’s uncle, and Barb, the high school’s ancient secretary. She squints. “Something from the Bible?”

“Seriously?”

“I know he wasn’t much of a religious guy, but isn’t that what people typically read at funerals?”

“Lucy, we’re Jewish,” Vivian says incredulously. “You must know that.”

Heat rises to Lucy’s cheeks. “Of course. But I’m half and half.”

Only by blood. She’s never celebrated a single Jewish holiday, since none falls in July and Dawn wouldn’t know the first thing about where to begin—not that Lucy would admit as much to Vivian right now.

“And I’m his daughter, too. It’s not the *most* far-fetched idea.”

“Oy vey iz mir,” Vivian mutters.

Lucy doesn't need to know one lick of Yiddish to translate Vivian's disdain. She shifts hard in her seat to face her.

"Grief is universal. A Christian hymn, a Jewish prayer, a Buddhist teaching, a nondenominational poem—they're all basically expressing the same ideas in different ways."

"But he was Jewish," Vivian repeats. "So, a Christian verse is inappropriate."

Lucy chews her lip, not wanting to say something she can't take back. This isn't a harmless dispute over his taste in music. These roots go deeper.

Understanding dawns on Vivian. "He never passed it down to you, did he?"

Lucy's heritage was never kept secret from her. She liked the Hanukkah episode of *Rugrats*, and Hank once bought her a copy of Anne Frank's diary. But aside from her close friends, her classmates at school didn't know. Nobody thought to ask; it never came up. After she heard Matt Cunningham spit out, "Don't be such a fucking Jew," at the lunch lady when he was fifty cents short for a carton of chocolate milk, she wasn't eager to broadcast that fact.

The truth is, Lucy has never felt Jewish. The more she tried to learn about the religion and culture, the more alienated she felt from it. She felt no spark of familiarity while reading Anne Frank's words; their lives couldn't have been more different. She went to a single Shabbat dinner at Hillel in college, and while it was lovely—the wine, the candles, the prayers—she was a clear outsider. She stayed mute while the others recited prayers in warp-speed Hebrew. She wasn't moved to return.

"Look, he raised us differently, okay? I would've been happy for him to teach me more about Judaism."

"The daughter of Hank *Levy* wants to read a psalm or something at his funeral," Vivian says, shaking her head.

Humiliating tears well up in Lucy's eyes. Vivian is just some stuck-up city girl who was born with a silver spoon of God knows what (merlot?) in her mouth. She's not worth crying over. Not now. Not over this.

Lucy spurs the engine to a sputtering start. "Let's go."

Vivian doesn't protest. Wind rips ominously through the trees fringing the shoreline and whips up white caps of froth. A storm is coming, and they're all the way in the third basin, where speed is strictly limited. Violators are photographed and admonished in the lake's Facebook group.

As they slowly make their way into the mouth of the second basin, a crack of thunder rolls in from the west. If the rain could hold off for another fifteen minutes, they'd have enough time to safely navigate out of the Narrows and around the curling eastern edge of the lake to their dock. But that seems unlikely.

Vivian glares at the speedometer. "We're screwed."

"Nothing I can do about it but drive," Lucy says tightly.

"Can't you go faster?"

"Not allowed to."

"Who cares? It's about to pour!"

Rules are rules. Lucy ignores her, even as the first cool droplets fall from the white sky. At first, it's not so bad—refreshing, even. Soon, though, the rain splatters more heavily, slicking the windshield. Vivian finds a baseball cap in the glove compartment and jams it over her head. It's one of Hank's: long-faded pale blue with an interlocking "CU" for Columbia University.

"Come on, come on," Vivian urges the sky.

As soon as they crawl past the threshold into the main part of the lake, Lucy guns the engine. Vivian shrieks as her hat flies off, sailing backward into the water. It bobs at the surface for a moment. Even a summer kid should know how to hold on to a hat.

"Turn back!" she shouts.

In the rain, Lucy might not be bothered to retrieve one of Vivian's, or even one of her own. It's a fact of lake life: Hats and sunglasses get swept away more often than you'd like. Except Lucy remembers this one shielding Hank's face year after year. He'd hand it to her for safekeeping when he water-skied. Lucy wrenches the steering wheel hard to the left.

Vivian nearly trips before steadying herself. "It's sinking!"

The gear shift is already down. Theirs is the only boat still out.

"Hold on tight," Lucy says, slamming it harder.

Three seconds later, Vivian yelps, “Stop!”

Lucy yanks it back.

Vivian scrambles onto the front tip of the boat and flings herself off, fully dressed. She dives, skimming beneath the choppy surface with one arm outstretched. Here, the lake is probably thirty or forty feet deep, and waterlogged, the cap could be impossible to see. Vivian pops up and treads in a frantic circle. As she dives again, Lucy feels sick. She can’t lose another piece of her dad.

When Vivian resurfaces, she lets out an anguished screech. “It sank! It’s gone.”

They’re both drenched and it’s still pouring, so it isn’t immediately clear, but when Vivian climbs back aboard with her shorts and tank top glued to her body, Lucy realizes she’s crying. She slumps in the passenger seat, squeezes out her ponytail, and crosses her arms angrily. Despair renders Lucy speechless.

“Go!” Vivian says, annoyed, gesturing toward the house.

Jolted from her grief, Lucy remembers she is wet to the bone. A chill seeps through her as she pushes the boat into gear once more. Eventually, they make it home.

“Wait!” Lucy calls as Vivian rushes up the stairs. “Aren’t we supposed to cover the boat?”

Hank was careful about protecting it from rain.

Vivian throws her arms up. “It’s already soaked!”

“He’d want us to cover it,” Lucy insists, even though deep down, she knows it’s already a lost cause. Vivian is right. They stare at each other through the torrential downpour.

Vivian groans. “Fine.”

Lucy’s pretty sure she’s only acquiescing out of guilt, but still, she conceded. It’s hard to feel victorious, though, considering the circumstances. With their clothes plastered to their skin and their hair clinging to their necks in dripping hanks, they haul a pair of tarps and poles down from the garage and race to fit the covers on properly. If their dad were here, he wouldn’t rest until every snap was secured, but time and

weather have warped and shrunk the fabric. As hard as they try—and they do their damndest, precariously perching barefoot on the rain-slicked lip of the boat—they can't finish the job. It hits Lucy: He'll never be able to help her again.

"We're close enough," Vivian says. "It's not gonna work."

Lucy hates to agree, but she's shivering. "Fine."

They speed up the stairs.

Inside, panting hard, Lucy says, "We should shower to warm up."

"Yeah. You go ahead."

She's about to give Vivian first dibs, thinking of how pitiful she looked climbing out of the lake empty-handed. But then a flare of fury shoots through her. Vivian let something precious slip away with a careless mistake. Furthermore, she made Lucy feel like the most backward, insignificant speck.

So, Lucy takes her time in the sole shower, lathering her hair and thawing her chilled body until the modestly sized, ancient boiler runs out of hot water. When she's done, she wraps one towel around her body and the remaining one over her hair.

"All yours," she says sweetly, ascending the stairs.

VIVIAN

Vivian runs the shower, steps in, and—*shit*. It's freezing. She fiddles with the faucet. A good hot rinse would restore her at least halfway to life, but no dice. Rather than toughing it out, she wrenches it off and reaches for a towel, but comes up empty-handed.

"Damn it." It hurts to ask for help, but she needs it.

Shivering, Vivian pokes her head out of the doorway. "Lucy?"

She waits.

"Yeah?"

"Could you grab me a towel? I forgot to get one."

“Sorry, what did you say?” Lucy asks from the living room. She probably heard her perfectly well.

Vivian repeats the request. She’s surprised she dove in for the hat—and even more surprised by the lump that sprang up in her throat once she realized it was permanently lost. The hat didn’t mean anything to her. She shouldn’t care.

A minute later, Lucy returns with the thinnest, oldest towel they have. “I’m going to my mom’s for lunch.”

The storm has passed as quickly as it came on.

Vivian glares. “Hope you enjoyed the last of our hot water.”

“I’m sorry, did it run out on you?” Lucy’s not a good enough actor to pull off her innocent shtick.

Later, after she leaves, Vivian pulls on cashmere sweats and lounges on the couch while catching up on her phone. There’s a text from her mother.

Just thinking about you. Hope you’re having a nice afternoon. It’s beautiful here today.

Below that, there’s a selfie taken in their backyard. Half of Celeste’s face is glamorously hidden behind tortoiseshell sunglasses and a wide straw hat. Beyond her, there’s a riot of green leaves spilling over the fence, then the backs of other brownstones poking into adjacent gardens. It’s somewhat of a sweet gesture—until she sees the same photo on her mother’s Instagram, posted an hour before she apparently thought to send it to her daughter. Vivian sends a thumbs-up.

There’s a missed call and text from Oscar. Just tried you, he wrote ten minutes ago. As she calls him back, she jams her feet into the crevice of the couch for warmth. She knows that if she flipped that cream tweed couch seat over, she’d see an old splat of pinot noir. Her fault.

At seventeen, she’d raided Hank’s liquor cabinet on one of the rare nights he went out with friends at the lake. He promised he’d be home at nine. She only wanted to have one glass—not enough for him to realize it

was gone, and definitely not enough for her to still feel a remote buzz by the time he got home. All told, the plan was practically wholesome. A harmless night of youthful indiscretion.

Vivian didn't expect him back at 8:30. She startled at the sound of his car pulling into the garage and knocked the glass over. Hank walked in as she was frantically soaking the stain with wet, soapy paper towels. He looked furious.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!" she'd wailed.

"Don't rub it *in*," he'd snapped. "Here, let me—grab me some seltzer."

She had never seen him so angry. Not about the drinking ("I believe it was only one glass, and half of it ended up on the couch anyway"), but about the furniture. His own dad had bought it for his mom as a birthday gift not long after they bought the lake house. It wasn't just a couch. It was a memorial. A shrine like the rest of this whole damn place. Hank lifted most of the wine from the fabric, but there was still a reddish stain they could only hide by flipping the cushion. Vivian doesn't drink wine on this couch anymore. She used up her one mistake. They can't flip the pillow again.

The phone rings and rings and rings and rings. She hangs up only when she gets his voicemail. A moment later, he texts, *Can't talk now*, which is likely just one of those autofill responses. He runs a major restaurant, he works odd hours, he's *busy*. She knows this; she's never complained. And yet something feels off. He once carved out time to take care of her when her biggest problem was a bad UTI. One would think a dead parent and a long-lost sister warranted at least a call.

She types, *Oscar, my entire life is falling apart. Any chance you could pick up the phone?* and then deletes it. She tries again. *I miss you. Too needy, too useless.* She settles on *Got it*.

Too amped up to sit, she needs a task to burn off her buzzing frustration. What had the Realtor said? *Declutter*. She takes two large, empty trash bags upstairs to her dad's closet. With an angry rock playlist blaring in the background, she sweeps the contents of each shelf and drawer into the

garbage. There are familiar old swim trunks, plus jeans and short-sleeved button-downs with holes or stains that Celeste forced him to retire from his New York wardrobe. None of it tugs at her heartstrings; all of it goes in the trash. She ties the plastic handles into a sloppy bow and leans it against the bed.

The rest of the afternoon is consumed by tasks: sorting the linens for items to donate, doing her best with a screwdriver to straighten the hanging shutter outside, dusting away the gray fuzz that accumulated on windowsills over the offseason. Rage powers quick, efficient work until the click of the front door jars her back to reality. Multiple voices stream through: two girls and a guy, overlapping with casual, long-held intimacy. Ugh. Vivian's in no mood to entertain.

Grudgingly, she goes downstairs to say hi. There's Lucy, of course, with an Asian woman toting two bags of groceries, and a tall guy with chestnut hair in board shorts. Her stomach drops. She recognizes that man.

Chapter Three

LUCY

Breaking the news to Dawn was brutal, and Lucy is exhausted from an afternoon of emotional boot camp. She doesn't have the energy to play hostess, but in a limp voice, she explains who's who.

Vivian stiffly shakes hands with each one. "Hi."

"Nice to meet you," Paige says tightly.

Caleb cocks his head. "Hey."

Vivian fixes him with a coy look. She's not *flirting* with him, is she?

Lucy doesn't have energy for the bonfire, but her best friends insisted she shouldn't be alone right now (Vivian doesn't count as soothing company). She had to agree. If nothing else, maybe carrying out this tradition would be a cathartic way to honor her dad's memory. Paige unloads the burgers and corn into the fridge.

"You're barbecuing?" Vivian asks.

"And lighting the bonfire if the weather holds," Caleb says.

It had turned into a lovely afternoon.

Vivian rubs her arms. "It'll be so nice to warm up in front of that."

"It's too bad the boiler went on the fritz for you," Lucy says.

"Another thing to fix up before it goes on the market," Vivian notes lightly.

The atmosphere gets even more strained.

"I'll miss this place," Paige says.

Vivian takes that as her cue to leave. “Well, nice to meet you both. I’ll be upstairs.”

“You don’t want to join us?” Caleb asks.

Lucy and Paige both glare at him, but he doesn’t seem to notice. He’s transfixed. She can’t believe this.

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to crash your party,” Vivian demurs.

“You wouldn’t be,” he says.

Lucy could strangle him.

Vivian gives a tentative smile. “Well...I guess I could use a bite to eat.”

Lucy scowls and walks out to the deck.



The annual bonfire started when Lucy was in middle school. Hank would grill cheeseburgers, hot dogs, skewers of vegetables, corn, and chicken breasts slathered in barbecue sauce. She’d set out fruit punch, a cooler of popsicles, and a whole buffet of s’mores paraphernalia for after dinner. There were streamers and sparklers and cans of bug spray. When night fell, they’d pile into the boat to watch fireworks explode overhead.

The tradition felt permanent, as regular and predictable as birthday cake and Christmas trees. This felt especially true the summer after Lucy and Patrick had gotten engaged. It was Patrick’s, what, eighth or ninth year at the bonfire? He and Hank didn’t have much in common besides her, though they managed to stir up discussion over *Game of Thrones*. Lucy hung back for a moment, taking in their silhouettes backlit by tall stretches of flames. She thought about them returning to this same spot, both grayer each year. It felt inevitable, and that certainty made her flush with pride.

Now Caleb carries Adirondack chairs down from the garage while the girls build the bonfire. Vivian makes a trip to the kitchen. Paige puts on a classic rock playlist and tips her phone into a bucket they’ll use as a makeshift speaker. Flames lick the warm July air. The lake buzzes with boat parties.

“You okay?” Paige asks. Her heart-shaped face wrinkles in concern.

Lucy grits out one brittle syllable. “Nope.”

“Caleb shouldn’t have invited her. I don’t know what’s wrong with him.”

“Too late now.” Lucy sighs.

She pulls a seltzer from the cooler, deliberates, and shoves it back into the ice. She grabs a beer and a bottle opener instead and pries off the cap harder than strictly necessary. The Allagash label is printed with the outline of pine trees and sloping mountains. “*From Maine, with love,*” it says.

“How long is she sticking around?” Paige asks.

Lucy takes a swig of the cold spiced beer. “I don’t think she’s leaving until she puts the house on the market. I’m trying to stall her. Maybe I can get her to change her mind.”

“You think she could be swayed?”

“Honestly? No. She doesn’t care what I think.”

“You can always stay with me, you know.”

If only it were that simple. Nora is teething—there are more pleasant places to be at five o’clock in the morning than on her best friend’s couch. Besides, the pep talks Paige (and Dawn) have given about her exciting new chapter as a single woman only make her want to defend Patrick more fiercely.

Vivian returns with bags of potato chips. Lucy wishes she’d disappear already.

Stiffly, she asks Lucy, “How’s your mom doing?”

“Terribly.”

“Really?”

“He’s *dead*.”

Vivian flinches. “No, I mean, I didn’t know that he and your mom were still close.”

“They weren’t, really. But still.”

In fact, Dawn avoided Hank whenever she could. She didn’t date much, either. At first, the demands of single motherhood left little time for it. Later she rarely bothered trying. Lucy didn’t blame her. Gossips still painted her as the other woman thirty years later. Neither Dennis Fletcher, the

electrician she once dated for eight months, nor Wayne Rouillard, the fireman she dated for four, ever stood much of a chance.

Caleb sets down another armful of logs. Vivian glances at his biceps bulging under their weight. Lucy slumps back in her seat. Nobody seems to know quite what to say, and she's in no mood to stoke conversation. Paige checks her chest-length hair for split ends, avoiding any interaction with Vivian out of loyalty to Lucy.

"Oh, we're short a chair, aren't we? Here, you can take mine," Vivian says to Caleb, rising.

He shakes his head. "Absolutely not."

"You're the one doing all the heavy lifting."

"I'm comfier down here," Caleb promises, settling onto the earth next to her.

He stretches his legs out toward the bonfire and takes a casual swig of beer, trying to make the lie look convincing.

They hear a car pulling into the driveway.

"Who else did you invite?" Lucy asks, frowning.

"Hooray, it's the third long-lost, secret child," Vivian deadpans.

Lucy gives her a withering look. "That's not funny."

Paige winces. "I'm sorry, he was asking how you were doing, and—"

Lucy is split in two at the sight of Patrick ambling down the hill toward the firepit. They'd vowed "in good times and in bad," and here he was, just like he'd once promised. She wants his comfort—needs it. At the same time, though, she's afraid to lean on a man who took "'til death do us part" so loosely.

"Who is this?" Vivian asks.

"Patrick, Luce's husband," Caleb says.

"Soon-to-be ex-husband," Paige corrects.

Lucy isn't sure what it means that neither of those labels sounds quite right.

"It's sort of complicated," she explains.

"Is it?" Paige asks, poorly masking her alarm.

Patrick has never liked being the center of attention. He greets them with a half-hearted, “Happy Fourth of July.”

He stops two feet away from her and shoves his hands in his pockets, as if coming any closer would be uncomfortable. Then, maybe because he sees how miserable she is, he leans down for a tentative hug. She’s grateful that he lets her be the first one to pull away.

Then he braces himself on the arms of her chair and studies her tenderly, taking in her puffy eyes and the uneven skin she stopped bothering to care for weeks ago.

“How are you holding up?” he asks softly.

He’d texted her the same question a few hours ago, but she hadn’t gotten around to answering. She was afraid that if she started to write back, she wouldn’t be able to stop.

She shrugs, conscious of her friends watching them. “You know. Not well.”

“She showered today,” Paige points out. “That’s something.”

He nods, pushing off her chair. “Good. And you must be Vivian?”

With a coy smile, she extends her hand. “Unfortunately.”

It’s surreal to watch them meet. Patrick studies her intently, like he’s searching for traces of Lucy in Vivian’s features. She wonders what he sees.

“Want a beer, man?” Caleb asks.

“Please.” Patrick scans for a place to sit, ultimately choosing to stand a foot back from the rest of the group. Raising his bottle, he says, “To Hank.”

“To Hank,” Caleb and Paige echo.

“To Dad,” Vivian says tightly, staring down at her white sandals.

Lucy is barefoot. Given how little Vivian respects Hank, she doesn’t want to see Vivian mourn, not when she had the best of their dad and the audacity to make Lucy feel so small. She sometimes resented her dad for his absence, but compared to Paige, who hasn’t seen her dad at all since elementary school, she felt lucky. Grateful. Loved. Vivian has been undoing all of that from the minute she got here. Lucy drains her beer.

“To Dad,” she says as her vision begins to blur with tears. “I loved him so much.”

VIVIAN

This is the most depressing party in the world. Vivian's been to more entertaining funerals. Lucy and Paige speak quietly enough that she can't make out more than a word here and there—and she's pretty sure that's on purpose. The bits she does catch are fraught: “miss him...selling...hate this.” They clearly don't want her to join them, but even if they did, she wouldn't know what to say. The bonfire flaps in the breeze, so Caleb stokes the embers until they glow a vivid orange and yellow again. When he announces he's going to get the coals started, Vivian jumps at the chance to talk privately.

“Need a hand?” she asks, though she doesn't know the first thing about how to barbecue.

He brushes dirt from his palms. “No, but you're welcome to join me. Although, I mean, I guess this is your house and your stuff. So, obviously you're welcome. That was dumb. Um, *do* you mind if I use your barbecue?”

His verbal stumbles are endearing. Surprising, too. He has thick chestnut hair that glints with copper in the sun, a strong jaw with a hint of scruff, broad freckled shoulders, and long legs. If he lived in the city, his dating app profile would come with a waitlist attached.

“As long as I get a cheeseburger out of this deal, use it anytime.”



As they head up the hill, she says, “It's Caleb, right? You used to work at the pub?”

“Still do, part-time.”

“We...” She gestures between the two of them as he hauls the barbecue out of the garage and rolls it onto the driveway. “Met. A few years ago.”

He laughs to himself and shakes his head. “You think I wouldn't remember that?”

She shrugs. *She* still certainly remembers what happened that night.

“It was four years ago,” he says, grinning as he hoists a half-full bag of charcoal briquettes. “I wondered if you’d ever come back.”

“It was the end of the summer. And then...”

“No, no, I get it. I’m glad you *did* come back. I just wish you were here under better circumstances.” He tips the briquettes into the barbecue’s chimney, stuffing the bottom of it with crumpled sheets of the *Boston Globe*. Grumbling, he adds, “It was a dollar cheaper to do this before the *Journal Tribune* went out of business. Wanna do the honors?”

“The honors?”

She’s not playing dumb—that’s never been her style. She hates being clueless.

“You light it here,” he says, handing her a matchbook and showing her where to hold the flame to the wads of newspaper. A spark tingles down her spine when their fingers brush for the first time in years. “And then we’ll wait for this to burn before we add more coals and then the food.”

She strikes the match. The flame catches. For a moment, they both watch the edges of the paper furl and char.

Clearing her throat, she asks, “How do you know Lucy?”

“Um, kindergarten. We all grew up around here, went to the same schools.”

She narrows her eyes. “When we met, did you know who I was?”

“I knew Hank had another daughter, but I didn’t put the pieces together, I swear.”

They watch smoke curl through the air.

“What’s it been like, meeting her? It must be wild, I can’t imagine it.”

A low groan slips out. “Complicated. She hates me.”

“Nah, Luce is too nice to hate anyone.”

“There’s a first time for everything.” It comes out more bitterly than she likes.

He glances behind them, toward the bonfire. “I don’t know if I should be saying this, but she used to dream about meeting you. She wanted you to be real sisters.”

Vivian is surprised by how much that hurts to hear. “Can we actually not talk about this?”

With a regretful nod, he says, “Absolutely. I’m sorry.”

While he tends to the barbecue, she casts around for any question she can shove at him, anything safe and mild that’ll let her regain control of herself again.

“So, you’re part-time at the pub now—what about the rest of the time?”

“There we go,” he says.

“What?”

“Work—a New Yorker’s favorite question.”

She laughs. “And that’s a bad thing?”

“I’m just teasing you. I work at Adventure Cove. You know it?”

“Actually, no.”

“Really? It’s such a tourist trap, I thought you’d be well acquainted.” He gives her a playful wink.

“Oh, low blow! Come on,” she says, lightly slapping his arm.

She’s grateful to him for lightening the mood.

“Sorry, I couldn’t resist,” he chuckles. “It’s an adventure park over in Waterboro. White-water rafting, ropes courses, and zip-lining in the summers; tubing, skiing, and snowboarding in the winters. I teach and lead groups through the courses.”

That explains his lean physique, more muscled now than he was back then. Thousands of hours spent belaying people across ropes courses and careening down snowy slopes would do that.

Vivian has no interest in any physical activity beyond unloading cases of wine, but even if she did, Hank would’ve discouraged her from visiting. They rarely ventured beyond Fox Hill Lake, ostensibly because nowhere else could compete with their slice of paradise. Of course he was keeping Vivian in hiding. He was squirrely whenever they ran errands together. On multiple occasions, they bumped into people he knew, and each time, he’d try to slither out of the conversation before someone asked, “And who’s this?” As a kid, she usually wandered off, bored by adult conversation and not reading into his weirdness. But after she overheard him on the phone,

she made a point of introducing herself to people around town, loudly and clearly enunciating “Vivian Levy, Hank’s daughter” as he stiffened beside her. The rush of spiteful pleasure never lasted more than a moment, though. They’d both be moody and distant for the rest of the day.

Caleb says, “And I still do a few bartending shifts when I can. I’m saving up to travel. I’m dying to backpack across Southeast Asia for a few months.”

“Whoa.” She can’t imagine the impulse to leave home for that long. Her whole life has been in the city.

“What’s new with you?”

“Since we last spoke? New apartment, new job...” New relationship, too, but she shouldn’t give Oscar any airtime. “Work is kind of nuts, but I love it.”

“Of course you do,” he teases. “What else is going on?”

“Outside work, I’m into, um...I really like to...”

She casts around for a legitimate hobby worth mentioning. She always means to catch the new exhibits at the Met and the Brooklyn Museum, or at least gallery-hop through Chelsea, but her hectic schedule makes that pretty much impossible. It’d be silly to talk up her love of painting; it’s been ages since she made anything. Beyond that, her schedule isn’t compatible with most workout classes, and the same Sally Rooney novel has sat untouched on her nightstand for six months.

“I like wine,” she finishes lamely.

“You like *wine*,” he echoes, amused.

“I mean, I know a lot about it. I’m a somm.” She grins through her defense, feeling the ease of their connection sweeping back in.

“Somm?”

“Sommelier.”

He rolls the French word around on his tongue. “*Some-all-yay*. Remind me, what exactly does that entail?”

Most people Vivian meets who aren’t that confident in their knowledge of wine—which is to say almost everyone—attempt to hide that fact. Embarrassed, they fluff up what they do know, requesting a dry red, not

realizing every single red she carries is dry; nobody pairs sweet dessert wine with dinner. She doesn't blame them. The industry is notoriously opaque. Bottles from Burgundy, for example, are never labeled with the type of grape they're made from, because it's assumed that anyone who drinks it already knows the red is pinot noir and the white is chardonnay. Caleb lays out the question with unselfconscious curiosity. It's refreshing.

"I recommend wines to the restaurant's guests."

"Based on what goes with their food?"

"Among other things."

"Like?"

"What they're in the mood for. What they already like. Their budget. Whether they want something familiar or brand-new. You learn to pick up clues based on what they're wearing, how they carry themselves, how they talk to you—all that can inform what you recommend, like if you think they'd rather have Champagne in a flute or a coupe, that kind of thing."

He whistles. "That sounds complicated."

After her string of miserable days, his awe makes her feel like herself again. "Especially when you have twelve hundred wines in your cellar."

"Wow."

Vivian likes that he's impressed. Up here, people build houses, wire electricity, repair boats. By comparison, her skills are frivolous. She studied art history with a plan to work at a gallery after college. To celebrate her twenty-first birthday, her parents took her out to Daniel to splurge on the nine-course French tasting menu with world-class wine pairings to match. She was hooked on it all, from the choreographed movements of the servers to the exquisite flavors, and wanted to know more. The more she learned, the more she saw wine as art you could drink.

Soon she was prepping for her first somm certificate. She began working as a cellar hand, and by twenty-seven, she had reached the top of the ladder, master sommelier. In order to receive that diploma, she needed to blind-taste six wines. With only a few sips, she'd have to accurately spit out the grape varietal, country, region, and vintage. She'd spent years honing her palate to the point where she could sense the volcanic soil in a nerello

mascalese from Sicily or taste the autumn mist lingering in a Loire Valley chenin blanc. Her dedication paid off—almost nobody reaches master somm so young.

“So, what would you recommend for me?”

There’s a challenging tilt to his chin, like he’s daring her to analyze him up close. His powerful-looking shoulders and taut calves spark desire low in her belly. She ignores it.

“To pair with this meal?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t know you *that* well, but…”

He smirks. “Sure.”

He’s making her heart race, not that she’d ever let him catch on. “Okay, a red, for sure. With a burger, nothing’s better than a cabernet sauvignon. Full-bodied, big flavors, dark fruits. I noticed you sneaking bites of green pepper and—”

He withdraws his hand from the platter, snickering.

“I know it sounds weird, but cab sauv typically has this really lovely green pepper note, too.”

“Nice,” he says, nodding as if that’s the end of her spiel.

“Oh, we’re just getting started,” she says, relishing the pleasure of being on her own turf after forty-eight hours at sea.

Amused, he gives a slight apologetic bow. “By all means, go ahead.”

“So, if we’re talking cab sauv, the classic choice would be a bottle from Bordeaux in France. We could go for Château Lafite Rothschild—it’s to die for—but I’m guessing you’d rather not drop a thousand dollars on a few drinks.”

He nearly chokes on his beer.

“Right, no. It’s the Fourth of July, so let’s go with something homegrown, right? In the US, California cab gets all the glitz and attention. It’s flashy. And unless I’m wildly mistaken, you’re not that kind of a guy.”

“No.”

“Jeans instead of a tux.”

“Yeah,” he says, pleased.

“So let’s look at the Walla Walla Valley in Washington. It’s kind of flown under the radar for a while. Now one of the winemakers out there, Drew Bledsoe, I think he used to play for...” She squints and crosses her fingers. “The Patriots?”

Caleb lights up. “No way, really? He was a quarterback. I had his jersey as a kid.”

She’s thrilled to be nailing this.

“There we go. I only know of him because of work—don’t you dare test me on other athletes.”

He grins. “Patrick Mahomes? You gotta know Travis Kelce.”

She rolls her eyes. “Drew moved back home to Walla Walla and actually makes some of the best cab sauv in the world. Like, he’s won international awards.”

“Whoa, really?”

“Yep. His cab has notes of blueberry, blackberry, cherry, with a little bit of a floral element on the palate, too. And it’s half the price of a bottle from Napa.”

Caleb gives a slow clap. “That was unbelievable. Sold.”

Warmth spreads through her chest. Neither of them breaks eye contact. “That’s my job.”

Once everything is cooked, they carry it all back to the firepit. Lucy is sitting sideways across an Adirondack chair with her knees slung over one arm and a drink in her hand, looser than Vivian’s ever seen her.

“Here we go again...” Vivian mutters, steeling herself for another awkward encounter.

“Take it easy. She’s had a rough go of it.”

“Wait.” She nudges his shoulder with hers. “Can we not tell Lucy that we know each other? At least not yet. Things are already so bad between us.”

“I don’t know...Is it a big deal? I don’t think she’d care.”

She doubts that. “Please? Things are tense enough already.” She can see the wheels turning in his head.

“For Lucy’s sake, fine.”

Vivian exhales. “You’re the best.”

LUCY

Lucy hasn’t been this drunk since Halloweekend back in college. At some point while she stewed, watching traitorous Caleb flirt with Vivian from afar, somebody must have gone up to the house to retrieve a bottle of Hank’s favorite Scotch. At first, the amber liquid scorched her insides as it slid from her throat to her stomach, but now she’s only pleasantly warm and woozy, like she’s wrapped in the fleece blankets she and Patrick used to share on frigid nights.

It got late. The sun went down in a flaming ball of tangerine. Paige went home to Kyle and Nora, and now Lucy’s alone with Patrick on the boat, tethered to the dock, gently rocking over midnight blue waves. Depending on how she squints, he’s either her ex or her husband. Without thinking, she burrows under his outstretched arm and leans against his chest.

“Do you really think we should be sitting like—” Patrick starts.

“Why are men supposed to like Scotch?” she asks, nose-deep in her Solo cup. “It’s like getting punched in the face by a tree on fire.”

He laughs, which makes her feel glowy and alive again. “Don’t drink it if you don’t like it.”

She tips her head back to look at him. “Can I tell you a secret?”

“Yeah.”

“I do kind of like it.”

He laughs. “I can tell.”

A loud *crack!* bursts over the lake. With a jolt, she sits up—slopping some of her drink down her front—and sees a spray of white light over dozens of scattered boats. Fireworks! How could she have forgotten?

“Oh, look!” she says, pointing, as if he could possibly have missed it.

“Yeah.”

She feels him watching her, though, not the sky.

Lucy settles back against him and threads her fingers through his. The fireworks shoot up and explode into big, beautiful pinwheels. *Bang! Bang! Bang!* In their wake, clouds of smoke linger, then fade. She finds herself watching that more closely than the pretty bursts. The haze doesn't linger long, and she imagines it settling over the lake, swirling into the water the way ashes would. She can't hide her tears for long.

"Hey, hey," Patrick says softly, rubbing her arm.

"He's not here to watch with us."

"I know. I wish he could be."

"No, no, it's not just that."

She sits up, and in a thick, trembling voice, tries to spell it all out: It's the fireworks, the gunpowder, the lake. It's Vivian threatening to dump the ashes out of spite. It's missing the funeral, missing the chance to say goodbye, missing the chance to even tell Hank that Patrick left her. It's being a failure of a wife, and now failing at wanting to move on. It's sobbing in Patrick's arms, exactly where she's supposed to be, except he doesn't want her anymore.

"Lucy, hey, breathe," he says.

Most of her words are unintelligible smears at this point anyway. She sucks in air.

"You're not a failure."

"You're done with me."

"That's not—" He sighs. "I'm sorry for hurting you. I really am."

"You are?"

"Of course I am."

It doesn't compute. He left her.

"Why are you here?" she asks.

"Because you shouldn't be alone right now," he says softly.

"Yeah, but do you actually want to be here? This isn't your job anymore."

Lucy can hear the nastiness in her tone but can't rein it in. She tries to anchor herself by focusing on his green eyes. The problem is, he has four of them.

Then her face puckers again. “I don’t even know if you’re an organ donor.”

He frowns. “What?”

It takes a few tries, but eventually, she ekes out, “I’m your wife and I don’t even know what’s supposed to happen if you die.”

In Patrick’s pupils, fireworks crackle emerald and gold.

She wipes her nose. “I’m still your wife, you know. Legally.”

“I know.”

“You made a face.”

“I was trying to remember if I’m an organ donor. Luce, *I* don’t even know. Here, let’s find out.”

He digs his wallet out of his pocket and shines his phone on his driver’s license. In the bottom right corner, the card is printed with “ORGAN DONOR” next to a little red heart. She’s just sober enough to clock that he’s talking to her like she’s a child, but drunk enough that she doesn’t care.

“Now we both know,” he says gently.

“I think I’m an organ donor, too.”

“That’s great.”

The sky lights up in what must be the grand finale, and as they watch, she settles against his chest. He strokes her hair. Lucy closes her eyes and lets herself sink into the sensation—but then it abruptly stops.

“Hey,” Caleb says cautiously, standing above them on the dock. “I just wanted to see how everything’s going over here.”

“A little sad,” Patrick says. “But we’re managing.”

“We’re both organ donors,” she explains.

“Huh?”

“Just go with it,” Patrick says. “I need to run up to the house for a sec. Can you sit with her?”

In his absence, her arms and legs break out into goose bumps. Caleb takes over on Lucy duty.

“I brought you the rest of your dinner,” he says, stepping into the boat. “And some water.”

She picks up what's left of her drink and sloshes it toward him. "I've got my liquid dinner."

"It might help to put some more food in your stomach."

She snorts. "Like what you made with your...your..." She tries to think of a coolly biting insult but comes up short. "Your cheeseburger assistant over there?"

"I was being friendly, nothing more," he says calmly. "But hey, maybe keep your voice down a bit when talking about her. She's right over there."

"Sure, I'll be careful with Vivian's feelings," Lucy whispers sarcastically. "*That's* important."

Caleb gently removes the liquor from her grasp, trading it for solid food and water. It's not just the burger she abandoned earlier after two bites—he also added a hot dog in a golden toasted bun drizzled with ketchup and a bright yellow ear of corn shining with butter. She sinks her teeth into the burger, not caring that a little juice runs down her hand. The patty is rich with flavor and grilled to perfection; the cheddar is a hearty, gooey delight; a fat red tomato and a leaf of lettuce round out the satisfying bite.

"Are you okay with him being here?" Caleb asks. "Things looked... cuddly."

"Yeah, and?"

Drunk people can play dumb, too.

"I just want to make sure you're doing all right."

Lucy's vision fills with tears again. "I'm not. Of course I'm not. But I have a really great burger, and you, and Paige, and probably the last fireworks I'll ever see here, and..." She hiccups. "The burger is actually incredible, though."

This is more than dinner. It's proof she still has someone besides Patrick who will care for her when she's too much of a mess to fend for herself. Happy Independence Day.

Chapter Four

LUCY

Waking up the next morning feels like slowly extracting a syrup-slathered screwdriver from her brain. Lucy's tongue is sandpaper-dry and tastes like she'd been French-kissing a sewer grate. As she runs it over her mossy teeth, snippets of last night stumble forward: the bonfire's sweet smoke, the fireworks, the sinful comfort of curling up under Patrick's arm. And—oh, no. The bathroom floor, up close. The acidic burn of Scotch coming up the wrong way. His hands holding her hair back.

She doesn't remember coming back up to the house or going to bed, but the pieces in between are embarrassingly clear. Slumped on the floor, sitting by the open toilet, she'd asked Patrick to take her back—or, no, not asked. Pleaded.

"You're my *husband*. You *love* me. You're *here*. What's the problem?" she'd asked, tripping past a few consonants and vowels.

Several times.

"Let's talk about this tomorrow, okay?" he'd said.

Tomorrow's here. He's gone.



Downstairs, Vivian is at the kitchen table, sipping from the old mug with the fading, outdated New York skyline. On her phone, there's a photo of Hank with toddler Vivian on a wintry city sidewalk lined with elegant brownstones. He still had a dark crest of JFK Jr. hair. They're in parkas. Snowflakes dot Vivian's lashes, and a sled trails behind them. Hank bought Lucy a sled for Christmas when she was eight, but nature wasn't on her side that winter. The snow didn't line up with his short, sporadic winter visits. They've never sledded together, and now they never will. It still sits in Dawn's garage, collecting dust.

Vivian flips her phone over, looking irritatingly awake. Her hair is twisted and clipped up, with tendrils spilling out just so. Whenever Lucy tries to do her hair like that, she looks like a mom in the school pickup line.

"Morning."

The word reverberates painfully in Lucy's skull. "Hi."

She fills the kettle and peels one of the bananas Paige brought for her yesterday.

"The fireworks were nice," Vivian says.

Lucy barely remembers them. "Yeah. You and Caleb seemed to get along pretty well."

Vivian nods. "He's a nice guy."

"Are you into him?"

It's a bold question—too bold—but Vivian is probably going to sell the house out from under Lucy tomorrow and then they'll never see each other again. She might as well ask.

Vivian gives one sharp *ha*. "I'm in a relationship."

"It seemed like you were hitting it off."

"We didn't want to get in the way of you and Patrick catching up."

"Mmm. Thoughtful."

Vivian keeps prying. "So, you're separated, but he came over anyway?"

"I didn't invite him."

"Which one of you ended things?"

Lucy can't really say if they're even over. The details from last night are fuzzy, but she remembers feeling peaceful in his arms. He was tender with

her. He cared.

“That’s a very personal question, Vivian,” she snaps.

She flinches and holds up her hands. “I’m sorry.”

Lucy goes upstairs to find aspirin for her pounding head. She pads past her unmade bed, then stops short when she sees two plump, stuffed garbage bags leaning against her dad’s bedroom closet.

“Hey, what’s this?” she calls, wary.

“What’s what?”

“The trash.”

Downstairs, there’s the scrape of a chair over linoleum, then footsteps on stairs. “I’ve been cleaning,” Vivian says, equally wary, as if she knows this could cause a fight.

Lucy kneels to untie one black plastic bag. Panic rises in her chest as she sifts through the soft mess inside, a jumble of clothes and swim trunks.

“You’re getting rid of his things?” she asks, alarmed.

Lucy spills the bag’s contents onto the sand-colored carpet. She reaches for a forest green sweatshirt with Foxy Roxy’s logo on the back and its name embroidered in front. The inner layer of fleece has worn down to nearly nothing over the years, and the cuffs are frayed. She remembers wearing this when she was five or six years old—or, no, maybe she’s just seen that photo of herself in it so many times, she can’t tell where memory ends and imagination begins. There aren’t many pictures of her with Hank from her early childhood since other people were rarely around to take them. But that summer, her dad had gotten a fancy digital camera with a self-timer. One afternoon, Lucy borrowed the sweatshirt to warm up after a cold swim. It fell to her knees. They must have propped up the camera on the coffee table. The timer went off as they both were scrambling back to the couch with silly smiles, zero poise, a natural kind of ease. She hadn’t had to try back then.

“It’s old junk,” Vivian says. “Half of it was falling apart twenty years ago.”

Lucy clutches the sweatshirt to her chest. “You can’t throw all this out.”

Vivian picks up an errant sock. “This is sentimental?”

“It’s not about the sock.”

Lucy scoops up armfuls of clothing and heaves them back into the closet. It’s not wrong to want to keep pieces of him alive, intact, and on his own property.

“Lucy...” Vivian sighs. “You can’t fight this forever.”

She whips around. Her headache boomerangs with her. “You don’t get to have the final say on everything! We’re not getting rid of all this.”

“It can’t just sit here.”

“You can’t throw it all out because you’re mad he didn’t tell you about me!” Lucy says, a little more shrilly than she’d like. “He just died, can’t you respect that?”

“Respect?” Vivian echoes in disbelief. There’s an unsettling edge to her voice, and her dark eyes glint with emotion. “Yeah, let’s talk about that. If he had respect for any of us, we wouldn’t even be in this situation. He wouldn’t have lied straight to my face for my entire life, and he wouldn’t have made a fool of my mom. And if he respected *you*, he would’ve done more than just play house together for a few weeks a year.”

That does it.

“It. Is. July,” Lucy says, shaking with anger. “I am being *generous* by letting you stay here during my month. You might have had more time with him, but you know what? If you actually loved him, you wouldn’t be able to stomach throwing all this away.”

Vivian shuts down. “I’m not doing this,” she mutters.

She walks away, leaving Lucy with a blinding headache and a whole wardrobe of old clothes.

VIVIAN

Vivian needs to get away from Lucy. Far away. Down at the dock, she straddles the Jet Ski and zooms away. With a squeeze of her hand, she rockets to fifty miles per hour. She takes wide, arcing curves, leaning far

enough to one side for the thrill of centrifugal force to kick in. She drives in circles, bouncing over the ripples from her own wake. She's still too angry to breathe properly.

If Lucy wants to cling to ratty T-shirts, fine, let her. She can take all of them if she cares so much. What rattles Vivian is that Lucy got close enough to the truth. When she overheard that damning phone call all those years ago, it was like the first snag in a sweater. She could've sewn it up—confronted him or let it go. Instead, she took note of every single one of Hank's infractions and watched the wool unravel.

There were the standard poor-little-rich-girl complaints: He was always working late, pecking out emails on his BlackBerry during family vacations in Aruba, skipping her AP Art show for a business trip, whatever. (It occurs to her now—maybe there was no business trip. Lucy probably graduated from high school the same week.) And look, Vivian wouldn't want to be married to Celeste, either, but he made that choice. If he couldn't give his wife his full respect, Vivian felt he ought to have let her go. She could probably find someone else. So could he. Instead, Celeste contorted herself to make him happy and always came up short.

Beyond that, he never seemed proud of Vivian, not when her art portfolio earned a notoriously difficult five out of five points, not when she landed that coveted internship at Gagosian, not when she graduated with honors. "Of course you did," he'd say. "If you didn't, I should call up Calhoun and ask for my money back." She often heard him quip to others, "I spent a quarter mil for NYU and she's a bartender." (She was not. She was one of the youngest certified master sommeliers in the country.) Anytime she pushed back against him, he'd take off his glasses and pinch the bridge of his nose, saying, "You don't know how much I wish my parents were alive so I could argue with them like this." He already saw her as a disappointment—selling the house would be just another black mark against her. What's one more?

Vivian wishes she could've loved him. He just made it so damn hard.

She is motoring around to nowhere in particular, half-heartedly taking in the rustic scenery, when her phone buzzes in the glove compartment. She

comes to an abrupt stop. It's Oscar. Her chest tightens.

"Hi," she breathes into the phone.

"Is this a good time?"

A snarky response pinballs out before she can catch it. "I don't know, is this finally a good time for *you*?"

"I'm so sorry I haven't been able to talk sooner. I hate that I haven't been there for you," he says guiltily.

"You should."

"I know. Things have been..." He sighs. "Carla's been...You know what, don't worry about Carla. It's just been hard to get away, that's all."

Vivian realizes she's digging her nails into her thigh and clenching her jaw. She tries to relax.

"I miss you," she says. Her tone balances on a tightrope between tender and accusatory.

"I miss you, too. How are you doing? What's going on up there?"

She describes the past three strained days, leaving out Caleb.

"I'm trying to get the house ready, but Lucy had a meltdown when I tried to throw out his old socks."

She's exaggerating and she knows it isn't fair, but venting feels good. She waits for his response.

"...Oscar?" She checks her phone. The call is still connected. "Oscar?"

She hears him a beat later. "You there?" he asks.

"Ugh, the service is bad out here."

"Where are you?"

"In the middle of the lake. I needed space from her."

"You keep cutting out."

She groans. "Hold on a sec. Don't hang up, okay?" She secures her phone in the compartment and zooms a quarter mile west. Lifting it back to her ear, she asks, "Better?"

"We'll see. When are you coming back? I miss you."

She savors the sound of that. "As soon as I can. But I don't know when that's going to be. What's happening at the restaurant?"

He fills her in on the recent petty melodramas: The newbie waiter tripped over a woman's emotional support Pomeranian and dropped an entire tray of entrées. An influencer shut down the restroom for forty-five minutes to stage a full-on photo shoot sitting on the green marble sink. It was a star-studded week: Kristen Stewart, LeBron James, Congressman Bennett Garcia and his wife, the fashion stylist Edie Meyer.

"Let me guess, Kristen ordered a pét-nat."

"Bingo."

Vivian is so good at her job. She misses it, misses him—though she can't tell where one stops and the other starts. She misses feeling talented and desired and at home. As Frank Sinatra famously sang about New York, *if you can make it here, you can make it anywhere*. But why would you want to?

There's a beat of silence.

"Oscar?"

Nothing. She hangs up, then tries him again.

"Hello?"

"Hi. You sound fuzzy."

She bangs her fist against the handlebar and groans.

"Let's talk later, okay? I have to go anyway."

Now that she's finally gotten him on the phone, she's greedy for more. She doesn't want it to end.

"Okay, have a good day," she says morosely.

"You, too—I mean it."

He hangs up first. Vivian stows her phone away and presses her hands over her face. She loathes that this is so hard. The good news is that she only has to hang on for so long. As soon as she sells the house, everything will change. It has to.



Vivian tentatively creeps back into the house. “Hello?” Early-afternoon light slants through the living room, casting dramatic shadows. “Lucy?”

No response. Thank God.

Upstairs, she sees Lucy put Hank’s closet back together again. Fine. Vivian won’t antagonize her by undoing her work—though she notices the green sweatshirt is gone, and she’d bet a whole paycheck that it’s stuffed away in the bedroom Lucy’s been hogging.

Instead, she works on the kitchen, scraping dried-up pens and bent paper clips out of the junk drawer, deep-cleaning the baseboards, and doing her best to fix the sagging blinds. Eventually, she needs a break. She gets in the truck and drives, hoping her hunch pans out.



Walking into Foxy Roxy’s is like stumbling across the set of a feel-good movie about a small, scrappy town. Half the cars in the parking lot bear bumper stickers with the pub’s name and logo, stamped “Circa 1971.” The wooden floors are well-trodden, creaking in hot spots like outside the ladies’ room and smack-dab center in front of the bar. By the dartboard, there’s a group of graying men, undoubtedly buddies from the glory days of their high school’s hockey team. It’s not chic—the bar stools are made of vinyl that’s seen better days, and the menu is printed in Comic Sans—but why should this place be stylish? It’d be boring if every restaurant across America were the same. People need places like Foxy Roxy’s a whole lot more than they need upscale dining. Without low-key joints like these, Della wouldn’t be as special.

The place hasn’t changed. As she’d hoped, Caleb is behind the bar. Vivian’s glad her luck has taken a turn for the better.

“She returns,” Caleb says, smiling as she approaches.

He nods toward an empty stool away from the crowd. (It’s lunchtime, but during the summer, the pub has six happy hours a day starting at noon.)

“What are the chances you’ve got some vinho verde back there?”

The Portuguese wine is tart and light, like a crisp Granny Smith apple; it's one of her favorites for hot weather.

"Is that wine?"

"Yes."

"Does this look like the kind of place that'd carry a vinho verde?"

She sighs. "No."

Running a finger across the tap handles, he says, "I could try sizing you up the way you did for me last night."

She smirks. "Try me."

"Hmmm."

Pursing his lips, he scans his options and fingers the lever for Shipyard's Summer Ale. As he slides the glass across the dark, scratched, burnished wood of the bar, a memory pops up: Vivian herself sliding across this very surface with Caleb's hands bracketing her hips. She drops her gaze to the trembling surface tension of the pint and sips down the foam.

"I don't have any speech prepared about why you should drink this in particular," Caleb says. "But I think it's delicious, and if you disagree, the replacement's on the house."

"It's good. Refreshing. I needed this."

"You have a whole fancy license for your expertise in drinks, and the best you can come up with is 'Good, refreshing'?"

She has no clue how to deal with grief or Lucy, but this? Bantering with men in bars? This, she can do.

She flips her hair. "Oh, *I'm sorry*. The earthy mouthfeel of the hops is quite elevated by the honeysuckle and amber and—"

"Okay, okay, you can stop showing off now," he says, grinning.

"I actually don't know anything about beer. I made that up," she confesses.

"I'll call the New York State Bar Association, have you reported as a fraud."

"I think that's for lawyers."

"Good, you'll probably need one."

"You'd really turn me in?"

He pretends to consider this. “It’d be more fun to go on the run together.”

“I’m sure Lucy would love for me to disappear. She would’ve pushed me into the bonfire last night if she could.”

The comment lands with a thud. Caleb grimaces.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t drag you into that,” she says.

“It’s okay.”

She peers down into her glass. “It’s really not.”

He hesitates. “I don’t know if I should say this...”

She’s instantly intrigued. “Say it.”

He bites his lip, then exhales. “Okay.” Dropping his voice, he continues, “She doesn’t hate you. She really wanted to meet you. You have no idea, she used to look you up, talk about what it’d be like if you could be closer...The circumstances are horrible, but I think eventually she’ll want to be friends.”

Vivian’s breath goes shallow. She’s hanging on his every word but refuses to let him see how much this means to her.

“Friends.” She sips her beer, crosses her legs, and tucks away her feelings. She’s had enough practice at that. “Well, we’ll see.”

He nods. “She’s cool. Just give her a chance.”

There’s a beat of silence. “And she and my dad were...close? The way she talks about him, you’d think he was a saint. He wasn’t—at least not around me.”

“She loved him,” Caleb says. “I mean, he was her dad.”

Right. Of course.

“He was never, I don’t know, condescending? Difficult? Distant?”

It’s embarrassing, putting this out there. But she needs to know.

He sighs. “It’s not my place to judge.”

She raises one eyebrow. “But?”

His mouth twitches in sympathy. “Well, he always dropped in for the summer and a few weekends, but...being a parent should involve more than that, shouldn’t it?”

Vivian wants to hear more, but a surly waitress—forty-something and freckled with a row of silver hoops climbing the curve of her left ear—slaps an order slip down in front of Caleb.

“Feeling chatty, are we?” she asks.

Vivian covers for him. “He was recommending a few of your specials.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet he was,” she scoffs.

“That’s Robyn. I’ll win her over someday, I swear,” he says once she leaves. Tapping the slip of paper, he deadpans, “These are my favorite customers. See those three girls at the table in the middle?”

She takes a subtle peek. One is watching Vivian and Caleb closely, and the other two are doing a bad job of pretending to pore over the menu they’ve no doubt seen eight hundred times already.

“Yeah.”

“Jenny, Kayla, and Brooke. We all went to school together. Biggest blabbermouths in town.”

Sure enough, when he delivers the drinks, one of the women grabs his wrist. Vivian strains to listen in.

“Is that the girl?” Her eyes widen with intrigue as she chews her gum.

“I don’t have a clue what you’re talking about,” he says, extricating his arm.

“Yeah, and I don’t have a clue what you and my sister did behind our shed after junior prom,” she retorts as he walks away.

Caleb groans. “I’m sorry if you heard that,” he says to Vivian.

With a prickling sensation along the back of her neck, she realizes she can sense people watching her. Not just the Gossip Girls, but from every corner of the room. She stiffens, not wanting to give anyone the satisfaction of turning around.

“Word travels fast around here, huh?”

Caleb glares at the three women. “And it’s about to travel even faster.”

Indignant heat rises to her cheeks. Over the past two years, Vivian has often wondered how hellish it’d be to be the subject of the rumor mill. She’s lucky to have avoided it for as long as she did.

“So, you were saying...?” she prompts.

He sighs. “I could never say this to Luce, but she deserved a better dad than the one she got. I mean, anyone would.”

Vivian is relieved. If Hank really were an angel around Lucy, surely her best friend would back that up. He can’t.

Vivian finishes her drink. “Thank you for saying that. Seriously.”

“Want another?” he asks.

“Not if I have to drive back.” She never has to consider these things at home; she always walks or takes the subway. She slides a twenty to him—more than enough to cover the pint and a generous tip. “This was nice. Thanks for listening.”

He looks like he wishes she’d stay. “Come around anytime.”

She hitches her purse over her shoulder, starts toward the door, then turns back. “I should’ve done this years ago,” she says, scrawling her number on a napkin.

Caleb bites back a grin. “I’ll text you mine.”

Chapter Five

LUCY

Lucy is too hungover to put her dad's closet back together but does it anyway out of spite. It keeps her hands busy while waiting for Patrick to reply to her text: Thanks for taking care of me last night. I'm sorry I was such a mess.

She isn't exactly embarrassed that he saw her drunk and vomiting (he saw her in college, after all, and with at least two stomach flus), but she's ashamed that her desires are so out of sync with his. Since Patrick left her, Paige has been a fount of pep talks and inspirational Instagram quotes, and according to all that, Lucy is going about this completely wrong. She isn't supposed to want him back. She should walk away with her head held high. Love herself. Know her worth. Honor her boundaries. Have the dignity and strength to embrace the future, however unknown, instead of crawling back to her ex. It's like there's something unfashionably retro about wanting her own husband back. What happened to their promise to grow old together? She feels as if there's a heartsick madwoman on one shoulder and a drill sergeant with a bullhorn full of tough love on the other.

feeling better?

My head is killing me, but I'll live. Can we talk? Do
you want to come over?

good

idk if i should
i want to be there for you but i don't want to
lead you on

Her chest crumples like a soda can.

You said we should talk in the morning.

you remember that?

I do.

i feel really bad
i don't want to hurt you

She watches with shallow breath as he types and deletes and retypes and deletes.

i will always care about you
i can come over as a friend, if you want

Her last hope for her marriage dies here, on her dead dad's bedroom floor.

Don't worry about it.



Lucy had tried to prevent her marriage from sliding downhill. She really had. She made valiant efforts to plan date nights he'd enjoy: First up was an axe-throwing bar. On the way home, he rested his hand on her thigh and, exhilarated, recounted their epic misses and one perfect bull's-eye. She thought, *This is exactly right. We're fine. I shouldn't have worried.* She took

him around Portland for a brewery tour and got tickets to a Sea Dogs game. Nothing was in their backyard; each trip required a real drive. But to Lucy, it was worth it.

Patrick had started off strong with a bowling night, and she liked his next idea, going to the pub for wings and pool. They'd done it a thousand times, but there was still something a little sexy about him helping her line up the right shot. She was less interested in their next date, seeing the new Marvel movie. Sitting side by side in silence for three hours was not what she'd had in mind. Overall, Friday nights felt fresh again, though each date was also tinged with anxiety. Conversational lulls felt magnified; each silence seemed to deliver a verdict on the strength of their bond.

Just seven weeks in, Patrick forgot to plan a date. When she reminded him about it and kissed him goodbye on her way to school that morning, he said he'd come up with something, though he had the enthusiasm of a sullen teenager. On her lunch break, she texted, *Where should I meet you tonight?* He wrote back three hours later: *i'm tired, let's just do something tomorrow instead.*

She got home from work earlier than he did, arriving to the unpleasant surprise that their heat had cut out. She was able to get a repairman to come by the next day, but they'd have to make do with blankets and space heaters for the night. It was cold for October, but they'd be fine. Although Lucy was annoyed by his lack of planning, she also saw a silver lining. She imagined them nestling under a pile of thick blankets, cuddlier than they normally were. Maybe they could make the night a fun novelty—set up sleeping bags in the living room and watch a Halloween movie marathon.

Patrick had a different vision for the evening. After work, he plopped down on the couch and played *Call of Duty* in a sweatshirt and parka. He answered her questions with clipped responses and his eyes on the TV. His day had been “fine,” and “nah,” he didn't care what they had for dinner. Sitting next to him in the den, she felt superfluous, an unwanted distraction.

But Lucy didn't want to give up. She couldn't—according to the nagging voice inside her head, if she couldn't rescue date night, that would be another tally mark against her relationship. She changed into her pretty white lace teddy, a bridal shower gift from Paige, and draped a gray fleece

blanket around her shoulders like a cape. It trailed behind her as she sauntered into the den.

“The best way to stay warm is through each other’s body heat,” she said, attempting to sound seductive.

He glanced up from his game. “Luce, put some clothes on, it’s like an igloo in here.”

First of all, it wasn’t. Second, and more importantly, she hadn’t anticipated rejection. Who’d rather pretend to shiver in front of a video game instead of steam up the house with their scantily clad wife?

Lucy leaned over the couch, cleavage dangling toward him, and nuzzled his earlobe for a kiss. “You always know just how to warm me up,” she said in a husky voice.

All he said was “Come on, Luce, it’s like fifty degrees in here.” That was it.

The following spring, Patrick asked for a divorce. In his words, they’d lost their spark. Lucy didn’t necessarily disagree. The difference was that she believed they could find it again, if only he’d try.



Lucy can’t stop crying while showering off last night’s stench. She’s insulted by Patrick offering himself up as just a friend. No friend has ever caused her this much pain. And he didn’t have the strength to say any of this in person—or even over the phone. No, he thought a text would suffice. He didn’t even use periods at the end of his sentences. She was stupid for thinking he’d change his mind.

Between her hangover and Patrick’s gut punch, Lucy spends the rest of the day in a miserable stupor, lonely, emotionally wrung out, and exhausted. When Vivian breezes in, Lucy barely has the strength to acknowledge her. Later, she parks herself outside to watch the sun set and sits there until the sky deepens into a velvet wash of midnight blue. She stays past the point of comfort—the Adirondack chair’s hard wood makes her butt go numb—and

only retreats inside once the mosquitoes come out. Thankfully, Vivian leaves her alone.



The next morning, Lucy doesn't want to get out of bed, but—fortunately or unfortunately—Caleb is on his way over. They'd made plans for a hike before she knew Hank had died, back when he only wanted to help take her mind off Patrick. How appropriate. She's lacing up her hiking boots on the couch when Caleb beeps in the driveway.

"Who's that?" Vivian asks, finishing a plate of scrambled eggs.

"Caleb. He's picking me up."

"Where are you going?"

"Out."

Vivian rolls her eyes. "Yeah. Where?"

"On a hike."

With a look of contempt, Vivian says, "Have fun."

Lucy snatches her water bottle from the table. "Thanks."

She doesn't want to say much more in case Vivian gets the wrong idea and tries to fish for an invitation. Shoes on, Lucy fills her backpack with sunscreen, a baseball cap, and energy bars: blueberry for him, chocolate peanut butter for her. Hiking is their thing; they have a whole routine down pat.

Caleb comes through the front door, lighting up at the sight of Vivian. Lucy wishes he stayed outside.

"Hey!"

"I was coming out," Lucy says, annoyed.

"Wasn't sure you heard me beep."

"Morning," Vivian says, more brightly than anything she's said to Lucy since yesterday—or perhaps ever.

"Are you coming with us?" he asks.

"Oh, I don't think so."

“It’ll be fun. Perfect weather.” His tone sounds dangerously close to an invitation.

Lucy makes a mental note to push Caleb off the mountain later.

Vivian peers outside. “It does look gorgeous.”

“Yep,” Lucy agrees. “Anyway, ready, Caleb?”

“You sure you don’t want to join?” he asks Vivian.

Lucy doubts Vivian will say yes, but her hand curls into an involuntary fist anyway.

“Well...how hard is the hike? I’m not much of an athlete, but I do live in a fifth-floor walk-up, so...”

“I don’t know, I’d say it’s pretty easy. Three miles, maybe? Not too bad,” Caleb offers.

“Oh, no,” Lucy counters. “It’s a trek. Steep, too. Half of it is basically a vertical scramble.”

Caleb’s brows knit together in confusion. “I don’t know if I’d—”

Lucy shoots dagger eyes at Caleb until he shuts up.

With a dark laugh, Vivian says, “Maybe I should give it a try. Gotta keep the heart healthy, right?”



“How was the rest of your shift?” Vivian chirps from the back seat of Caleb’s car.

In the passenger seat, Lucy watches the scenery roll by with her arms crossed tightly. The question needles at her. *Rest of?*

“Eh, a little busy, but fine.”

“I bumped into Caleb at Foxy Roxy’s yesterday,” Vivian explains. “I didn’t realize he’d be working.”

“Huh. I didn’t know that.”

Lucy can imagine Vivian sitting coquettishly on a bar stool, twirling her hair, venting to Caleb about what a stick-in-the-mud Lucy is. She slumps in her seat. Lucy and Caleb have been friends for twenty-five years, and all

sense of loyalty goes out the window the minute a pretty girl shows up? She doesn't understand it.

"Lucy, did you and Dad ever hike together?" Vivian asks.

"Sometimes," she says curtly.

It's the first real question Vivian has asked her since their argument yesterday.

"On this trail?"

"A few times, yeah."

"I didn't know he liked to hike."

"It's not the worst thing he kept from you," Lucy says, sucking the air right out of the car.

After a minute of tension, Caleb turns on the radio.

"That really big mountain way north of here—you know which one I'm talking about, right? Have you hiked that one?" Vivian asks.

"Katahdin? Yep."

"With him? How was it?"

"What is this, a game of Twenty Questions?" Lucy complains.

In the rearview mirror, she sees Vivian cross her arms and peer out the window.

"Just trying to, I don't know, have a nice conversation with you. That's all."



Normally, this is one of Lucy's favorite hikes. The trail is lush, a quietly beautiful landscape of tall, slender trees and mottled rocks. A soft bed of pine needles rustles underfoot. The stream's steady trickle is soothing background noise. Today, though, none of it diffuses her agitation. It only makes her miss her dad. Vivian keeps stopping to take pictures of the scenery, which prompts Caleb to stop, too. Lucy catches his gaze lingering for a second too long on Vivian's strappy black tank top and matching bike shorts.

Vivian pants on her way up the first major hill. “I shouldn’t have quit my barre studio.”

“Bar?” Caleb echoes. “I hate to break it to you, but a drink won’t do you any favors here.”

Vivian swats at him. “You’re clueless.”

Caleb smirks. “At least I know how to use a barbecue.”

“I understand the general concept! I just happen to lack firsthand practical experience.”

The more they flirt, the more painfully alone she feels.

“Luce, can you barbecue?” Vivian asks.

“It’s Lucy. And yes, of course.”

Vivian glances at Caleb. “Right.”

As they climb, Lucy charges ahead solo. Hank should’ve known better than to keep her and Vivian separate all these years. Now she has to face the fallout without him. If he were here, would he side with Lucy against Vivian? Could he see the kind of daughter he raised?

Behind her, Caleb and Vivian chat side by side. She can hear him talking about his dream backpacking trip. He wants to trek through the lush jungles of Laos, hit up hawker stalls in Singapore, and watch the famous sunrise over the Mount Bromo volcano in Indonesia. To cap it all off, he wants to take the ferry from the Thai mainland to the island of Ko Phangan for the Full Moon Party, which draws tens of thousands of people every month into an all-night frenzy of music, dancing, glow paint, and even fire-eaters on a pristine white sand beach. The whole trip will take two or three months, but first he needs to stock up on gear: new hiking boots, a mosquito-netted bivvy, an astronomy headlamp for stargazing. Every shift at the pub gets him a tiny bit closer to it.

Lucy used to think she’d miss Caleb when he traveled, but in this moment, she wants to buy him a one-way ticket.

Vivian reels off stories about working her way up through the shockingly grueling world of fine dining—a verbally abusive manager, crushing schedules, handsy customers, the painfully old-school industry where women still aren’t taken seriously.

“I’m actually planning to leave my job soon and open up my own place,” she tells Caleb.

“Whoa, really? That must cost a fortune.”

Lucy gives Caleb a piercing glare. “About the same price as a four-bedroom lake house, I hear.”

Vivian purses her lips.

Lucy can’t resist pushing further. “It’s not really all on your own, though, is it? It’s with your boyfriend, right?”

She senses Caleb deflating. Finally.

“Yeah, we’re doing it together.”

A taunting voice squeaks in the back of Lucy’s mind: *Vivian has a boyfriend and Caleb’s following her around like a puppy, but not even your own husband wants to be with you.*

“You haven’t told me much about him. What’s his name? How did you meet?” Lucy presses.

Vivian squirms, tightening her ponytail. “Oh, the story’s not that interesting.”

Her discomfort piques Lucy’s interest. “Please, I’d love to hear.”

Lucy has gobbled up every crumb of information Vivian has ever posted online, but she’s never seen mention of a boyfriend. No anniversary posts, no Valentine’s Day photos, nothing. Sometimes, she’d wondered if Vivian was ultra-private. Other times, she’d imagined Vivian being alone, and let herself indulge in the smug notion that she’d found someone but her half-sister hadn’t.

Vivian seems cagey. “Well, he works in the restaurant world, too.”

“And his name is?” Lucy prompts.

“He’s...a pretty private guy.”

“You can’t even tell us his *name*?” Lucy asks.

After a beat, she says, “Oscar.”

“Do you live together?”

“Not yet,” she says coyly.

Good luck to him, Lucy thinks.

“Sounds like you’re serious, though,” Caleb says, possibly a smidge jealous.

Lucy considers that perfect payback for him dragging Vivian into their hike.

“We are,” Vivian concedes. She turns the spotlight toward Caleb. “Are you seeing anyone?”

“Me? Not really, no.”

“No one interesting has wandered into your bar lately?”

He laughs. “Not in a long time.”

Vivian shoots Caleb an amused look.

There’s something going on here that Lucy can’t quite grasp. “What do you mean?”

He glances at Vivian, who hesitates, gives him a private nod.

“The bonfire wasn’t the first time Vivian and I met,” he says slowly. “We met once before, four years ago.”

Lucy gets a pit in her stomach. “Met? How?”

VIVIAN

This, at least, she can tell the truth about. She’d planned to keep quiet about it to spare Lucy’s feelings, but her prying was so irritating that Vivian no longer cares.

“At the pub. I was having a drink, he was bartending,” Vivian says.

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?” Lucy asks, annoyed.

“I...We...” Caleb tries.

Vivian jumps in. “I’d just told you about Dad. I figured that was enough stress for one week.”

Lucy cocks her head. “Why would this be stressful for me?”

There’s no tasteful way to spell this out. Caleb’s eyes widen with panic, but he doesn’t speak. Vivian’s customer-service skills kick in, and in a calm voice, she tries to smooth the situation over.

“You’re right, that was a misjudgment on my part. I’m sorry.”
Lucy huffs. “Any other surprises or secrets you want to drop on me?”
Vivian holds up her hands. “That was the last one, I promise.”
At least the last one she can stomach sharing.



Four years ago, Vivian took a week off work for her annual Maine trip. While she was there, Hank had a client emergency pop up and flew home for a night. She’d never had an evening to herself in Fox Hill before, and decided to eat dinner at Foxy Roxy’s. It was something of a novelty; she’d had their takeout before, though she and Hank had never actually stayed for a meal. As it turned out, Caleb—not that she knew who he was yet—was working that night.

“This your first summer here? I haven’t seen you around before. I’d remember you.”

His amber eyes actually glittered. Up until then, Vivian thought that phrase was a cheesy exaggeration, but no, sure enough, there was an unmistakably flirtatious twinkle. He was so clearly giving her a line, something he dangled in front of every out-of-towner to get a good tip. She didn’t mind. She wanted to flirt right back. Liven up the evening. See what could happen.

It would be embarrassing to tell him she’d spent every summer of her life in this tiny town while barely setting foot in its most popular establishment. Feeling brazen, she swiveled on her bar stool and said, “You must have been busy chatting up other girls. I was here just last week.”

He reddened, then recovered. “Miss, I’d never be so unprofessional as to flirt with pretty customers on the job.” He tossed her a wink. He could actually pull off a wink.

“And I’d never be forward enough to distract you from your work.”

“This is your version of shy?”

“Something like that.”

“Where are you from?”

“New York.”

“Oh, that explains a lot.”

She just laughed.

“You’re not a Giants fan, are you? ’Cause if you are...” He slid away from her.

She squinted. “That’s football, right?”

“Thank Tom Brady,” he muttered. “Though we’ve got a lot to go over.”

“Good thing I’m staying for dinner.”

She ordered a basket of fish and chips and a pint of Allagash. In between serving other customers, he’d come chat with Vivian, leaning over the bar on his elbows. He asked how a New Yorker wound up in Fox Hill, and she said her family has a place on the lake. He mentioned he knew some people out there. She didn’t bother to ask exactly who or where—it wasn’t like she knew anyone. She asked if he resented the influx of summer people into his hometown, and he hesitated for two seconds before saying, “Honestly? Yeah, a little bit.”

He didn’t seem to resent Vivian, though. She liked the way he lit up whenever he returned to her spot at the bar. As she ate and drank, they covered the basics of the NFL, her life back at home, and his disdain for big cities. (“How are you supposed to see any stars?”)

And then, once the pub had mostly emptied out, he said, “So...I close up at nine.”

It was somehow already 8:45. She drained the last of her pint.

“You don’t have to leave,” he added, a touch quieter than he’d been all night. “Not if you don’t want to. It’s just me on closing duty tonight.”

She felt victorious: She had set out to experience something new in Fox Hill. Here it was!

She smiled. “Okay.”

He poured her a second pint—“On the house, don’t worry about it”—and one for himself. She hung around as he wiped tables clean and transferred the contents of the cash register into an envelope. They were alone.

Drinking and talking turned into kissing, which turned into making out, which turned into—well, Vivian had wanted to shake up her usual Fox Hill routine, hadn't she? She liked the ease with which he lifted her onto the bar. She liked how his fingers instinctively trailed over her tan lines. She liked the playful kisses he nipped along her collarbone and the deeper ones that spurred her to wrap her thighs even tighter around him. And she liked that afterward, it felt completely natural to chat, passing a glass of beer between them.

“When can I see you again?” he asked.

“I leave the day after tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow, then.”

“I can't.”

Hank would be back on the first flight the next morning.

He squeezed her hand. “Then next summer.”

“I'll know where to find you,” she promised.

Except next summer, she was hooking up with a chef back in the city and wasn't particularly motivated to seek Caleb out, and then the one after that, she had no free nights alone. The following year, there was only one person she wanted an illicit bar-top tryst with, and it wasn't Caleb. She never thought she'd see him again. She kind of likes that she was wrong.



Vivian isn't dumb. She knew hiking with Lucy would be a challenge, but she hoped that Caleb would serve as a neutral buffer—with him there, ideally it would be harder for them to snipe at each other. The more she wins Lucy over, the easier it'll be to deal with her—as long as Vivian can keep her temper in check. Dancing around her fling with Caleb was a petty mistake, but Vivian had been thrown off her A-game by Lucy asking too many questions about her personal life. She wanted a small slice of revenge.

She's grateful when they hit the last, most intense portion of the climb. They've reached the point of exertion where conversation fizzles out. Instead, the only noise floating through the forest is the sound of their breath.

"Almost there," Caleb promises.

Vivian's thighs burn and her heart hammers against her ribs, but she refuses to take a breather. If Lucy can do this in one go, Vivian will, too, even if it kills her.

When they reach the top, she doubles over and exhales an awestruck "Whoa."

There's a steep drop to a clear river winding through a valley, and beyond that, rolling green hills dotted with wildflowers. Farther in the distance, rocks give way to tree-topped mountains underneath a brilliant sky. There isn't a road or a building or a single soul for miles between here and the horizon.

"Like the view?" Caleb asks.

"It's gorgeous," she says.

And it is. But she can't fully appreciate the scenery. All she can think about is the long trek down the mountain with Lucy, the car ride home, and however many days they're going to be stuck together under one roof. She isn't sure she can do this much longer.

LUCY

Lucy has Caleb drop her off at Paige's house. It's chaos, but comfortable, familiar chaos. She feels lighter the moment she walks in. A plastic bucket of toys overflows next to the heinous plaid love seat Paige inherited from her favorite uncle (who was, it must be said, color-blind). There's a blond wood step stool with Nora's name carved in multicolored blocks; the green *R* has been missing for weeks. A copy of *Tell Me Lies*, by Carola Lovering, last month's book club pick, is splayed open, unfinished, on the coffee table

alongside Nora's sippy cup and two mugs of Lucy's favorite lemon-ginger tea. (Paige keeps a box of it in her pantry. When Lucy lived with Patrick, there was always a bag of Cool Ranch Doritos in her kitchen for Paige.) Her home used to be neater, but that was in the BCE—Before Child Era.

"I'm so glad you were home. Thanks for letting me escape here," Lucy says, blowing on her tea to cool it off.

They're on the couch while Nora plays on the floor.

Paige snorts. "Right, because I'm home so rarely."

Once Nora was born, she quit her dental-assistant job. She misses it, but her salary would barely cover the cost of childcare.

"Did Eddie get back to you about working part-time?"

"Don't change the subject. Your life is falling apart, not mine. How are you holding up?"

Lucy recounts the day's misery, beginning with two-faced Caleb ruining their plans and ending with the bizarre revelation that he and Vivian know each other.

"Do you think Vivian and Caleb were ever a thing?" Paige asks, wrinkling her nose.

"Like a couple? Caleb's never committed to anything more binding than a seasonal ski pass."

"Okay, but, like, maybe they hooked up?"

Lucy tries to banish that image from her mind. "I didn't want to ask too many questions."

She does vaguely remember Caleb once telling her about a fling with a "hot city chick" years ago. She prays that wasn't Vivian.

"Like, it's not enough that she grew up with both of her parents under the same roof *and* had all this money *and* is selling the house out from under me. She also has to prance around Caleb in spandex? They hung out yesterday, too."

Paige winces. "I hate to even suggest this, but you're the only two people who are fully going to get what the other is going through. Maybe it's worth giving her another shot?"

“No,” Lucy says firmly. “She’s cold, snooty, entitled, obnoxious, she drinks too much...” (Lucy can only guess how many drinks she’d downed at the bonfire. But that was just one bad night.) “So, no.”

The nicest thing Vivian has done for Lucy is let her sleep in her own bed.

Paige holds up her hands. “Okay, I hear you. Fair. For the record, I’ve never liked the sound of her.”

Lucy knows she means well, but this just makes her feel worse, as if she should’ve known better than to keep a sliver of hope all these years. Paige witnessed Lucy break down over and over, comparing herself to Vivian’s online persona and constantly falling short. Nothing Paige could say would ever make that hurt less. Hank picked his life with Vivian over his life with Lucy, and no matter how hard she tried to be the perfect daughter, that would never change. She would always be second best.

“I really wanted to like her,” Lucy admits.

Paige softens. “I know. I wish this had turned out differently.”

“And then there’s everything with Patrick...I know I’m supposed to move on, or hate him or something, but I don’t. I miss him.”

“That’s understandable.”

“He doesn’t miss me.” She picks at a stray thread escaping the couch. She feels so broken.

“He cares about you. He’ll always care about you.”

“He didn’t care enough to try fixing us,” she says with a snort.

Paige looks somber. “I’m so sorry.”

“I’m not strong enough for this.”

“Of course you are. Think about how strong you were for your mom when she was sick. Think about...”

Lucy saves her from having to grasp for a second example. “I’m a mess.”

The tears begin to flow again; it’s become a regular function, like breathing and sleeping. Not that she’s getting much sleep these days.

Paige rubs her back. “You don’t have to go through this alone. You have us.”

Friendship isn't a substitute for love. Happily married people forget that. "And who knows who else is out there? Your options aren't limited to Patrick and spinsterhood."

Lucy wishes that were true. In a town this size, though, there are more moose than age-appropriate single men. The good ones are all taken. (The bad ones are, too.) Paige is wrong, plain and simple. Maybe she thinks it's kinder to pretend Lucy has options, but it's not. Nora pulls herself up to a standing position by the coffee table and wobbles over to plop a slobbery hand on Lucy's knee. She giggles with a toothy smile.

VIVIAN

Vivian is barely out of Caleb's truck when the idea occurs to her. Leaning on the door frame, she asks, "Do you want to come in?"

"For what?"

She hadn't thought that far ahead. "Lunch? A swim? I don't know, just to hang out?"

The tension had lightened considerably after Caleb dropped Lucy off. The rest of the ride was shorter than she'd expected, and pulling into the driveway felt too abrupt. It was the first time they've been completely alone together since the night they met.

Caleb unclips his seat belt. "My shift doesn't start for another few hours."

Vivian shuts the door, satisfied. Inside, she forages for ingredients that could add up to a respectable meal. As they eat, Caleb somehow talks her into going fishing, something she's never tried.

"Not even once?" he asks after lunch, sorting through equipment in the dim basement.

"My dad wanted to teach me when I was a kid. It grossed me out."

He blows dust off a fishing rod. "Are you squeamish?"

"I've been beheading and filleting my own fish for years."

Caleb shivers. “You’ll be fine.”

She puts a bikini on underneath her clothing in case she can convince him to sunbathe instead. (It’s her most flattering swimsuit, and that’s on purpose. If Oscar were better about staying in touch, she might be more motivated to wear something else. She won’t stray, of course, but a little flirtation is harmless.) They take the boat out to a calm cove. Beside her, he assembles rods and hooks and all the other parts Vivian doesn’t know the names of.

“Don’t we need bait? Worms or something?” she asks.

“I’ll just toss you in,” he says casually, threading the line through the pole.

The thing is, he easily could. “Ha ha, very funny.”

“But no, we don’t need live worms. I found lures.” He flashes a handful of colorful doodads. “Although, actually, there are these guys down in Boston who use tampons instead.”

“No.”

“Swear to God, I saw it on YouTube. They float, don’t they? These big, burly fishermen had all these theories about which brands worked best.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Fine. But if you’re ever in a pinch and need to catch fish to survive—”

“A situation I’m in constantly.”

“*If* it ever comes to that, now you’ll know what to do.”

In sixth grade, her science class was studying photosynthesis, so they took a field trip to some nature preserve north of Westchester to study plants and trees. Pretty much everyone was mucking around in the river, splattering mud up to their thighs, but Vivian didn’t want to ruin her shoes. She isn’t planning to glamp, much less camp anytime soon.

Caleb hands her a rod and picks up his own. “You want to have about two, three feet of extra line.”

He measures out his own and Vivian copies him.

“Like that?” she asks.

He leans back to eyeball it. “Yeah, good. But be careful with these. You see that scar?” There’s a small, crescent-shaped one along his pointer finger.

“Yeah.”

“It’s from a fishing hook. I was with Lucy, actually, and the line was tangled. We must have been, what, eight? She had this brilliant idea—for us to each yank one end of it so the knot would slide out. Instead, it snapped and the hook flung back at me.”

She winces. “Ouch.”

“I knew it was a dumb plan from the start, but she said she knew better because she was older. We’re not even a full month apart, but she’s never let me forget it.”

She purses her lips; she doesn’t want to comment on Lucy’s illogical stubbornness. “Okay, no fooling around with the line, got it. What’s next?”

“Put your index finger down like you’re holding a trigger, then flip the reel open.”

She glances at his example. “Like this?”

He reaches over to adjust hers. “When you let go, the line goes down. So you take a step back and…”

In one fluid motion, he flicks the pole overhead. The lure arcs and lands, bobbing, twenty feet in front of them.

“Aye, aye, captain.” She tries to mimic him.

“Not bad.” She gives him a skeptical look, and he adds, “For a first attempt. Now we sit.”

“And wait?”

“Yep.”

“That’s it? We just sit here?”

“That’s the whole point,” he says, amused.

“Oh. Isn’t that boring?”

Catching her eye, he says, “Depends on who you’re with.”

The air between them surges with energy. She keeps her gaze focused on the line in front of her. He flirts as naturally as he breathes, and she’s technically taken.

He keeps going. “You think you can sit still, Miss I-Walk-Thirty-Miles-Per-Hour?”

Of course a little banter isn’t much of a transgression.

“I do *not*. Maybe only, like, five.”

“Except when you’re trudging up a hill.”

“Come on! I was just taking in the scenery, that’s all.”

“And what did you think?”

“It’s earthy, rustic...all those trees...”

“A few more than in Central Park?”

“Well.” She pauses as a memory hits her. “Actually, there’s this spot in the park my dad used to take me to when I was a kid, the Ravine. It’s wooded and kind of hidden, so most people miss it. The trees are tall enough to hide the skyline, and the waterfalls block out most of the noise from the traffic. It’s nice. Kind of the one bit of nature we both agreed was perfect.”

Caleb listens quietly, respectfully. “That sounds beautiful.”

“It is.”

An uncomfortable lump begins to swell in her throat. She didn’t have to love him in order to miss him. The grief is still there.

She forces a smile. “But I mean, there were tourists in tacky horse-drawn carriages right around the corner. Thanks for taking me to see an actual forest today.”

“My pleasure.”

She squints out at the water. “So, how long does it take to catch a fish? What happens if you hook one?”

“I wouldn’t count on catching any, actually.”

“Why not?”

“Afternoons are usually no good for fishing. It’s too bright. They don’t like that.”

“Then why are we out here?”

He shrugs. “Why not? I just like hanging out with you.”

After days of Lucy making Vivian feel like the Wicked Witch of the West Village, his simple compliment genuinely touches her.

“We don’t have to keep sitting here, though,” he adds.

“Oh, no, I don’t mind.” Truly, she doesn’t want to cut the afternoon short. “This is nice.”

He rises and pulls his T-shirt over his head without hesitation. “Jump in with me,” he says, extending a hand.

She’s standing before she realizes what he asked. “What? I don’t get in the water.”

He drops her hand, dumbfounded. “But you have a lake house!”

For now, she thinks. “I like to sunbathe. It’s just like fishing—an outdoor activity, very little physical exertion. You might like it. We could try it right now.”

“Oh, no, you’re definitely getting in.”

She sits so he can’t topple her. “No, thank you.”

“Seriously?”

“I’m not stopping you,” she says, amused. “Go have fun.”

Caleb digs into the pocket of his board shorts and tosses her a carabiner with a half dozen keys attached. “All right, keep this safe for me?”

He stretches up, laces his fingers together, and dives in. He pops up fifteen feet away to slick his wet hair back. If he emerged in slo-mo, it would be a cologne ad.

“Whew!”

“Cold?”

“Not at all.”

He treads water, then floats on his back. Blissed out, his eyes drift closed. She’s suddenly aware of the sweat beading down her spine.

“Fine,” she says with a loud, dramatic sigh. She drops his keys into the cup holder with a metallic plunk. “I’m coming.”

She peels off her clothes. Ruffling her hair, she steps up onto the ledge, steels herself, and jumps.

At first, the lake feels frigid, but as she bobs up to the surface, she unfortunately has to admit that Caleb was right. The water is a goddamn delight. No frozen margarita at any rooftop bar is even close to this refreshing.

He swims over. “How’s the hypothermic shock?”

With a light splash, she says, “I think I’ll live.”



When Vivian's had her fill, she climbs back into the boat. Caleb follows her.

"I probably have to get going soon," he says. His mouth twists into a frown when he checks the time. "Yeah, mind if we head back?"

She leans over the side of the boat to squeeze the water out of her hair. "Not at all."

The insistent sunshine nearly dries them off by the time they dock.

"What are you up to this afternoon?" he asks.

What *is* she up to? The peaceful swim really did clear her mind. "I should probably fix some stuff up around here."

"Do you need a hand? I could come back tomorrow."

She wouldn't protest seeing the one friendly face in Fox Hill again, but she doesn't want to seem like a useless out-of-towner, unable to do the most basic of DIY projects.

"I'll be all set, but thank you. Really. Today was perfect."

LUCY

Lucy sleeps over that night. Paige invites her to stay for another one, but Lucy declines. Why? Because her spine can't withstand more sleepless hours on Paige's lumpy couch. Because Nora is teething and Lucy has eardrums. Because Patrick texted her, *how are you holding up?* and she doesn't want to cry in front of Paige again. And because it's July, her month at the lake. She'd hate to miss another minute of it. She doesn't have to spend any real time with Vivian. No, she'll read on the boat. There's no better way to spend a summer afternoon.

Paige drives her back to her car, then Lucy swings by the library on the other side of town. This place has always felt like another home away from

home. The sacred hush, the soft lighting, the best chair tucked into the sunniest corner with a depressed cushion from so many years of readers sitting there, engrossed—this was her sanctuary when she was growing up. She drank up compliments on her voracious reading habits from Bess, the librarian.

Bess is still here in her uniform of long cardigans and glasses on a bejeweled chain. She offers her condolences, which is a nice thought, but makes Lucy anxious that she might crack in public. She makes polite small talk for just long enough to be socially appropriate, then excuses herself to browse. She's walked the familiar aisles of romance, fiction, and women's fiction (as if men can't enjoy reading about women?) so many times, she practically has the shelves memorized. However, there's a solid two-foot stretch of novels she's never touched: Celeste Levy's.

Lucy was a preteen when she figured out who Hank's wife was, and far too scandalized to pick up her books. The mere thought of bypassing the YA shelves for the romance section was mortifying. The *SNL* skit making fun of soccer moms snapping up smutty *Naked in New York* had been bad enough—she couldn't bring herself to actually read it. Anyway, she felt it was important to boycott Celeste's books out of loyalty to Dawn.

Now that Vivian has crash-landed into Lucy's life, though, her curiosity is insatiable. It's time to read Celeste's work. She wants to start from the very beginning, but her debut novel, *The Mistress in the Mountains*, isn't on the shelves. Instead, Lucy picks up the next three—*Sandals and Scandals in Santorini*, *Will You Maui Me?*, and *The Hunk in Hong Kong*.

As she emerges from the aisle, a man standing between the opposite row of shelves looks up from the book splayed open in his palm. He has warm brown skin and angular cheekbones, and wears sand-colored chino shorts with a moss green linen shirt. His gaze flicks to the *romance* label across the end of the bookcase, then back to Lucy, where it sticks. She's never been comfortable making casual small talk with handsome strangers—or even sustained eye contact, if she's honest. What is she supposed to say? She knows practically everyone in Fox Hill; it's not like she has much practice with new people.

“Hi,” she says, passing by.

He nods. “Hi there.”

His voice is rich and deep, like he could host a podcast.

When she makes her way to the checkout desk, Bess muses, “Oh, you’re getting into Celeste Levy. She used to be very popular. That book of hers... what was it called? It was spicy!”

Lucy is on the verge of blurting out something like, “She’s my stepmom!” Except there’s no simple term for “long-lost half-sister’s mother” or “recently deceased dad’s unfamiliar wife.” Besides, if she tells Bess, she’ll probably tell her husband, Larry, who will tell Mike down at the tackle shop, and by Monday morning, word will have spread across town. As far as Lucy can tell, nobody in Fox Hill has made the connection between her and Celeste yet, and she’d like to keep it that way.

Instead, she simply says, “I don’t know, but I didn’t see *The Mistress in the Mountains* in stock. Do you know if it’s available?”

“Let me check.” Bess glances over Lucy’s shoulder. “I’ll be with you in one minute, Harrison.”

Lucy turns to see the man behind her. Bess’s exclamation—*It was spicy!*—rings in her ears. Did he hear that?

“Hi,” she says again, blushing.

One side of his mouth quirks up. “Hi.”

It sinks in that they’ve already had this exchange. She wishes she didn’t look so disheveled in her borrowed clothes, a shapeless T-shirt and pull-on shorts so washed and worn, they might as well be pajamas. Yesterday’s underwear is on inside out.

“It’s probably not *that* spicy,” she says, embarrassed.

He tilts his head. “Sorry, what’s not?”

“Oh, nothing, just...”

She’s flailing for a way to finish that sentence when Bess saves her.

“It’s out right now. I could call you when it comes in.”

Blushing, she says, “That would be great. Thank you so much.”

Bess slides her glasses a half inch down her nose. “Take care.”

The man—Harrison, Bess said?—glances at her again as she exits. By the time she reaches her car, she hears another *whoosh* of the library door. She’s digging through her purse for her keys, and in her peripheral vision, the man pauses outside the building and squints into the sunshine.

“Oh, hey!” he calls.

He jogs in her direction, apparently on purpose. If he’s from out of town—which, from his leather watchband and pristine white canvas sneakers, is likely—maybe he needs directions.

“Hi,” she says.

“I...I saw you in there.”

“Yeah.”

He steps forward and extends a hand. His nails are neat. She hopes he doesn’t notice her ragged cuticles.

“I’m Harrison, by the way. I just wanted to say hi. Again.”

“Lucy. Hi.”

He repeats her name. There’s something magnetic about his eyes.

“Nice to meet you.”

“You, too,” she says, flustered.

He’s not asking for directions. She didn’t drop her wallet. Guys don’t chase her across parking lots to make friends. Is this...romantic? Lucy’s brain feels like Jell-O. Not once in her adult life has she ever considered another man as anything more than a friend.

But if Lucy were single, she’d theoretically be interested in getting to know a man who reads. And she is kind of single now. Begrudgingly, but still.

He nods at the stack in her arms. “What did you check out?”

“Oh, just...books.”

“No kidding,” he says, raising an eyebrow.

She clears her throat. “Romance novels.”

He nods gamely. “Spicy,” he says, like they already share an inside joke.

Lucy could die. “What did you get?”

“He glances down at the chunky door-stopper. “Stephen King.”

“A classic,” she says.

“I’m ashamed I haven’t read him already.” He glances away and bites his lip, then turns back to make solid eye contact. “I never do this, but I have to ask—would you want to go out sometime?”

Panic shoots through her. She scrambles to rearrange her expression into something calm, as if this kind of thing happens to her all the time.

“For a drink or a coffee, or something like that?” he adds.

It takes a moment to rein in her butterflies. “Yeah?” she says, feeling outrageously awkward. “That would be nice, thank you.”

Was she supposed to thank him for asking her out? She has no idea.

“Great. Can I get your number?”

Lucy recites it, though she’s so rattled, she can’t be sure she got all the digits in the right order.

“All right, well...” There’s something about the self-assured, teasing way he looks at her that makes it hard to breathe. “Enjoy your books. Watch out for the spicy parts. I’ll text you.”

She sinks into her car as he walks away. Lucy doesn’t know anything about dating. Not as an adult anyway. If Harrison hasn’t already noticed her puffy face or utter inability to string two words together, he certainly would up close on a date. On the drive home, she’s already scripting how to politely let him down.



Lucy’s almost on Loon Road when the school’s principal calls. He never calls. It’s the thick of summer break. Worried, she pulls over and picks up.

“Hello?”

“Lucy, hi. How’s your summer going?”

What a question.

“Good, thanks, how are you?”

“Excellent, excellent. Little hot today—I melt in the heat.” With a nervous laugh, he continues. “The kids are down in Boston with their grandparents for the week, and Becca and I are...”

Lucy closes her eyes and takes a deep breath, absorbing none of this. *Get to the point. Please just get to the point.*

“Anyway, is this a good time for a chat? I know you’re probably wondering why I’m calling.” His tone is awkward and tense. Lucy doesn’t like it.

“Now is great.”

“Well. I hate to say it, but the school board is making more budget cuts, and this time, they’re aimed at the English and history departments. We’re not able to renew everyone’s contracts, as much as I’d like to. The other teachers, they have tenure, or families, and it would be terrible to let them go. The long and short of it is, your position has been cut for the upcoming school year.”

A chill runs through Lucy. “Oh.”

“I wish I was calling with better news.”

“Thank you for letting me know.”

She doesn’t remember how the rest of the call goes because she plunges headfirst into survival mode, calculating how many days there are until the start of the new school year (fifty-eight), how long she can afford to go without a paycheck (not long enough), how much her severance will be (zero—teachers don’t get it), and how many teaching jobs are likely to be available in the state of Maine at this point in the summer (less than zero). It’s probably impossible to get licensed to teach elsewhere on such short notice, and if she doesn’t secure a new position by the end of August, she’ll be screwed for the next full year.

“Take care, Lucy. I’m sure you’ll land somewhere great,” he says, sounding guilty and entirely unconvinced.

In a horrified daze, she drives the last half mile home, forgetting to dodge every single pothole. No job. No income. No husband. And soon no place to live. She’s utterly anchorless. When she parks in the driveway, the house looks golden in the sunshine. It’s twice the size of anything else on Fox Hill Lake, with coveted west-facing views and a lengthy stretch of waterfront. If she needs a quick infusion of cash, here’s her gut-wrenching answer—except Vivian would never hand over a dime.



Inside, a muffled shriek erupts from the basement. She jogs down the stairs to her least favorite part of the house. The floors are cold concrete and the air is musty. Cobwebs multiply in the corners.

Vivian, clutching a wrench with rubber gloves, ducks away from a spray shooting out from a pipe, snatches her laptop off the floor, and whisks it up to a high shelf for safety. Bikini strings dangle from the back of her neck, like this foray into housework interrupted her day of leisure. She wipes her forehead with the back of her arm.

“It broke!” Vivian shouts. “I was just trying to fix it.”

“Fix what?”

“The water heater thing! The boiler.” A YouTube tutorial is paused on her screen.

“Why didn’t you call a plumber?”

“They’re all booked for weeks! I need to *shower*, Lucy.”

Patrick could probably fix this. He liked to tinker with these kinds of things. She could call him, but with a jolt of dread, it hits her: It’s entirely possible he could say no. She couldn’t face rejection like that in front of Vivian.

“Is it hot?”

“No!” Vivian moans. “That’s the problem!”

In a huff, she tries to screw a piece of metal back onto the pipe, but that only leads to water spouting off in three different directions, including onto Vivian. Frustrated, she stops the jet by pressing both palms against it. Lucy gapes.

“Are you going to just stand there or actually help me?”

Lucy doesn’t know a thing about plumbing, but with no better options, she grabs the wrench. Vivian is all too happy to give it up. She rips off her gloves and storms to her computer.

“I’m googling it,” she says.

Lucy spins a knob in one direction, then tries the other.

“Okay, I think you just have to...screw the cap thing back on, maybe?”
Vivian says.

“Yeah. I got that part.” Obviously.

The rusted metal doesn’t want to budge. Water pools around her feet. Grimacing, Lucy leans all her weight into the wrench. The cap fits into place and the stream vanishes.

Instead of feeling satisfied that she could swoop in to fix Vivian’s mess, she’s just heartbroken. If Lucy’s days on Fox Hill Lake are numbered, Vivian could at least let her enjoy them. Instead, she gets to watch Vivian treat the house like a mean-spirited kid would treat a Barbie doll: rip out a chunk of hair, twist an arm on backward.

“Thanks for your help,” Vivian says, sounding like she’s aiming for sincerity.

“Don’t worry about it. Just give me half of the proceeds from the sale and we’ll call it even,” she says brazenly.

Vivian’s expression sours as she crosses her arms. “We’ve had this discussion already.”

“I just lost my job.”

Her eyes pop. “What?”

“I just got the call.”

“I’m really sorry to hear that.”

Vivian looks genuinely stricken, and for the first time in days, Lucy feels a sliver of optimism that she could change her mind.

“At this point, I’d be shocked if there are still any open teaching jobs around. I need the money, Vivian. I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

Begging makes her skin crawl.

Vivian’s show of sympathy evaporates. “It’s a shitty situation, and I’m sorry, I really am, but—”

“You ‘need the money,’ I know,” Lucy says acidly, pausing to let that sink in. “Right.”

Vivian rears back. “You have no right to this place. You’re mad that I’m here during ‘your month,’ but if anything, you’re here in *my* house.”

Nobody makes her feel as powerless and hopeless as Vivian does. This isn't just about the sale anymore—it's about Vivian's conviction that she can steamroll Lucy simply because she's rich.

“Do you hear yourself? You're gallivanting around on an endless pity payroll vacation, dead set on snatching this place away from an unemployed teacher. You know most people have to work, right?”

Vivian glares. Lucy's exhilarated to finally have gotten under her skin.

“Losing my job has huge consequences for me, and you're just lolling around, not even bothering to show up for work.”

She reddens. “Oh, come on.”

“You don't know the first thing about needing money. My mom puts buckets in the living room every time it rains or snows. She would've had the roof fixed years ago, but she's been paying off medical debt for the past decade.”

Vivian frowns. “My dad had to have offered to help. I mean, if she was seriously sick. Right?”

Lucy loathes that Vivian can afford to be so detached from her family's finances while she can account for every dollar. Her half-sister is five feet and nine inches of privilege draped in expensive linen.

“My mom didn't tell him. She didn't want to be his charity case. He'd just paid for most of my tuition. You took it for granted that he paid yours, didn't you?”

There were limits to his financial support; Lucy and Dawn both knew this. He didn't offer to help pay for the roof, even though Lucy had mentioned it to him once or twice, hoping he'd take the hint. He didn't chip in much for her wedding, but he walked her down the aisle. (Lucy knew her mom chafed at him receiving that honor, but Lucy had spent years dreaming about that father-daughter tradition.)

“Yeah, but—”

No, Lucy will not allow herself to be cut off. Not over this.

“We didn't take family vacations to Aruba, or Aspen, or Paris,” Lucy says, reeling off destinations she saw on Vivian's social media half a lifetime ago. “Or Sardinia, wherever that even is.”

Vivian opens her mouth to answer but apparently thinks better of it.

“I didn’t get to go to sleepaway camp or private school, or have my parents pay for a swanky off-campus apartment in college. I didn’t have a nanny—I actually babysat from the time I was eleven years old, because an allowance wasn’t in my mom’s budget. I mean, do you even know how much a gallon of milk costs?”

Silence fills the basement. Stony-faced, Vivian takes a stab at it. “Maybe...three dollars? Five?”

Lucy smirks. Hank let Vivian grow up sheltered—stay sheltered, too. Lucy doesn’t want to dwell on why he didn’t do the same for her.

“Why do you even need to sell this place? Can’t you just get money from your mom?”

“She wouldn’t give it to me outright.”

“Why not?”

“She doesn’t know I’m leaving Della.”

Lucy could explode. “So? Tell her!”

“It’s complicated.”

Dripping with sarcasm, Lucy says, “I’m sure.”

“I’m glad you’ve come around to selling the house—”

“Only as a last resort.”

“But it isn’t yours to sell.”

Lucy’s throat stings with the threat of tears. “So you make a single phone call to a Realtor, practically flood the basement, and think that’s enough work to deserve the full payout? How does that math work?”

Vivian draws a deep breath. “Look, if Dad wanted you to have it, he’d have done something about it—he didn’t.” She heads upstairs without another word.



Lucy scrunches down in an Adirondack chair on the back deck with a can of seltzer sweating on the arm rest, her feet kicked up on a plastic stool and

her laptop balanced against her knees. A furious search turns up exactly two job listings for English teachers within sixty miles: a middle school role in Lewiston and a position at Casco Bay High School in Portland. More than she expected, honestly, but still dismal. The Portland job tugs at her, though getting her hopes up feels dangerous. She'll apply to both, but even though she's confident in her teaching skills—more self-assured than she is in any other realm of her life—she's afraid neither opportunity will pan out. At this point in the summer, it seems all too possible that the school administrators simply forgot to take down the listings.

When she attempts to locate her résumé so she can spruce it up, she realizes the file is so old, it predates her (now clunky, outdated) laptop. It's not saved to her desktop or even buried in her files. She finally digs it out of the recesses of her inbox—she'd once sent it to Patrick for his thoughts. (“Looks good, Luce.”) She scans it, seeing the work of her twenty-two-year-old self, written before she had even tossed her graduation cap. It is painfully earnest, listing her GPA (3.9, thanks to the required math course she'd hated) and noting her “special skills” include typing and the use of Microsoft Word, as if either of these could possibly set her apart from the rest of the class of 2016. None of her work leading a classroom appears at all; this was written months before she began her first and—to date—only job. Okay. So this might need more than a little “sprucing up.”

Distilling her nine years of experience into a list of tidy, compelling bullet points is daunting. She could mention her ability to create engaging lesson plans and her skill in drawing out insightful discussions about literature from a roomful of unenthusiastic teenagers. And sure, all that would be fine. Solid. But Lucy needs to be better than that. She needs to be great.

With the eagle eye she usually lends to grading term papers, she polishes the document until it shines. She no longer “helps students learn”; she “encourages them to thrive in an academic setting.”

There's still more she's itching to offer up, so she pours that into her cover letter. She's proud of helping a student who used to flounder due to his dyslexia. Lucy found every title in her curriculum on audiobook and

presented him with the fully stocked account the morning after she learned of his IEP. He was skeptical at first, asking what the point was when he didn't care about books anyway. By the end of the year, not only had his grades improved, but he was listening to books for pleasure, too. She'd converted him into a reader.

"I'm committed to making a real difference in students' lives," she writes. Lucy stares out at the lake, turning the sentence over in her mind as she watches a sailboat drift past their house. She deletes the line, tries again. "I make an impact on my students' lives that extends beyond the classroom."

She reads her application over a dozen times before she works up the courage to hit send. The adrenaline that floods her veins feels identical to the split second between jumping off the dock and landing in the water: suspended in limbo, waiting to make a splash. Waiting to savor what comes next.

Chapter Six

VIVIAN

Vivian is drenched. Her hands are sore. There's a smudge of grease on her cheek. And despite it all, when she steps into the shower, lukewarm water is still waiting for her; she hadn't fixed anything. Her dad didn't need to pinch pennies. He could've easily replaced the boiler years ago, but he didn't, so here she is, playing plumber to bump the house's value up a notch and getting rescued by her half-sister like a damsel in DIY distress. It's yet another sign that Vivian doesn't belong here.

Once she's clean and dry, she crashes on the twin bed she's been exiled to and plays a voicemail from her mother.

"Hi." Celeste clears her throat. "I want to discuss how our conversation ended the other day. I hear that you're upset, and I'm sorry if I've made you feel that way."

Her intonation is clean, almost mechanical, like she wrote herself a script.

"I was hurt by your accusations that I'm distant and cold, but I understand that it was a heated moment. I know you don't really mean it. As for the situation with that other girl, well..." Celeste sighs.

Even this part—trailing off into a dramatic huff—sounds rehearsed.

"That wasn't my secret to share. You'll understand when you're married someday."

Vivian's eyes ache from rolling too hard.

“Being a parent isn’t easy, and if I’ve made some mistakes along the way, so be it.” With a little laugh, she adds, “But I can’t have messed up *too* terribly because you’ve turned out so well. I hope you know how proud I am of you. Your dad was, too.”

Vivian is surprised to find herself tearing up at that.

“If you’d like me to be more attentive, I’ll do my best. I’ll call you more often, and you should call me, too.” Then she seems to veer off script. “Though not between eleven and five—you know I’m working. And I’m doing the nine a.m. class at Tracy Anderson on Tuesdays and Thursdays now. But that’s it.” There’s another sigh, a real one this time. “I love you, Vivian. Let’s talk soon, okay?”

Vivian plays it again, stunned. It’s a stretch to call this an apology—Celeste didn’t fully admit that she was wrong—but her little speech was at least apology-shaped, and it’s more than Vivian ever expected. It would’ve been more likely for her mother to keep her distance for a while, then call about something unrelated—“Do you ever see anyone from Hollywood at work? A director, maybe? Would you slip him my name?”—and forget that their fight ever happened. For her mother, this was generous, her version of kind. Vivian should just shut up and be grateful, but she’s fairly certain Celeste’s behavior will slip back into place by next week. She wishes she had more faith in their relationship.

She will call her mother back. At some point.

For now, she rereads her recent text history with Oscar. For every one of his short gray texts, there are five of her long blue ones. Sometimes, he simply didn’t respond. Frustrated, Vivian dials him. The call goes to his too-familiar voicemail message. Anger pools deep in her chest, in her fist, in her jaw.

“Hi. It’s me,” she says sharply. “It really sucks for me to be sitting here alone, thinking about you, missing you, planning out this business we both desperately want—or at least I thought we wanted—and getting nothing from you in return. I’m struggling here. You can’t ignore me, especially not now that my life is falling apart. I don’t get what’s going on with you.” She

takes a shaky breath. “I’ve been so strong for you for so long. I don’t think it’d kill you to talk to me.”

After she hangs up, she collapses bitterly on the bed and stewes in her own misery. She stays like that, waiting for Oscar’s response and fantasizing about his apology, until her phone lights up. She rockets upright and grabs the device, only to find an email from Della’s publicist celebrating a *New York Times* story on “The New Class of Young Restaurateurs Demolishing Fine Dining’s Stuffy Reputation.” She knew this was coming. Vivian clicks on the link and waits for the story to load.



Vivian first met Oscar Delgado, owner of Della, two years ago during her job interview. She’d been referred by an old mentor, even though she’d never been director of anything before and twenty-eight was young for this type of role. After she applied, there was an unusually long stretch of time before she heard anything back at all. She wanted the position desperately; if she landed it, she’d say yes no matter the salary or circumstances. She was bored by her current job’s fussy older clientele and barely scraping by on the insulting excuse for a salary. She was also exhausted by her boss’s needlessly punishing comments every time she so much as took a bathroom break. “What are you here for if not to work?” he’d sneer. Vivian wanted to be treated like a human.

When Oscar called her in for an interview, she nearly screamed. His name was synonymous with rave reviews and sold-out seating. The bar to impress him would be high. When they met, he scanned her résumé like he was seeing it for the first time. In person, he was even more striking than she’d expected from photos she’d seen online: dark, blazing eyes; thick, expressive brows; cheekbones like cut glass; a glint of silver running through the dark hair at his temples.

“So, you have no actual experience as a wine director?”

“Not yet, but I passed the CMS’s Master Sommelier Diploma exam at the top of my class, and I’ve worked in the industry for six years, and—”

“Then why’d Gio recommend you?” Oscar didn’t seem annoyed, just puzzled.

She launched into the response she had prepared for this very question. “I think I could do a great job here,” she said, explaining that she’s a fast learner and a hard worker with plenty of ideas for pushing Della’s wine list even further.

He studied her for a moment. She tried to meet his cool, steady eye contact. When he leaned forward and clasped his hands in front of him, his wedding band gleamed in the light.

“All right, let’s do this. So, Vivian, tell me about your career so far.”

She was sailing through his questions when he mentioned that the fridges in the climate-controlled basement cellar were set to sixty degrees.

“Fifty-five,” she corrected automatically.

He paused mid-sentence. “I’m sorry, what?”

She didn’t want to embarrass him, but explained, “Cellars should be set to fifty-five degrees. Anything above that, and you risk losing acidity and flavor.”

He took her in, then grinned. “So you really know your stuff, huh?”

She sat up an inch straighter. “Like Gio said.”

After a half hour of questions and answers, he glanced at his watch. “Do we have time? What the hell, let’s go. I’m taking you for a tour of the place.”

He showed her around the cellar, asking for her thoughts on different vintages. He knew quite a bit, as it turned out, but Vivian could teach him a thing or two. He hung on her every word. Vivian was shocked by this—the industry is a toxic cesspool of fragile male egos—but didn’t dare let him see that. No, let him think she regularly schooled award-winning restaurateurs on the contents of their own cellars. She was pretty sure she was nailing the interview.

They had made their way from reds to whites to sparklings.

“So, one last question for you,” he said, leaning against a fridge and casually crossing one ankle over the other.

“Yes?”

Her pulse thumped in her ears. This was it. Her final chance to impress him.

“Pretend I’m a customer. I’m coming in to sit at the bar—no dinner—and I tell you I’d like something bubbly to celebrate a special occasion.”

“What kind?”

Most celebrations are more or less the same, but this attention to detail is what makes Vivian so good.

He grinned. “A job offer,” Oscar said in that smooth, steady voice she would come to know so well.

Giddy, she recommended a bottle. He pulled it out and popped the cork. (She had notes on his technique—it’s easiest to twist the bottle, not the cork itself—but recognized it wasn’t the right time to give them.) He poured two flutes and she accepted one. It fizzed with promise.



Working at Della was sublime. For the first month, she didn’t tweak the menu; she wanted to see what diners gravitated toward. From pinot noirs to pét-nats, they were mostly trusting enough to try anything Vivian recommended. So, she crafted the wine program of her dreams, made possible by the generous budget Oscar gave her. She made regular trips to wineries, which told her everything she needed to know about stocking and selling her wares. With soil in her shoes and a third-generation winemaker walking her through his vineyard, a bottle meant so much more than it did in a catalog: It was about people and place. The rest of Della’s staff seemed less downtrodden than her previous coworkers ever did. Even the Byredo hand lotion in the restroom was luxurious (and nobody ever reprimanded her for bathroom breaks).

Running a restaurant is nothing but a string of unpleasant surprises. Oscar seemed to handle them all with ease. The shipment of tuna accidentally got left out on the counter overnight; Table Five skipped out on their bill; a waiter mistakenly sent complimentary flutes of Champagne over to a couple mere minutes *before* the future groom planned to propose. In every situation, Oscar swallowed the news stoically. Then he'd calmly explain what to do: defrost the spare salmon fillets to put a twist on the tuna carpaccio appetizer; personally cover the table's tip so the staff still gets paid; apologize profusely to the couple, deliver an extra bottle on the house, and promise a discount if they'd like to have an engagement party at Della. He always knew what to say.

More than once, Vivian caught herself staring at Oscar. She was drawn to his gregarious charm, his innovative talent, and something mysterious she couldn't quite name—an It factor that made him the most compelling person in any room. During family dinner, the communal staff meal before service began, waiters and cooks would always draw him into conversation, but when it came time to actually sit down, he wound up in the seat next to Vivian a smidge more often than could be explained by random chance.

The bar closed later than the kitchen, so it wasn't uncommon for Vivian and Oscar to be among the last to leave. They fell into a routine: him dreaming up a request—"something delicious enough to make me forget what a pain in the ass Table Twelve was tonight"—simply for the fun of seeing what she'd pick. She'd choose a bottle, and they'd split it as they closed up shop, recapping that night's wildest moments, trading industry gossip, and, every once in a while, talking about their own lives. They became friends.

Oscar rarely mentioned Carla, his wife. The little Vivian knew about her came from the internet (she was curious). They'd married six years ago. She worked at a marketing firm nearby, yet never dropped by Della. On Instagram, she and Oscar posed for a picture in Hudson, the kind of town New Yorkers visit on long weekends to shop for \$300 alpaca wool sweaters and antique brass candlesticks. Vivian wondered if their relationship was anything like her parents': pretty on the outside, empty inside.

One night, emboldened by her third glass of wine (or was it her fourth? Like a gentleman, he always noticed when she was running low), she asked Oscar about Carla.

“What about her?” he asked, stiffening slightly.

“I never see her around. What’s she like?”

“She’s busy. She’s fine.”

“Oh.” Vivian didn’t know what else to say.

She had begun to forget that Oscar was her boss instead of her late-night drinking buddy. In the silence, that knowledge roared back, painfully clear.

Oscar exhaled. “Things have been tough between us for a couple of years now.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

And she was. Despite her crush—she had finally admitted to herself that the charged energy she felt around Oscar very much qualified as such—she didn’t want him to be unhappy.

He told her more. Carla resented him for not having a “normal” nine-to-five, something he had warned her about when they met. (That was something that Vivian struggled with, too; nobody ever wanted to schedule dates around her regular four p.m.–to–one a.m. shifts.) Carla wanted a homebody husband, somebody to curl up with on Sunday nights to watch *Succession* live. She saw Della as her competition when it came to his time and energy, and he was frustrated by her lack of support for his career. They’d been in couple’s counseling for months, but recently decided to take a break from it. They lived under the same roof; that was about it. Emotionally, romantically, they were nearly estranged.

This was the glummiest she’d ever seen Oscar. She missed his smile. He had a great one—it always started in the glimmering depths of his eyes before cracking wide open across his face.

So, Vivian leaned in and kissed him. One hand lightly rested on his jaw, and the other steadied herself on his knee. She felt a giddy shock when her lips found his—she hadn’t known for sure that she was going to do it until it happened. Oscar didn’t flinch. He tasted like citrus, peaches, and honey,

thanks to the northern Italian white they'd been sharing. It reminded Vivian of everything they had in common that Carla didn't seem to care about.

Carla. Vivian pulled away.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "I don't know why I did that."

Vivian knew the pain of being cheated on firsthand—how it had ignited a sinking fear that she wasn't lovable enough to deserve loyalty, one that never quite went away. At twenty-two, she'd fallen in love for the first time with Noah Moskovitz, an investment banker a few years older than her who she'd met at a club. After three thrilling years, they were on the verge of moving in together. His thirtieth birthday fell a week into their apartment hunt. That morning, she surprised him by arriving at his place with a box of chocolate fudge cupcakes. A woman opened his door in a towel. Vivian was shattered. She didn't want to pry open her heart for anyone else after that.

Vivian pulled away from Oscar, horrified. Her last meal was a cup of mint-dusted gazpacho several hours ago—the wine had gone to her head, yes, but that was no excuse. She'd crossed a hard line. There's no way to undo something like that. He'd have to fire her.

Oscar's jaw hung open an inch. The man who always knew what to say was rendered speechless.

Vivian got up. "I should go, I'm sorry, I—"

He swiveled to face her. Hoarse, he said, "You have nothing to apologize for."

They stared at each other for a moment. Heat rose to her cheeks. His gaze dropped to her lips, but he didn't move any closer, and she understood that he wouldn't—not unless she did. So she took an exhilarating step toward him, slid her fingers from his cheek to his hair, and kissed him. His soft mouth loosened the tension from her shoulders. She pulled him off the bar stool and led him around the corner, into the kitchen, so they were hidden from view of the street. As she melted against the wall, he gently cupped the back of her head so it didn't hit the brick. She pinched the placket of his white button-down shirt and pulled him toward her. His hands found her waist; her sides tingled under his touch.

She could have done that forever.

But they shouldn't have been doing it at all.

"Oscar." She pressed her fingers into his chest and delicately pushed him two inches away.

His grip on her torso slackened. He looked equal parts awed and afraid.

She knew this was outrageous, but it didn't feel reckless. Leaving felt crazier than staying.

"We should talk about this," she said, weak-kneed.

"We should." His voice was husky with desire.

"Is this a bad idea?"

He braced one hand against the wall. His breath was shallow; his eyes, heavy-lidded.

"We're professionals," he said, gaze locked on hers. "We can do this and keep our heads and not let it affect our work tomorrow."

Keep our heads—it sounded so reasonable when he put it that way. It would be strictly physical, no messy emotions or workplace drama. Neither of them would get hurt.

"Professionals," she said, nodding. "Of course." When he kissed her again, she kissed back.

LUCY

The next day, Lucy takes *Sandals and Scandals in Santorini* down to the waterfront. She climbs into the back of her dad's boat and stretches her legs across the sun-warmed bench seat. Streaks of clouds drift lazily over a sapphire lake dotted with boats. There are chirping birds, jeweled dragonflies, and serene quartets of loons. Under any other circumstances, it would be heaven. Now, though, its beauty taunts her. Her days here are numbered.

She needs the book to lift her mood. In the headshot on the back, a much younger version of Celeste sits on the steps of a stately brownstone, wearing a burgundy silk blouse and tortoiseshell glasses. She has pale,

luminous skin, a strong nose, and dark eyes that match her thick, chocolate brown hair. Even then, she had her signature bob with blunt bangs. Her chin rests in her hand, where a sizable diamond juts out from her finger.

Lucy can't help but compare Celeste's rock to the cubic zirconia tennis bracelet Dawn bought herself as a fortieth birthday treat. She had always wanted one—well, one with diamonds, though Lucy could hardly tell hers wasn't the real deal. Once she actually owned it, she rarely clasped it on. “What, am I supposed to let maple syrup drip all over it?” she'd asked.

Next to the picture, a snippet of text reveals a charmed life: “Celeste Levy is the author of *The Mistress in the Mountains*. *Sandals and Scandals in Santorini* is her second novel. A graduate of Columbia University, she lives in New York City with her husband and daughter.” *With her husband*. Celeste would never think twice about mentioning him in public. Meanwhile, Hank had cautioned Lucy not to speak too openly about their family; it'd cause problems for him if word got out. She'd hated hearing that, but had just said, “Okay, got it.”

Lucy begins to read, though it's hard to focus. The novel is about Lydia Stein, a ceramicist and art-world darling who follows her boyfriend, Desmond Scott, to Greece, where he's leading an archaeological dig. On the surface, Desmond has nothing in common with Lucy's father: He's as social as her dad was introverted, fascinated by history whereas he had a head for numbers, British-born and ridiculously proper. But with every chapter, Lucy picks up details that are unmistakably borrowed from her dad. Each man wears a hand-me-down gold watch engraved with his father's initials and had a childhood sailing accident that left a nick of a scar on his ankle.

Desmond isn't a direct copy of Hank. Even so, the tenderness with which Lydia cares for him is beautiful to read. Celeste loved Hank deeply—that much is clear. She hates that she's jealous, not on her mom's behalf but on her own; Hank loved his wife for more than thirty years, whereas Lucy might not ever find that kind of longevity now. Her phone buzzes with a text.

Lucy, nice meeting you yesterday. Any chance
you happen to be around tonight?

She stares at Harrison's message. She is, in fact, technically available, but...for starters, she still loves Patrick. She suspects it might seem pathetic to accept a date with just a few hours' notice. And she's too raw with grief to guarantee she can make it through a full conversation without tearing up. Not one part of her week would make for good first-date conversation fodder.

It was so nice to meet you, but—

Delete.

Thank you for the invitation, but tonight's not—

Delete.

I'm so sorry if I gave you the wrong impression,
but I'm actually married.

It's clumsy, but it's something. Lucy hovers her thumb over send, reads it one more time, then deletes the whole thing again. Patrick left her. He doesn't want her back. If she truly needs to start over, she shouldn't reject handsome men knocking at her door. Lucy is curious about Harrison, and if nothing else, maybe a night out would be fun and exciting. Romantic, even.

Actually, she texts back, I am.

VIVIAN

Seeing her name alongside Oscar's in the *New York Times* makes Vivian's pulse race, like they're too exposed for their own good. After that first night, she and Oscar stole minutes together whenever they could. Their hands brushed as they carried their plates from family dinner to the dishwasher. They stayed at Della well past closing time, right up until the moment he'd retreat to the apartment he owned with his wife. Of course they were professionals about it all. They kept their heads. Nobody at the restaurant ever suspected anything. Vivian was relieved—not only that this wasn't affecting her work, but also that it was just a fling. She couldn't get hurt.

As it turned out, however, he liked things about her that other men never did: her naked ambition, her blunt tongue, the sass that came roaring out after a couple of glasses of cab. He admitted her palate for wine was better than his. She fell for him by accident, turned on by his surefire confidence and gregarious command of the room. She liked the deep, rumbling crack of his laughter, especially once she realized that nobody else made him sound quite like that. She appreciated the challenging lilt to his voice; it brought out the best in her. Around Oscar, Vivian felt like the sharpest, boldest, sexiest version of herself. The first year flew by in a dizzying blur. She'd never been happier. Her work had never been better—she felt energized, creative, deliciously alive.

Last summer, although Vivian didn't know it, she was packing for her last trip to Fox Hill Lake with her dad. She was moving back and forth from her narrow closet to the suitcase splayed open on the bed. Oscar, shirtless and barefoot in the open kitchen, was making coffee using the fancier machine he'd bought when he started spending more time at her apartment.

“So, tell me about this place,” he said. He'd given her the week off. “It's special to you, isn't it?”

“To my dad,” she corrected, sorting through her pile of swimsuits to find a few she could comfortably wear around him.

“But you're going.”

“It’s a free vacation.”

“You can afford a real vacation.” Oscar frowned. “Or am I not paying you enough?”

Women more ruthless than herself would use this opportunity to secure a healthy raise, but she didn’t want to take advantage of him. It’d feel cheap.

“You pay me fine,” she insisted.

Oscar appraised the gauzy white dress she’s folding. “I can’t picture you there. A dress like that belongs in Bali, Tulum—not on some backwoods lake.”

She struggled to put her thoughts into words. “It’s like turkey on Thanksgiving, you know? It’s flavorless, dry, it puts you to sleep, nobody actually likes it. But every year, you make the turkey anyway because that’s just what you do. That’s how I feel about Maine.” She paused. “And I’ll be honest, it *is* pretty up there.”

“If I ever visited,” he said, joining her on the burgundy duvet and delivering a mug, “what would it be like?”

A ridiculous question. He’d be out of place for sure, even more so than she is. But with Oscar in tow, the idea of Fox Hill Lake sounded more alluring. They could paddle out to the island, eat fried-clam lunches on the back deck, savor a bottle of sauvignon blanc as the sun slips behind the blue hills on the horizon. He could see how the forces of nature rule the lake, the same way they shape the grapes that become wine. A twisted part of her could see him getting along with her dad. Hank’s already said he’s impressed by Oscar’s success. At thirty and forty-two, she and Oscar are a dozen years apart—exactly like Oscar and Hank. And if anyone could hear their story without judgment, wouldn’t it be her dad?

Her phone was buried under a mess of clothes, so Vivian grabbed Oscar’s off the nightstand and punched in his passcode: 0625, the birthdate of his hero, Anthony Bourdain.

On Google Maps, she typed in the lake house’s address to show him where it is: a blip of blue on an expanse of green.

“Maybe someday,” he said, kissing her temple.



Three months ago, when Carla flew to Cleveland for her cousin's baby shower, Vivian and Oscar had an entire delectable weekend together. Normally, he'd go over to her cramped studio; by comparison, his two-bedroom apartment was a palace bathed in natural light. Vivian peered at Carla's unfamiliar things: her faded Buckeyes sleep shirt hanging over the lip of a white wicker hamper; a copy of Michelle Obama's memoir with a sticker on the front proclaiming it's signed (the spine hasn't been cracked); her deep conditioner formulated for color-treated hair (this reminded Vivian to vacuum and wipe down the shower and change the sheets, lest one of her own dark hairs stayed behind and ruined everything). She touched nothing.

On Sunday morning, she rose from Oscar's warm bed and quietly crept into the bathroom. One single sheet of toilet paper hung limply over the roll. Vivian opened the cabinet beneath the sink, hoping to find more, which she did. Next to a stack of pregnancy tests.

When she crawled back into bed, Oscar slung one leg over Vivian and pulled her close. Carla's flight home was that evening.

"Morning," he mumbled into her hair.

She stared at the wall over his shoulder. He nuzzled her stiff neck.

"You okay?" he murmured.

She didn't want to ask the question because she might get an answer she didn't like. But she asked anyway.

"Why are there pregnancy tests in your cabinet?"

His soft grip on her hip tensed ever so slightly. "Are those still there? They're old."

"How old?"

"Years."

"I didn't think you were trying."

"Originally, we were both on the fence—maybe me a little more than her—but we figured...if it happened, it happened. Now, though, I mean, she and I don't even touch in our sleep. I'm right on the edge of the bed." Then

he kissed Vivian's neck. In a voice like molten chocolate, he said, "Thank you for giving me a reason to sleep closer to the middle."

Vivian was relieved.

"If I threw them out, she wouldn't even notice," Oscar added.

She kissed him on the lips. "Good."

"I wish you didn't have to go," he said. "I want you to stay here every night."

She'd been having similar thoughts for weeks: She wanted more of him—maybe all of him. She hadn't said anything about it yet because, well, Oscar was a married man. Married men never leave their wives. In Oscar's case, Carla's own father had bankrolled the launch of Della. A divorce would kill Oscar's career and could put Vivian and the rest of the staff out of work, too. She knew not to beg for the impossible.

But he said it with such longing. He *wanted* her. He admired her, too: He asked the publicist to place Vivian on panels at food festivals and get her profiled in *Bon Appétit*. (She was working on it.) He clung to her words, preferring, for once, to listen instead of speak. Their relationship was a risk, but she always felt safe with him. So she said it. She put out the kind of suggestion you can't walk back.

"You know, we could do this all the time if things were different," she said, trailing her fingertips down his forearm, watching her nails drag across his dark hair.

"I know," he said, staring at her sadly.

Heart pounding, she tried to keep her voice even. "And what would you think about that?"

He fidgeted with his wedding band, which Vivian always tried to ignore. It looked like Hank's.

"I think about it all the time," he croaked.

The room felt airless. Up until then, Vivian hadn't let herself fully consider what would happen if Oscar were to leave his wife because she'd assumed he wouldn't. If he did...it would be a thrill. A terrifying thrill. He rubbed his face. An eyelash flaked onto his cheek. Part of Vivian yearned to

be a little girl whose troubles could be resolved by making a wish on it. His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed.

“Would you really want that?” he asked.

Oscar ran a finger gently along the ridge of her collarbone as he waited for her response. And for the first time, she let those thoughts unfurl. That day, the idea for the bar was born. They'd need to find new investors—a lengthy, difficult task, yes, but not necessarily impossible. Once they locked in the money, their future as a couple in public could begin.

LUCY

Harrison offers to pick up Lucy and drive her over to Foxy Roxy's for dinner, but that place is teeming with everyone she's ever known, Patrick included. She'd never be able to relax there. Instead, she suggests they meet at the Clam Shack, one of her favorite spots two towns over, and he agrees.

When she arrives, she spots him leaning against the side of the building. She struggles to hold cheerful eye contact for the full twenty seconds it takes to walk across the parking lot. She doesn't know where to look. How do people learn these things? The last time Lucy felt this lost on a date, she was fifteen years old. (Reader, she married him.)

“Hi,” he says, offering her the lightest graze of a hug. “Thanks for coming out on such short notice. You look beautiful.”

It's the simplest compliment, but it catches her off guard anyway. Patrick fell in love with her when she was a wisp of a teenager; once her thighs filled out and her belly turned soft, she wasn't sure how he felt about her appearance and didn't want to ask. He'd offer up “cute” or, if she put on a dress and prompted him, “pretty.” But “beautiful” hadn't been in rotation for a long time.

“Thank you,” she says as Harrison opens the door for her.

The place still has a kind of retro charm, with a red-and-white-striped awning, warm wood-paneled walls, checkerboard floors, and a lengthy

section of the menu dedicated to milkshakes.

“Table for two?” he asks the waitress.

As she takes them to a booth, Lucy scans the room, dreading the possibility of spotting Patrick. She breathes a little easier once she realizes they’re in the clear—that is, until she and Harrison are sitting face-to-face. She’s close enough to see there’s a freckle near his left pupil, and a dimple that flexes when he smiles. She didn’t know regular people outside Hollywood had cheekbones like that and finds herself nearly too shy to speak. What had she been thinking, pretending she could do this?

“Long time, no see. How’s it going?” he asks.

Her laugh is strangled. “Um. Well.”

She flicks through recent events, searching for anything remotely attractive to discuss. Losing her job? Crying over her dead dad? Yearning for the husband she’s still married to? Accusing her half-sister of swanning around on a life raft of money in a sea of clueless privilege? One minute in, the conversation is already a choose-your-own-adventure book with doom on every page.

“Well, I’m a teacher, so I’m off work for the summer,” Lucy says, a little too brightly. Technically, it’s not a lie. “I spent the afternoon reading outside—that’s kind of my perfect afternoon.”

“You teach English?”

She’s sinking. Does she?

“Eleventh and twelfth grade.”

“What’s your favorite book to teach?”

“*Pride and Prejudice*. It never gets old.” Especially now that she isn’t guaranteed another year of teaching it. “The kids think it’s going to be this musty, ancient thing, but then they discover it’s still so relatable.”

“That’s a good one.”

“You think so?”

The girls in class are usually on board. The guys typically couldn’t care less.

He leans forward on his elbows. “Don’t act so surprised. It’s a classic. I like to read all sorts of things.”

A waitress interrupts them. “You ready?”

Lucy rattles off her usual order: a basket of fried clam bellies with tartar sauce, a side of fries, and a vanilla milkshake.

“I’ll trust you. Two of everything, please,” he says.

Bursting with nerves and guilt, Lucy sits on her hands and watches the waitress scribble notes.

The moment she’s gone, Lucy exhales. “I actually got laid off yesterday.”

He winces. “I’m so sorry, that’s terrible.”

Fortunately, he sounds sincere, not turned off. It’s a relief to have at least a shred of the truth out there.

“I’m freaking out,” she admits.

“Oh, I bet. I get it, I was laid off once.”

“Really?”

They get to know each other. Before Patrick bought her a cone of mint chocolate chip ice cream on their first date, she had already known all the scraps of someone else’s life you’re bound to accumulate in a town of two thousand people. He’s the youngest of three boys. His dad owns a landscaping business. He broke his arm falling off a dirt bike in fifth grade, and his best friend, Brody—later the best man in their wedding—scrawled “POOP” on the cast in Sharpie. He had once gotten detention for running across the middle school’s soccer field in his boxers on a dare from friends...in February. He still doesn’t mind wearing shorts in winter, as long as it’s over forty degrees. If Lucy had met Harrison on a dating app, she’d at least know a few basics: his age, where he went to school, where he lives. But up until five minutes ago, Lucy only knew that his name is Harrison and that he has a library card.

But she learns. As they eat, he shares that he grew up in Portland and still works there as an attorney at his dad’s company. He was in Fox Hill the other day to visit some relatives on the lake. She offers up that she’s applying for jobs around his hometown, which gets a small smile out of him. He likes late-night talk shows and buys too many cookbooks. He’s been meaning to take a woodworking class but hasn’t gotten around to it.

Lucy likes the sound of his life. When he asks about hers, she scrubs Patrick from her story as if he never existed at all. She's been vulnerable enough for one night.

"Any siblings?" he asks.

"No," she says on autopilot. She rarely spoke about Vivian to anyone other than her husband and her best friends. "Well, sort of. A half-sister. We didn't grow up together."

"Are you close?"

She can't help but snort. Her eyes widen at her own sound.

"Sorry, no, it's just that she's...difficult. It's like we're from two different planets."

He nods. She overshared, didn't she?

"Is she on your mom's side or your dad's?"

It's such a simple question, and yet it catches Lucy off guard.

"Um." She's horrified to feel herself welling up. Her date is about to crumble like a kicked-over sandcastle. She stares down at her meal, refusing to let a tear fall. "My dad's? It's complicated."

When she eventually looks up, his expression is sympathetic, not pitying.

"We don't have to talk about it," he offers.

She's grateful that he doesn't dig further. At first, there's a natural lull in the conversation, but then it stretches on for too long.

A loud roar erupts from a rowdy table of eight—a welcome distraction. A rowdy group of young guys is doing shots, exuberantly whistling and goading each other on. Lucy wouldn't have guessed the Clam Shack *had* shot glasses. Upon closer inspection, she realizes it doesn't: They're clutching the same shallow plastic cups her tartar sauce came in.

"Summer people," she mutters.

Harrison turns around. "You think?"

They're dressed in T-shirts from private colleges and otherworldly-looking sneakers you'd never find at Famous Footwear. One has dared to don a Yankees cap.

“Absolutely. They can clog up Portland—sorry—or Kennebunkport or Bar Harbor, whatever. But small towns like these don’t have much in the way of restaurants, bars, attractions, you know? It’s not...” She searches for the right word, thinking of the luxurious locales Celeste Levy writes about. “This isn’t Vacationland.” Maine’s slogan. It adorns every license plate in the state.

“Parts of it are going that way, but is that necessarily such a bad thing?”

Her mind flashes to a political dynasty retreating to Fox Hill, the way the Bushes do in Kennebunkport, hikers and leaf peepers and lobster lovers infiltrating every corner of her hometown, bachelorette parties renting out houses just to use the lake as a backdrop for Instagram.

“No, it’s already outrageous. These perfectly homey cabins that have been in families for generations get knocked down by out-of-towners building flashy ‘farmhouse-style’ mansions to use a few weeks a year. I don’t get it—if someone wants that look, there are plenty of actual farmhouses around here.”

For a second, she loses her focus, imagining Hank’s warm, lovingly scuffed house—a place with real character—replaced with the cookie-cutter sterility of new construction, all white and greige with faux-marble counters. She’s railing against the exact problem she could be complicit in. The shame is sickening.

Harrison laughs. “True.”

It’s time to get off her soapbox, but she can’t. She refuels with a sip of milkshake.

“I see ‘For Sale’ signs everywhere these days, and these houses are going for double or triple what people around here can afford. How is that fair? The real estate agents are vultures. If Fox Hill gets overrun by outsiders, they can move on to the next vacation town. We can’t.”

The waitress stops by to clear their plates, curbing Lucy’s ramble.

“I’m sorry, that was a lot,” Lucy says.

“No, I understand,” Harrison says. “Tons of people from New York and Boston moved up to Portland during the pandemic. Property values nearly doubled.”

Pushing the idea of a life there further and further into fantasyland.

The waitress drops the check in the middle of the table.

“Let’s split it,” Lucy says, reaching for her wallet.

The thought of spending money without a guaranteed paycheck in sight nauseates her, but she isn’t sure what the etiquette is. She’s pretty sure men still typically pay on the first date but doesn’t want to seem greedy or entitled if she’s wrong.

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to get it,” Harrison says.

Her stomach unclenches. “Are you sure?”

He admonishes her good-naturedly. “Lucy, even if you weren’t just laid off, it’d be my pleasure.”

Lucy feels strangely taken care of. It’s not new to have a man cover her bill—she and Patrick typically alternated paying at restaurants—but that felt ordinary, not romantic.

She tucks away her wallet. “Well, thank you so much for dinner. This was lovely.”

She isn’t exaggerating. If he’d been too forward or asked invasive questions, she would’ve panicked, but tonight has been just right.

His dimple flexes in a way that gives her a nervous thrill. “It really was.”

Later he’s saying something as he accompanies her to her car, but she doesn’t have the bandwidth to listen. She’s mentally flipping through every romance novel she’s ever read, zooming in on the first dates. This should end with a good-night kiss, shouldn’t it? She’d be crazy not to want that—Harrison is gentle and kind. He’s been nice to her. He’s *hot*. But as they’re walking across the parking lot, all she can think is, *Please don’t kiss me, don’t kiss me, don’t kiss me*. Lucy’s married. She loves Patrick. It would be excruciatingly wrong.

“Mm. Yeah,” she says as they reach her car, sensing that’s likely the right response.

She gulps in air as she fumbles for her keys, not quite able to look at him. He seemed to enjoy dinner together and she feels guilty for shutting down like this. She doesn’t want to disappoint him or waste his time. When she finally looks up at him, though, his smile is polite, nothing more. His

hands don't leave his pockets. She freezes as Harrison's gaze slides to her mouth, and then he blinks.

He clears his throat and takes a step back. "Well, thanks for coming to dinner."

Her cheeks burn as she nods. "Of course, thank you for inviting me."

A shadow flickers across his features as he gently touches her arm. "Have a good night."

Lucy sinks into her car in a confused daze. Harrison asked her out. He called her beautiful. He seemed to like her. And then he pulled away? She wasn't ready for a kiss, but she's embarrassed by the rejection, too. She puts the radio on to drown out her thoughts, but the song that fills the car is an old Taylor Swift ballad that reminds her of falling in love with Patrick. She jams her finger into the dashboard and lands on an infomercial. She doesn't care enough to find anything better. As she drives home, the last peach-pink rays of sun slip away. She missed the sunset. The sacrifice hadn't been worth it.

VIVIAN

Vivian had known this *New York Times* piece was coming. The reporter had contacted Oscar weeks ago. She was with him, eating blintzes and borscht at B&H Dairy, an East Village hole-in-the-wall Carla would never visit, when he got the email. The interview happened the next week—he thought it went well—and the photo shoot was set for the end of June. Carla had wanted him to wear his charcoal Polo Ralph Lauren suit and his navy Hermès tie.

"Roll up your shirt sleeves and throw the jacket over your arm," Vivian suggested in bed when Carla was in an hours-long cut-and-color appointment. "Skip the tie. Undo a couple buttons."

He smirked. "You want me to undress for the *New York Times*?"

The vision delighted her. God, the zing of chemistry was still there.

Splaying her hand across his chest, she said, “No, I want you to undress for me and only me.”

Recently they’d had a promising meeting with an investor, and it had gotten their hopes up that Oscar would be free of Carla sooner rather than later. They couldn’t wait: He had tucked a suitcase under Vivian’s bed with stacks of emergency cash, some underwear and shirts, the James Beard Award he won for Outstanding Restaurateur last year. She daydreamed about the sweet relief of living openly—no more pretending to be single in front of her family, no more last-minute cancellations she had to suck up and forgive because he had to save face with his wife, no more requesting the Valentine’s Day shift to avoid spending the evening alone.

“Looking boring, professional, *stuffy*—that’s the wrong move here,” she said. “That won’t make Della the hottest restaurant in town. You know what would? You looking like every woman’s fantasy.”

“I don’t need to be every woman’s fantasy,” he said in a low, gravelly voice, pulling her closer and grinning through a heady kiss. “Just yours.”

She felt drunk off his words—buzzed, giddy, weightless.

“You know I’m right,” she said, rolling on top of him.

And those were the last words either of them spoke for the rest of the afternoon. The next day, the promising investor called back to say he’d decided to go in a different direction. They were crushed.

If Oscar skipped the tie, she thinks, it will mean he’s truly committed to her. His silence right now is a fluke. He loves her.

If he’s wearing a tie, she’s in trouble.

She clicks, then scrolls down in a frenzy.

No tie.

Breathless, she skims the piece to see how prominently he was featured (fairly so) and if there was any mention of her wine program (briefly). Then she rereads it slowly from the top. The review heaps praise on the inspired seasonal menu and stylish atmosphere, though noting that certain creative dishes try too hard. The writer calls the wine list a “thoughtfully curated” mix of little-known producers with big flavors, which makes Vivian flush

with pride. Oscar comes across as decisive, sure-footed, original, tuned in to what diners want before they realize it themselves.

Vivian studies the photo, hoping to see traces of puffy eyes or dark circles—something to hint that he'd been missing her—and comes up empty-handed. It's an upsettingly handsome portrait. His dark eyes, his best feature, glint alluringly. For one brief moment, Vivian considers if she should text him congratulations. After all, no tie.

The screen lights up with Oscar's name. *Finally*. Relief flows through Vivian like bubbly streaming down a five-tier Champagne tower. She makes him wait, then picks up at the last minute.

Her resolve melts immediately. "Hi," she says, more softly than she should. Anger hasn't kept her from missing him. "There you are."

Oscar's breath sounds shallow. When he finally speaks, his voice is pinched.

"Hi."

Something is wrong. She slides onto the wooden floor and slumps against the bed.

"Did you get my voicemail?" she asks.

"Your voicemail?" The way he says it, it's like Vivian asked him to locate his last dry-cleaning bill or his sixth-grade math homework. Irrelevant. "Oh. Yeah."

"And?"

"We need to talk."

The worst four words in the English language. "Okay."

Already, she's firing up arguments for why she's being reasonable, not clingy. She's litigating his absence in her head, ready to list off all the ways in which he's fallen short when she needed him most. She's so high on self-righteous fury, she doesn't see the curveball coming.

Oscar sighs. "Carla's pregnant."

Vivian's blood runs cold. "What?"

"I've been trying to find the right time to tell you. We found out the morning your dad died, and I didn't want to upset you then, and then there was Lucy..."

She's too shocked to speak.

"She's nine weeks now. She's been really sick, throwing up constantly. It's been hectic with doctors' appointments and everything. We're not telling anybody yet."

We. Him and Carla. That word used to mean him and Vivian.

"I don't understand. You weren't trying anymore. You weren't ever really trying at all."

"I know."

"I mean, I didn't think you were *sleeping together*."

"Almost never," he says miserably.

"Well, clearly something happened."

"It was just once or twice recently, and she—"

"I'm sorry, which was it?"

"What?"

"Once or twice? Isn't that the kind of thing you'd remember?"

There's a brutal silence.

"Well, she's been reading this book about intimacy. She heard about it on a podcast and—"

They've fought plenty of times before, usually over Oscar canceling on Vivian at the last minute, but not like this. He'd own up to his mistakes, no excuses. He's never squirmed like this.

"How. Many. Times?"

Oscar clears his throat. "Three."

Vivian feels like she's sinking. "That's not fair to me."

"I know. I feel terrible about it. I wish this wasn't happening. I'm really sorry, Vivian."

"You're sorry?" Vivian echoes, brittle enough to snap. "You're really sorry. Oh, that's helpful. Amazing, thanks."

"Viv—"

"Do you know what I've been doing, Oscar, while you've been tending to your pregnant wife?" She doesn't wait for an answer. "I've been trying to sell my dad's beloved house so we—you and I—can go off on our own and build a life together out in the fucking open. Every step of the way, his love

child has been pouting and crying and trying to stop me. I feel like a stone-cold bitch, but I'm doing it for us. And you don't even care enough to text me back."

Rage illuminates each word. Vivian has been good and quiet and lonely and secretive for two long years, waiting for freedom, waiting for her sacrifices to pay off. Meanwhile, Oscar has been getting laid and offering his wife saltines.

"We can still do that," he says earnestly. "You and me. Together."

"Right," she says, dripping with contempt.

She'd fantasized about it in mouthwatering detail: Mornings in a shared apartment with golden light seeping through gauzy curtains. His espresso machine on the kitchen counter, her decanter in the cabinet above. Ten days off in January for his birthday to eat and drink their way through Argentina. His arm slung around her waist in public. Dropping a container of Greek yogurt and a box of pasta into a single shopping cart. Joint signatures at the bottom of a new commercial lease.

Now she sees a diaper bag. Smells a diaper bag. Imagines dull logistical conversations about pickup times and nap schedules stretching out into infinity. He wouldn't really leave Carla after all. The slivers of time he can carve out for Vivian would disintegrate even further. She'd strain to get crumbs from him.

"I love you," he says. "This doesn't have to change anything."

It already has.

"I've been needing more of you, Oscar. Not less."

"I want to be here for you," he urges.

The tenderness in his voice kills her. She can't subsist on nice words and pretty intentions anymore.

"Well, you're not," she snaps. "We're done."

Chapter Seven

LUCY

Lucy returns to the glare of Fiona Apple’s “Criminal.” In the kitchen, Vivian pulls the cork from a half-empty bottle with a *pop* and glugs the liquid into a glass.

“Hi,” Vivian says morosely over her shoulder.

She sets the bottle down and lifts her glass. On second thought, she sloshes in another inch of wine. Then another. Even for Vivian, this seems like a lot. She can’t still be reeling from their fight, can she?

“Are you okay?” Lucy asks.

“Never better,” she says bitterly.

Lucy doesn’t want to apologize, exactly. She shouldn’t have to. But now that the worst of her anger has burned off, icing Vivian out would be too uncomfortable.

“I know things got intense earlier...We don’t have to talk about it tonight.”

Vivian is staring off into middle distance, barely listening. “What? Oh, no. Not that.”

Lucy is curious enough to take the bait. “Is something wrong?”

Vivian swallows a long sip. “I just broke up with my boyfriend.”

Without asking, she fills a second glass and hands it over. Lucy assumes it’s expensive—Vivian had a case shipped.

“Do you want to talk about what happened?” she asks cautiously.

Vivian wrinkles her nose. “Things have been weird between us ever since Dad died. Today he finally told me why.”

Lucy takes a sip. It could be Franzia, or it could be \$300—she has no idea.

“Why?”

Vivian stares into her swirling glass. “He fucked up. He lied to me. And there’s no way to fix this,” she says flatly.

“Why not?”

“I don’t want to get into it. It’s nothing good.”

For all of Vivian’s showiness, she can be surprisingly cagey. She’s making a fuss like Lucy is supposed to drag the story out of her, but stonewalls Lucy at every turn.

“Would you still go into business together?”

Vivian deflates. “I couldn’t work with him—not now. But I don’t know enough to open a place on my own.”

Lucy gets an idea. Not a good one, necessarily, but with such an uncertain future, she’s desperate in all kinds of ways: If she lands a job, she’d be heartbroken to lose the house. If she doesn’t, she’ll hit rock bottom. What she needs is time—time to secure a new position, or sway Vivian not to sell, or both.

Before she can talk herself out of it, she blurts, “Your boss gave you lots of time off, right?”

Vivian shudders. “I mean, we’ll see if this changes things, but...for now, yeah.”

“What do you mean?”

Vivian hesitates, clearly weighing how much to share. “We were dating. He’s my...” She grimaces. “Ex, I guess.”

“Huh?”

“Oscar’s my boss.”

Lucy’s eyebrows shoot up, but to her credit, she does her best to swallow the news gamely. After everything her half-sister has thrown her way this summer, this is hardly the most damning.

“You have a terrible poker face,” Vivian says.

Lucy yanks her expression back to neutral territory. “No, I was just... surprised.”

Vivian rolls her eyes. “Sure.”

“I’m sorry.” She chooses her words carefully, knowing she has one shot to get this right. “What if you stay here for the summer? Enjoy the lake. Relax. There’s no rush to figure everything out. And while you’re here, if you don’t need the money for the business immediately, how about you put a pause on selling the house? Just until I figure out my work situation and my mom’s construction is finished.”

Vivian’s mouth falls open. “You want me to hang out here all summer and take the house off the market?”

“It’s already *on* the market?” Lucy asks, alarmed.

“Not yet, technically. But I can’t stay here for months in the middle of nowhere.”

“This isn’t nowhere.”

“The closest bit of civilization is twenty minutes away—and it’s a funeral home.”

“Exactly, it’s only twenty minutes away.”

“How often do you think I need a funeral home, Lucy? Recent weeks excluded.”

“It’s next to a bank, too.”

“Chase has an app. But...”

Lucy doesn’t dare breathe.

“You’d be here, too?”

She should’ve thought this through more carefully. She couldn’t bear if Vivian stayed but kicked Lucy out.

“Well,” she says slowly, “for July, at least. I could leave in August if you’d like.”

“If you haven’t noticed, we make bad roommates.”

Lucy bites her lip. “I know.”

“We don’t like each other. I mean, sorry to sound like a bitch, but it’s the truth.”

“I know.”

“And you think that’s a good idea? The two of us here together?”

“It can’t get much worse.”

She’s relieved when Vivian laughs. Feeling brave, she adds, “Look, you’re not working right now. I’m unemployed. We could finally get to know each other. We don’t have to be best friends—”

“No,” Vivian agrees swiftly.

That stings.

“But maybe we can try making up for lost time. Aren’t you at least a little bit curious what would’ve happened if we’d grown up together?”

Lucy knows she’s setting herself up for rejection and humiliation. She’s essentially flailing around naked, pulling her heart out, and waving it around in front of her half-sister’s face.

Vivian looks away. “I guess.”

Vivian puts Lucy on edge and brings out the very worst in her: jealousy, pettiness, self-esteem demolished by a wrecking ball. But as brutal as living together all summer would be, it’s also Lucy’s last hope of saving the house and all the memories within it—that is, if she can convince Vivian to see it through her eyes and land a good job soon. She isn’t sure which is more daunting.

“I’m going to sell this place eventually, you know,” Vivian warns.

“Okay,” Lucy says plainly, though it’s a gut punch. At least she’ll know she tried.

“And the money—I’m sorry, but I stand by what I said earlier.”

“Understood.”

“You can’t bug me all summer about changing my mind.”

“I won’t.”

Vivian stares into her glass, then looks up at Lucy. “What the hell, I’m in.”

Chapter Eight

LUCY

It's the first morning of Lucy's second chance. Fox Hill Lake knows, somehow, that it's showtime. It throws down its very best: seventy-eight degrees with thick, fluffy clouds gliding majestically across a cerulean sky. She and Vivian hadn't spoken much last night after they reached a tentative agreement. Lucy hadn't wanted to push her luck, but these are the summer days she lives for. She invited Vivian to join her on an outing, and she was secretly delighted—and terrified and nauseated—when she said yes.

Lucy, dressed in a tank-style swimsuit with a loose pair of cutoffs on top, jumps on board with her armful of supplies: a Sox cap Caleb left here once, a can of seltzer, a towel, and *Will You Maui Me?* (Too high on adrenaline, she'd stayed up late to devour the rest of *Sandals and Scandals in Santorini*. The heart-wrenching romance was legitimately engrossing.) Vivian makes it down a minute later in bug-eyed sunglasses and a black bikini with a long, flimsy robe fluttering dramatically behind her. The daughter of Celeste Levy, no doubt.

They zip down the center of the lake, then make a smooth arc around the tip of Wilson Point, swinging toward the cove and back out again. Lucy presses her hat down tight as her hair whips her neck and cheeks.

Vivian slows to a stop on the southern side of the lake. "It's a nice day."

Lucy beams. "Isn't it?"

"Okay there, don't get too excited."

She shimmies out of her ridiculous robe and rubs sunscreen over her face, arms, legs, and torso. “Would you mind doing my back?” she asks. She sounds casual, but as she turns and places her hands on her hips, she stiffens.

Lucy squirts the cream onto her fingers and smears it over Vivian’s shoulders and down her back. Dawn raised Lucy on pancake stacks and the promise that life is too short to worry about something as superficial as cellulite. But next to Vivian, who shares half her DNA, it’s tempting to wonder, *Could I look like that if I tried?*

Vivian offers to return the favor. Lucy keeps her shorts on.

There’s a ripple of awkwardness as they muddle through what comes next. Should they talk? Or is it better to give each other space? Lucy pulls her book from her bag. Vivian gawks at the cover.

“You’re actually reading that?”

Lucy blushes. “I figured I finally should.”

Vivian shakes her head. “Have fun.”

“You don’t like this one?”

“I haven’t read all of them.”

“Oh.”

Lucy can’t fathom growing up with Celeste Levy as a mother and not taking full advantage—although, on second thought, reading your mom’s steamy scenes featuring men who seem an awful lot like your dad is probably deeply uncomfortable.

“You know, you should invite her to the funeral.”

“Celebration of life,” Vivian corrects.

“Will you?”

Vivian sighs. “You really want to meet her?”

Lucy didn’t mean to come across like a pathetic groupie. “I don’t mean it like that. It’s just, she was his wife. Shouldn’t she come?”

“She hates it up here. Hasn’t been in fifteen, twenty years, probably.”

Lucy should let it go, but she wants to start planning the funeral. “I’ll invite mine if you invite yours.”

Vivian pushes her glasses up into her hair and squints. “You seriously think they want to spend a second together? On a *boat*? We’ll be fishing at least one of them out of the water by the end of the night.”

Lucy had assumed Dawn would join them. She deserves closure, too.

“Just consider it, okay?”

The glasses snap down. “Fine.”

Vivian picks up her phone. Lucy opens her book, figuring the conversation is over. A minute later, though, Vivian pipes up.

“How did you find out he had two families?”

“My mom told me when I was nine. I was upset that he wouldn’t come to Fox Hill for my birthday, and she had to explain why he wasn’t always around.”

“He didn’t even tell you himself?”

“Not that I can remember. He didn’t like to talk about you two with me.”

“What about when you visited him in New York? How could he avoid it?”

“Well,” Lucy says slowly, “that never came up because he never invited me.” She’s ashamed to admit it. “When I was little, he told me his apartment was too small for guests. And when I got older, and I found out he was married—”

Lucy doesn’t want to unearth what happened next. It still hurts to think about, but maybe it’ll help Vivian see what Lucy lost because of Hank’s cruel arrangement—what Lucy is owed.

“I saw you once,” she admits. “In New York.”

Vivian startles. “Seriously? When?”

If there’s a dividing line in Lucy’s life, that day was it. “I auditioned for my middle school’s honors chorus because that class took an annual trip to the opera in New York City. I got in and I went. A few hours before the show, our group was visiting Central Park, and I realized how close I was to your apartment.”

“How did you—”

“I found the address on a piece of mail he sent to my mom—our monthly check. When the chaperones weren’t paying attention, I snuck

away.”

It had been her first—maybe only—act of rebellion.

“I just wanted to see the apartment. I thought...I don’t know, that it would help me come to terms with everything, maybe? It doesn’t make sense now. I was just a kid.”

Maybe thirteen isn’t young for a New Yorker to be wandering the streets of Manhattan alone, but Lucy had never felt smaller. The skyscrapers were so tall, she got dizzy looking up. She’d expected to see cramped apartments, not brownstones the size of mansions. The sight of a homeless man on Broadway broke her heart; she gave him half her lunch money, not realizing she’d encounter another in fifty feet, and another after that. As she made her way toward West 77th Street, guilt nagged at her. She would’ve gone back if she weren’t already so close.

“I found where you lived and I stood across the street, just looking. But then the door opened, and you all came out. You, Dad, your mom.”

Hank and Vivian walked side by side, with Celeste a few steps behind them. Lucy hid behind a car to watch. It was cold enough that she could see her breath, and she shivered as they ambled down the sidewalk. A perfect little trio.

“You said something—I don’t know what, I couldn’t hear—and Dad laughed and put his arm around you. He ruffled up your hair and hugged you; you got annoyed and pushed him away.” A familiar sadness hangs heavy in her chest. “I couldn’t believe that you were lucky enough to have a family together like that all the time and took it for granted.”

“You didn’t say anything? You didn’t want to catch up to us?” Vivian asks incredulously.

Lucy had been frozen to the spot, stricken with shock. “No.”

“I must’ve seemed like a brat.”

Lucy nods. “Yeah, kind of. I was jealous.”

“I’m sorry. I had no idea.”

“I know you didn’t.”

Vivian is lost in thought. “He slipped up once. I overheard him on the phone with you.”

Lucy's jaw goes slack. "Seriously?"

"I was fourteen. You were on speaker. I heard him talking about 'Mom,' but it didn't sound like you were talking about mine. He tried explaining it away, but his answers didn't add up. I didn't know your name or anything, but...I knew something was up."

Despite the warm day, a chill runs through Lucy. "When did he tell you the truth?"

Vivian looks uncomfortable. "He never did."

It feels like a gut punch. Vivian was worth shielding from this whole mess, but Lucy wasn't?

"I kept trying to get him to come clean. The more I dug in, the more suspicious he acted. Something just felt very...off. The day he died, I asked him about it point-blank, and he denied it."

"He was that ashamed of me?" The second Lucy asks the question, she regrets sounding so weak in front of Vivian.

"Ashamed of himself, probably."

Maybe. But it hurts nonetheless.

Examining a lock of hair for split ends, Vivian says, "I tried to look you up. I didn't have anything to go on, I didn't even know if you were real, but I wanted to see if I could find you. And not just to prove he was hiding something."

It's earthshaking to know that Lucy's stalking wasn't one-sided. At seventeen, when she was skimming through Calhoun kids' Facebook albums titled "muploads" or "I Write Sins Not Tragedies" for a familiar face, Vivian could've been snooping through their dad's emails. A few years ago, when Lucy treated herself to a 23andMe kit for her birthday on the off chance that her half-sister would be notified of a genetic match, was Vivian pressing the cute bartender at Foxy Roxy's for information? She could've. Lucy had fantasized endlessly about stepping into each other's lives. What if they could've been college roommates, making up for childhood bedrooms three hundred miles apart? Vivian could've been her maid of honor. Every happy milestone was shadowed by absence. She could've reached out, but she was afraid of the potential rejection.

Vivian hadn't really needed anything in life—she had the luxe apartment, the expensive education, sleepaway camp, once-in-a-lifetime trips every Christmas break—and yet she'd still wanted something: Lucy.

“Why did you lie to me?” Lucy asks.

Vivian's eyebrows shoot up. “Lie?”

“You pretended you had no idea who I was.”

From the moment she arrived, Vivian's outraged bewilderment made Lucy feel like her years of longing for this exact encounter were pathetic. It didn't have to be that way.

“I guessed there might be a version of you. I didn't know anything about *you*, specifically.”

“That's semantics. You know what I mean.”

“I was caught off guard. I needed a minute to wrap my head around all of this.”

“It would've meant a lot to me, feeling recognized,” Lucy says, embarrassed. “Like you cared.”

“I did care about meeting you,” Vivian insists.

“You're that good of a liar? Guess I missed the family gene.”

Lucy doesn't fight like this with anyone else, flinging off barbs without caring if they hurt. Even during the most excruciating moments of the day Patrick left, she didn't lash out—she wilted. Maybe the words slip out like that because that's her best shot at breaking through Vivian's cold, hard surface. Or maybe this is just how siblings fight.

Vivian closes her eyes. “I—I'm sorry. I should've been more up front with you.”

Lucy sits with that for a moment. “Thank you.”

“Sometimes, it's just easier to...” Vivian's lips are a tight line, her hands ball into fists. “To just not get into stuff.”

“Dad would agree.”

Vivian rubs her hand over her face. “Ugh, God. Yeah.”



In the silence that follows, waves ripple by. A cotton ball puff of a cloud floats by, revealing the sun's warmth once again. Its glow shines down on Lucy, reading *Will You Maui Me?*, and Vivian, peering out at the lake, seemingly lost in thought. Everything melts: Sweat slicks Lucy's skin, condensation drips down her seltzer can, and the tense mood glides away. When she reaches the end of a chapter, Lucy closes the book.

Sensing a shift, Vivian looks up. Maybe Lucy's imagining it, but a nervous tension crackles between them, like they both want to move past their fight. She aims for a light topic, the kind of thing a pair of sisters would idly discuss on a leisurely afternoon like this.

"So, I met a guy at the library the other day."

The corner of Vivian's mouth quirks up. "Like, *met* a guy?"

"Mhm." A little shyly, she recounts what happened.

"An honest-to-God meet-cute. Adorable." Vivian grimaces, deadpan.

"We had dinner and—"

Vivian lifts her sunglasses. "Hold on, you already went out with him?"

It shouldn't feel this good to impress Vivian, but it does. Lucy wishes she could tamp down her swell of pride.

"Last night, actually." She hesitates, not wanting to bring up a sore subject. "But there was a lot going on."

"Mmm." Vivian peers over her sunglasses. "Well, go on. Tell me about him."

"He's from Portland. He's a lawyer. He reads. Um...what else..."

Vivian's eyes narrow. "What kind of law does he practice?"

"He didn't say, actually."

Lucy feels embarrassingly self-centered for not digging more into his career. She adds *Ask the right questions* to her list of reminders: *Smile, don't cry, make sure there's nothing in your teeth.*

"If we go out again, I'll ask."

"You're on the fence?"

Lucy shifts uncomfortably. Of course Vivian would assume he'd automatically want a second date. She doesn't want to describe the way the mood swung in the parking lot.

“I’m still married.”

“Technically.”

“I still feel married.”

Pity flits across Vivian’s face. “Oh.”

She hears herself, how hopelessly hung up she sounds. “I don’t know. We’ll see.”

VIVIAN

If today was a preview of how the rest of Vivian’s summer with Lucy will go, she doesn’t hate it. Sure, it’s rocky. They aren’t exactly braiding each other’s hair. Lucy is sensitive and self-righteous, but Vivian is also *fascinated* by her. Nobody else will ever precisely understand the impact and insanity of their dad’s choices. Lucy holds the missing pieces to the puzzle Vivian has fixated on for so long. It’s clear that Lucy inherited his love of the outdoors, his sentimental side, his innate connection to this place—which prompts the question, what did he pass down to Vivian? She doesn’t like the answer. She’s guarded, evasive, good at cleaving her personal life into two neat compartments. Spending time with Lucy isn’t comfortable, but it might be the most meaningful interaction she’s had with—family?—in a long time.

That night, they cast around for a movie they can agree on. The ancient TV doesn’t have Netflix or Hulu, but they can prop up a laptop on an ottoman and call it a day. Lucy flicks through their digital options, while Vivian blows dust off a box of VHS tapes.

“What do you think of this one?” she asks, holding up the Lindsay Lohan version of *The Parent Trap*.

“Will that be too weird?”

Identical twins separated at birth and raised on different continents meet as preteens at a lakeside summer camp; hijinks ensue.

“Probably. But it’s also perfect.”

“Does the tape still even work? I can’t tell you how many times I watched it as a kid.”

“Let’s see. But first, snacks.”

Vivian makes microwave popcorn sprinkled with crumbled Reese’s peanut butter cups, the snack Hank used to make for her when Celeste wasn’t around. The salty-sweet combo tastes like her childhood, before everything unraveled.

“I know it sounds weird, but it’s actually great,” she says.

Lucy looks up in surprise. “Oh, I know. I taught him that. Paige’s mom used to make it for us.”

Vivian can’t hide her sliver of disappointment. “He made it sound like our special thing.”

As a kid, Vivian didn’t mind being an only child. Her roster of playdates and, later, piles of homework and after-school activities kept her too busy to be lonely. Her parents had tried to get pregnant again, but Celeste had had a string of miscarriages.

After Vivian suspected she potentially had a sister somewhere out there, she became enthralled by her friends’ relationships with theirs. She watched them crowding in front of the bathroom mirror to dab on concealer from the same tube, bringing each other the right emergency snacks on bad cramp days, and cramming into a single twin bed during long weekend visits to each other’s colleges. She was intrigued by it all, jealous she’d been robbed of this. Not every family was that close, she knew that, but she understood that if you got lucky, a sibling could feel like another limb.

Even if she and Lucy can make peace with the wild disparities of their upbringings and forge a relationship—which still seems doubtful—they won’t ever achieve that instinctual ease. That kind of bond is soldered at birth, and they’d never been given the chance. The *Parent Trap* twins might know a thing or two about that.

She hits play. As the on-screen twins clash, she thinks, *I get it*, empathizing hard with both. She’s drawn to Hallie Parker, who grew up on a vineyard in Napa, for obvious reasons. Lucy would probably cast Vivian as Annie James, the rich city girl with the glamorous mother, and, well, she

wouldn't be wrong. Her empathy runs dry, however, when the girls are stuck living together and piece together that they're twins. They fling themselves into a hug as the music swells. If only it were that simple.

In another scene, Annie complains to her mother about living apart from Hallie, pouting, "No offense, Mom, but this arrangement really sucks."

"It could be so much worse," Vivian says.

Lucy shoots her a small, nervous smile.



In the week since Vivian officially agreed to stay in Maine for the summer, she's settled into something of a routine: Wake up, read the pleading texts Oscar sent her between midnight and three a.m., ignore them, brush her teeth. Coffee on the front porch in the mornings, happy hour at sunset on the back deck. In between, she lies out on the boat, rotating every twenty minutes for an even tan, then retreating to the hammock in the shade.

She even takes up painting again, picking up a watercolor paint set, an easel, and some canvases. As a kid, she adored capturing Fox Hill Lake's ever-changing landscape: bright blue afternoons, golden evenings, white skies on wet mornings. The summer she was ten, she proudly presented Hank with a whole month's worth of work across the kitchen table. He studied them carefully, then chose just one to frame for his office. She doesn't know what happened to the rest.

She and Lucy tentatively find a rhythm of their own—not as friends, but more like a pair of college freshmen randomly assigned to share a dorm room. They make their own meals and do their own laundry. Sometimes, they'll watch a movie together before bed, but only if one explicitly invites the other to join. Otherwise, Lucy will read on the armchair in the living room and Vivian will take a glass of wine into the bathtub and listen to breakup songs: Frank Ocean for wistful reminiscing, Adele to coax out the tears, Amy Winehouse to keep her head up. Some of the more fervently obsessive cork dorks back in the city would have a conniption if they saw

her drinking in the tub. The bathroom's humidity destroys the wine's structure, overemphasizing the tannins and lending the flavor an astringent tang. They may be technically right, but they're total killjoys.

It takes every ounce of her strength to refrain from texting Oscar or, worse, driving back to the city and doing something stupid, like reprimanding him—or kissing him—right in the middle of Della's dining room. On more than one evening, Vivian lies in the bath, googling first-trimester symptoms and child support statutes until her fingers prune. Meanwhile, Carla's fetus grows from the size of a chickpea to the size of a kumquat.

It's the carelessness that Vivian can't get over. She spent two years of her life meticulously strategizing their affair. Her browser history was filled with dense explanations of New York State divorce law and reviews of good restaurants she'd like to try in Oscar's neighborhood, the ones they were never careless enough to visit together. She stopped spritzing on her favorite Tom Ford Black Orchid perfume in case it clung to his clothes. It was her idea for Oscar to gift Carla a weeklong yoga retreat for her birthday, leaving him and Vivian with precious time alone. Whenever they traveled to vineyards together, she booked two hotel rooms on her corporate card, even if they only stayed in one. She cared enough to make sure the accounting looked clean; she knew a good divorce attorney could comb through Oscar's expenses and piece together evidence of an affair. They were so close to being free together. Life was about to be so good. And then he ruined it.

If Oscar were as laser-focused on a future with Vivian as she was with him, he wouldn't have risked getting Carla pregnant. He threw their future into jeopardy—and for what?

Her music cuts out suddenly. Her mother is calling, even though Vivian had finally spoken to her yesterday.

“Hello?”

“There you are, hi! Did you see my Instagram post?”

“I did.”

She'd posted screenshots of the *New York Times* story with the caption: "Praise from the paper of record runs in the family! I'm so proud of my daughter Vivian for her spectacular work directing the wine program at Della."

Vivian can practically hear Celeste frown. "But you didn't leave a comment. I thought I tagged you?"

She'd tagged Oscar, too. Fabulous.

"You did."

"Why didn't you comment and like it?"

"Because we already talked about the article yesterday."

"Yes, but the internet doesn't know that. It looks like you're ignoring me."

Exasperated, she says, "I promise you, nobody cares."

"But—"

"Look, I'm writing something right now," Vivian says, liking the post and commenting a single red heart emoji. "There."

There's a pause while Celeste confirms Vivian's work. "Good. That wasn't so hard."

"Is there something you're calling about?" Vivian asks.

She could be nicer, but it's a miracle she's this nice at all, considering the level of emotional intelligence she was exposed to as a child.

"No, I just wanted to check in, see how you're doing." Her tone shifts, like she's just humoring Vivian. "Because I know you want that." Then, enunciating clearly, she asks, "How are you?"

Vivian sighs. "Fine. How are you?"

"Well, I got through another day. I was wondering—how are things going with the sale? How much is it on the market for? I couldn't find it online yet."

Vivian had actually stayed true to her word with Lucy. She'd told the realty team that she was putting the project on pause. Another thing she'd rather not tell her mother.

"Well, the Realtor is still doing comp research."

"Still?"

“His office has apparently been slammed.” The lie comes too easily.

“Is that girl still hanging around?”

“Lucy. And yeah, she is. Reading your books, too.”

“Sweet,” Celeste deadpans, though Vivian knows she’s probably pleased.

“By the way, there’s this thing she wants to do when we scatter his ashes. A ceremony, sort of. A celebration of life for Dad out on the boat at sunset on his birthday. She wants us to be there—both of us, and her mom, too.”

“You’re not actually humoring her with that, are you?”

“Actually, I’m going to do it. Please come?”

Why had she let Lucy talk her into this? Her mother is difficult enough over the phone—a visit won’t magically make her any better. Celeste said she wants to be better...in theory. If Vivian wants a chance at a smoother relationship, she needs to give her mother a chance.

“Come on, you know I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“All of us on that little boat...it’s like the one-bed trope,” she muses.

“The what?”

“In romance, when there’s plenty of tension between two characters, you throw them into a situation where—oh, *no*—they have to share a single bed. Small spaces and high stakes make wild things happen. Like in Jocelyn’s last book, *An Ocean Apart*. They were stuck in the tiny underbelly of a ship lost at sea.”

Jocelyn Bloomsbury-Jones has been her mother’s biggest competitor for decades. They were neck and neck on bestseller lists until Celeste slipped off them. She’s famously reclusive and maddeningly successful, living in some Vermont farmhouse with a pair of Great Danes. Unlike Celeste, she’s rarely seen at conferences or festivals. She does a single reading per year at an indie bookstore in a different state. People scalp tickets. If you miss it, you’re out of luck. Try again next year.

Vivian briefly imagines the chaos that could emerge from the four women on the boat: flung ashes; drinks toppling overboard; Vivian

distracted at the wheel, crashing straight into the shoreline.

“Please,” she says, trying one more time, knowing she’ll get shot down anyway. “I don’t want to do this on my own. You might actually like Lucy.”

“I’ve been through enough already. You want me to hang out with my sister wife and her spawn, too?”

So much for being better.

“Mom,” Vivian groans.

“Okay,” Celeste says after a pause. “For you, I’ll be there.”

That brings Vivian up short. “Really? You’ll come up for his birthday?”

“I’ll figure out my travel plans and keep you posted. You’ll deep-clean the place, won’t you? The dust up there, it haunts my nightmares.”

LUCY

Lucy assumed she’d never hear from Harrison again. A week after he failed to kiss her in the parking lot, though, he texted to ask her out again. How did she feel, he wanted to know, about getting together for a drink? For starters, shocked. She’s full of dread, too, and nauseated by the prospect of saying yes. But she’s also afraid that if she says no now, she’ll never put herself out there again. She said she’d love to.

This is how Lucy finds herself sitting on the flipped-down toilet seat with her chin in Vivian’s hand a few days later. She’d asked for a natural look. “Of course,” Vivian had said. That was seven products ago. Her wedding makeup took less effort than this.

“Hold still and look up,” Vivian says, leaning in with a mascara wand.

Lucy stiffens. Their faces are inches away. The intimacy is nerve-racking.

“I wish I had lashes like yours,” Vivian says. “I got lash extensions once, but they’re too expensive to maintain.”

She can’t fathom what Vivian might deem “too expensive.”

“Oh, really? Thanks.”

The compliment shouldn't mean much, but it's the first time Vivian's ever openly envied something Lucy has. Around her half-sister, Lucy's used to feeling like the "before" half of a movie makeover montage—not the "after."

With a spritz of perfume, Vivian pronounces her work complete. Lucy gets up to check herself out in the mirror. She's surprised she really does look natural—that is, if she were born with smoother skin, more defined cheekbones, and hypnotic eyes. Side by side with barefaced Vivian, Lucy looks like the one with places to go.

"You like?" Vivian asks, admiring her handiwork.

"Wow," Lucy says, astonished. "You did an amazing job."

"I know."

"It's not too much, right?"

"Not at all."

Lucy stares at herself, feeling polished but uneasy. "I don't know how to do this. I can't bring up Dad because I'll cry. And—no offense—but I don't want to tell him about you, either, because that's a lot of drama to dump on someone. Do I tell him I'm separated? I mean, what if..."

Vivian's eyes bulge. "Oh, boy."

"I know what Patrick said, but..." She can't bring herself to finish the sentence.

"Forget about Dad. Forget about me. Forget about Patrick."

Lucy laughs bitterly. "What?"

"You're your own person. You have a life outside all of that, don't you? Talk about it."

Does she, though? Lucy feels like she's scrambling for answers to a test she never studied for. Vivian's advice is only making her feel worse.

"Okay, but..."

"If it comes up, you just say, 'By the way, I'm separated.' And then move on."

"What if Patrick and I get back together?"

Vivian gives her a pitying look. "I don't think..."

Lucy presses her steepled fingertips to her face.

“Don’t ruin your makeup,” Vivian admonishes her. “*If* that happens, you deal with it later. It’s just a date. Relax.”

Far easier said than done.



Once again, Harrison had offered to pick up Lucy for dinner and drinks at Foxy Roxy’s, and once again, she diverted his plans. Instead, she suggested they meet at a spot Patrick hasn’t set foot in for years, first stopping at the grocery store to pick up provisions.

“So, where exactly are we going?” Harrison asks as they gather a newspaper, marshmallows, graham crackers, a sleeve of Hershey’s chocolate, and two cans of hard apple cider.

“I don’t know if this place has a real name, but everyone calls it the Pond. Kids party there sometimes. It’s pretty.”

The hope was that it’d be a more romantic spot than the Clam Shack. (A low bar. Nobody’s ever swooned over tartar sauce.) From the grocery store, he follows her car two miles out of town before they turn onto a winding dirt road hidden almost entirely by trees. She cruises around a deep pothole Paige’s front wheel once got stuck in, and parks in a clearing where two other cars already sit.

They take a well-worn footpath that kisses a stretch of sand. There’s a firepit, a rope swing, a pair of mottled benches, and beyond that, tree-stump seats ring a small pond. A few college-aged kids are sprawled out on a picnic blanket with an open cooler between them.

“There’s a tradition around here—people call it 12:01,” Lucy says. “A minute after midnight, if you’re still here you have to skinny-dip.”

He laughs nervously. “I forgot to mention, my curfew is 11:59.”

“I’ve never actually done it,” she admits. They forage for sticks, then spear marshmallows, sit side by side, and roast them over the shared bonfire. The crackling flames fill the awkward silence. She tries to come up with something—anything—she could possibly say to give the impression

that she's a regular person with a full, normal life. She comes up short. The date has barely begun, and she already feels like a failure.

She hadn't considered this earlier, but now the memory erupts: The first time Patrick kissed her was at the Pond. They'd been sitting in the sand, talking. He kept fiddling with a box of Tic Tacs, flicking the lid open and shut, popping a new mint into his mouth every few minutes. She was pretty sure he was nervous, and if so, she hoped it was because he was ramping up the courage to make a move. He scooted in close to her, allegedly to flick a mosquito off her knee (if there'd been one, she hadn't noticed it), then rested his hand on her thigh. She was mid-sentence when he surged closer with a kiss. It was clumsy but thrilling. Here, now, she simply feels alone.

Staring at a curl of smoke, Lucy gives up. "I just wanted to let you know that I...haven't dated in a while. I'm separated, actually."

The word sounds so clinical and ugly to her, but he beams. "I'm divorced."

Divorced? Lucy never would've guessed. The comment seems to roll off his tongue easily, whereas her insides are about as sturdy as sawdust. She can't fathom reaching a point where this is easy to admit out loud.

"So I get it, trust me," he adds. "How long has it been for you?"

"About two months," she says, rounding up.

She waits for him to flinch, but he doesn't.

"I've been separated for a year. The divorce was just finalized, though." Then he flashes her a guilty look. "That's why it took me a few days to text you back. Too many days, if I'm being honest. I'm sorry about that. This isn't an excuse, but I'm rusty at this. I was nervous."

She's relieved. "That's okay. Me, too."

He exhales. "Okay then. Good."

"I didn't text you, either," she points out. "So we're both at fault."

She's so new at this, every interaction makes her feel like a kid wobbling on a bike with no training wheels and two scraped-up knees.

"Two chickens. Perfect." He shoots her a small smile. "Should we trade war stories, get it all over with?"

There's not one single thing she'd like to do less.

He sees her freeze, then rushes to add, “Or we can talk about something else. Anything else.”

Lucy racks her brain, coming up blank for longer than she’d like. “No, it’s okay. Tell me about yours.”

Talking straight toward the fire, he opens up. “We were only married for a year and a half, together for four. I probably should’ve known we weren’t right for each other sooner, but I didn’t want to admit it. I loved the idea of being one half of a team to the point where I overlooked a lot of things—I don’t know if that makes any sense.”

“It does,” she says, nodding in recognition.

“We just weren’t connecting in the same way anymore. I’ll be honest, I was focusing too much on work and not enough on us. But when I realized things were bad, I threw myself into fixing it: I found a couple’s therapist, impulsively got a tattoo of a line of her poetry, booked a trip at this romantic resort in the Bahamas...I had the room all decked out in rose petals and Champagne. That first day on the beach, I checked the time on her phone and saw texts from her coworker. Not the professional kind.”

Her heart breaks for him. “I’m so sorry.”

He shrugs. “It’s not your fault. I wanted to stay and talk it out, but she got on the next plane home.”

When things were bleak, he was loyal enough and dedicated enough to make an effort. That says a lot.

They’d both been watching the fire, but now he turns toward her. Self-deprecating, he says, “There’s no dignified way for a grown man to cry into a piña colada. Multiple piña coladas, actually.”

“You tried, though.”

“I did.” He doesn’t sound bitter, but rather like he’s made peace with the situation. “I had the tattoo lasered off, though.”

Her marshmallow has warmed to a glorious shade of golden brown. Upon closer inspection, it’s perfect: hot to the touch, a little crispy on the outside and molten on the inside. Strings of sugar stretch gossamer-thin as she pulls it from the stick and sandwiches it between graham crackers. The first crunchy bite tastes like her childhood.

The whole thing—opening the box of crackers, snapping off squares of chocolate—takes enough time that Lucy can reasonably stall. She doesn't know how to sum up sixteen years of her life into one neat, tidy story like he just did. Instead, what comes to mind is the memory of Patrick attempting to show off for her in high school gym class. That horrible keening sound she didn't know she could make after he left. How natural it felt to curl up against him on the boat when fireworks burst over the lake.

“We were high school sweethearts, and by the end, I guess we'd sort of grown apart. I didn't want to give up on us, either,” she says, feeling guilty at her use of the past tense. “But he did.”

Harrison seems to intuitively understand that this is all she wants to share—maybe all she's capable of saying on the subject. “Sometimes, love isn't enough,” he says.



Lucy and Harrison have a second pair of s'mores; then she has a third. After that, they slip off their shoes, open a pair of ciders, and wade ankle-deep into the cool pond. Sand squelches nicely between their toes. Harrison tilts his head back to take in the zillion stars. Lucy can recognize the Big Dipper, and he helps her spot other constellations.

“You see that star?” he asks, pointing one out.

She tries to follow his finger. “That one?”

He gently pulls her hand a few inches to the left. “That one.”

The brush of his skin against hers makes her feel as brightly lit as any star. Their hands drop, but he doesn't let go. Comfort has cracked open between them, and now she's eager for more. Parched for romance, she wants Harrison to kiss her.

He looks at her tenderly, like he's having the same thought. Inigue quirks on his lips. For all that she wants him to make the first move, she doesn't want to wait another second. She decides to be brave.

Lucy leans in to kiss Harrison. It's strange and exciting to kiss a new man; he's taller than Patrick and his lips are softer. His hands drift to her waist, pulling her in closer, and she steadies herself with a palm against his chest. The moment is gentle, sweet, and hopeful, and when they break apart, her heart whirs like a hummingbird. A shy grin spreads across his face before he dips toward her again.

VIVIAN

Vivian's little summer vacation with Lucy has been more fun than she'd originally expected. Yes, Lucy can be difficult, rotating between angry, insecure, and dressing Vivian down for her privilege, but it's all understandable, considering the circumstances—and Vivian is starting to enjoy her company.

Although Fox Hill Lake doesn't normally inspire much joy in her, she's found herself appreciating its quiet beauty more now that the tension between her and Hank is gone. She'd never lose face and admit this to Lucy, but there's something about the serene pace of life here that she actually *likes*. At home in the city, nothing enrages her more than a slow walker. Here, she ambles at a leisurely clip, taking her sweet time to admire the majestic trees. Her blood pressure is probably lower than it's been in a decade. Lake water teases out the natural waves in her hair; she hasn't touched her blow dryer since she arrived. She's painting again. Even her skin is clearer here.

But like all good things, this can't last forever. She has a real life to get back to in New York. While Lucy is out on her date, Vivian starts plotting her next steps. She's made it eleven whole days resisting Oscar's calls and texts—the number ticks constantly in the back of her mind like she's a recovering addict counting days—and in that time, she's decided to move on from Della. (She will, of course, continue accepting Oscar's paychecks during her bereavement leave. He owes her for emotional damages

anyway.) Without him, the prospect of opening a business on her own is too daunting, so she'll need to find a job.

She sits at the kitchen table with her laptop and a glass of juicy sauvignon blanc and plays Dolly Parton's "9 to 5." Begrudgingly, she starts sifting through job listings online. Many positions are too junior for her. When she does manage to find roles that match her level of experience, either they pay pennies or they're located in god-awful Times Square, where bars and restaurants exclusively cater to tourists with bad taste. She imagines winding up at a fourth-rate Midtown steakhouse with laminated menus featuring pictures where she's required to wear an embarrassing little bow tie. She'd have to serve screw-top chardonnay with ice cubes to women who pronounce it with a hard *ch*.

Don't be a snob, Vivian tells herself sternly. *This is not the time to be picky*. The Olive Garden on 47th Street is hiring a beverage director at a respectable salary, so she decides to whip up an application. She's never actually been to an Olive Garden, so she googles their menu in order to write a hopefully convincing cover letter.

She can't find a full wine list anywhere—that is, if they have one—but stumbles across a page featuring "Italian-style cocktails" with pictures (of course) that sends her into a fugue state. She stares at a fluorescent-blue vodka drink that's apparently "inspired by the vibrant blue waters of Italy's Amalfi Coast" and something called an Italian Rum Punch that's instantly nauseating. The steakhouse nightmare comes surging back, except this time, she's carrying a Blue Amalfi over to a customer hunched wrist-deep in a bottomless well of free breadsticks. When she places the radioactive cocktail on the table, the gray-faced woman looks up with a haunted stare. It's Carla. A trail of breadcrumbs curves over her enormous pregnant belly.

"I don't think you're supposed to be drinking this," Nightmare Vivian says.

"I don't think you're supposed to be fucking my husband," Nightmare Carla replies.

Vivian snaps back to reality and slams her laptop shut.



Vivian needs to have more faith in herself. She's smart enough to figure out how to run her own business. She'll study entrepreneurship, seek out mentors, buy that Tony Robbins book men love to quote—whatever it takes. She'll make it work. Over the past few months, the only thing that kept her happily distracted on lonely nights when Oscar was with Carla was dreaming up ideas for their business. That passion is still there. Now, though, the bar will be hers alone.

In her imagination, the walls are a moody blue. There's thick, old-fashioned crown molding and an original pressed-tin ceiling. Lamps with asymmetrically scattered bulbs cast a warm glow. She serves classic crowd-pleasers, rare gems, and funky natural wines; cheese, charcuterie, other nibbles. She offers themed flights—maybe one showcasing female winemakers; maybe even a time-travel flight documenting the trendiest tastes of each decade: a white zinfandel for the '70s, a merlot for the '90s, a rosé for the 2010s. Oscar thought the time-travel idea was basic. That won't be his problem anymore.

The more Vivian thinks about it, the sillier it seems that she'd been afraid of going out on her own. She actually knows plenty about running a business: At Della, she's in charge of inventory and balances her department's budget. As Hank loved to remind her, she had the best education money could buy. She knows how to work hard and dedicate herself to a lofty goal; memorizing the annual harvest conditions in every major and minor wine region around the globe was nothing to sneeze at, after all. Yes, she will be *fine* flying solo. Which means that regardless of what Lucy would prefer, it really is time to sell the house.

Vivian steps out onto the back porch. Above her, the stars are endless. Cicadas sizzle through the air, and crickets chirp rhythmically off in the distance. If she's honest with herself, she'll miss this place. It's grown on her. She can always rent a different cabin on the lake if she wants—and

Lucy can, too. She knows Lucy will be upset, but Vivian can't sacrifice her career to keep someone else happy.

Hopefully, this won't kill their relationship. After all, Vivian never promised to take the house off the market for good. Maybe they could do Thanksgiving together sometime. She'll spend the rest of the summer relaxing with Lucy while Hank's Realtor friend and his real estate lawyer son do walk-throughs for potential buyers and negotiate the sale. She'll cross her fingers that Lucy won't hate her forever. Regardless, it's a risk she's willing to take. The irony of it all is that this—opening a business—might have actually impressed Hank. Finally.

With the burden of job applications and this decision off her chest, she feels positively buoyant as she calls the Gray office. She gets their voicemail—it's after-hours; she isn't surprised.

“Hey, Harrison, it's Vivian again. I'm ready to sell the house. For real this time. Can you send over that contract you wrote and let your dad know we're ready to go?”

Chapter Nine

LUCY

Lucy and Harrison stay at the Pond for a little while longer, talking, kissing, and looking up at the stars.

“I’ve had a really great time with you tonight,” he says, delivering a long, languid kiss as his fingers slide into her hair. “Let’s go out again soon?”

She savors his touch. She didn’t anticipate how much she’d miss that as a single person.

“Yeah, I’d like that. I’d stay out longer tonight, but I know you have a long drive ahead of you.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll put on an audiobook and I’ll be home before I know it. How long is the drive back to your place?” he asks as they walk to the parking lot.

“Not bad, maybe twenty minutes. It’s on Fox Hill Lake.”

“Wait, really? I didn’t realize you’re on that lake.”

“Well, kind of—not year-round. It’s my dad’s place.” Her sinuses ache. She only has to hold it together for another thirty seconds. “It’s a long story,” she adds in a tone that signals she’s done with the subject.

He nods. After a beat, he asks, “What are you up to for the rest of the night?”

“Not much. Maybe I’ll watch a movie with Vivian—that’s my half-sister, she’s here from New York for the summer.”

He furrows his brow. “Oh?”

“Honestly, I’ll probably only make it halfway through.”

She leans in for a kiss goodbye, yearning for something passionate. Instead, his lips barely graze hers for a peck. The rejection stings. He steps back, watching her get into her car.

“Good night,” he says stiffly. “Drive safe.”

VIVIAN

While lounging around on the boat is relaxing, it’s also prime breeding ground for ruminating over Oscar, which makes it harder to ignore his frequent, groveling apology texts. Vivian needs other ways to fill her time, so she asks Caleb if she could give the ropes course a whirl. When she arrives on site, a clearing in the forest down a winding dirt road, Caleb greets her with a hug. Up close, he smells a little bit earthy and masculine. She likes it. He’s in cargo shorts and a close-fitting T-shirt that accentuates his biceps. Today, she decides, will be fun.

“Stay here, I’m going to grab our equipment and then we can get going,” he says.

“Sure.”

As she waits, she occupies herself on her phone. The first photo that pops up on Instagram practically reaches through the screen and punches her in the throat. It’s Carla and Oscar showing off a sonogram. She’s cradling a hint of a bump, and he’s serving up an excellent impression of a beaming father-to-be, though Vivian doesn’t miss the hint of tension in his jaw. (Can Carla see that? Vivian knows Oscar better than anyone. Or at least she thought she did.) “We are so over the moon to share our sweetest secret ever,” Carla wrote in the caption. “Two more Delgados are on the way! Our twins will arrive earthside in February! We’ve dreamed of this for so long and can’t wait to meet our little ones.”

Twins. Twins! Oscar hadn't bothered to mention that detail. "You two are going to be the world's best freaking parents," one person wrote. "Double the trouble, double the LOVE," another commented. Someone else asked how Carla's feeling. "The morning sickness has been 24/7. Oscar's been taking amazing care of me," she replied.

Well, then! Let Oscar be the world's best freaking parent. Let him take *amazing* care of Carla while calling and texting Vivian a combined twenty-seven times this week alone. (She ignored them all.) She's busy building her empire and scaling trees with a criminally hot bartender.

Caleb is back with an armful of harnesses and helmets. "Ready?"

She straightens up. "Bring it on."



He leads her down a series of trails outfitted with plank walkways. Every few hundred feet, there are signs hand-painted with coils of white ropes to reassure visitors they are, indeed, heading the right way for the ropes course.

"How've you been? I heard you decided to stay for the rest of the summer."

"Yeah, did Lucy tell you why?"

He winces. "She did. I'm sorry about your breakup."

"Did she tell you who he is?"

She doesn't care about discretion. Not anymore. Carla's carrying twins and Oscar didn't even think to mention it.

He flashes a guilty look. "Your boss, right?"

"He is—or was, I don't know."

Caleb nods, seemingly sympathetic—not judgmental. "How are you doing?"

Still fixated on him. His absence throbs. "I'll be all right. I was the one who ended it."

"Yeah, but still. That's tough."

Something about his sincerity makes her want to open up—which, when it comes to speaking about Oscar, is foreign to her.

“Honestly, yeah. It is. He really...” She exhales hard. “He turned out to be a selfish, lying piece of shit.”

“I’m really sorry, Vivian.”

“It’s not *your* fault.” Then the vulnerability hangover hits—that was enough for one day. “Anyway, we don’t have to get into it now.”

They reach the course, which features a knotted web for climbing, a catwalk, and narrow platforms jutting out from tree trunks. A dizzying zip line completes the course.

“Wow.”

“What do you think?”

It’s exactly what she needs to forget about Oscar and Carla. “I can’t wait. Get me up there.”

“You think you can handle it?” With a straight, concerned face, he adds, “I’ll warn you now, it *is* more complicated than a barbecue.”

She squeals and swats at him. “Caleb! Do you haze all your customers like this?”

He winks. “Only my favorites.”

He gives her the smaller of the two harnesses. She remembers perfectly well from summer camp how to orient the various straps and buckles and step into the leg holes but asks for his help adjusting it securely around her waist and thighs anyway. Caleb remains utterly professional as he slips two fingers under the waist strap to ensure the gear is snug. His teeth graze his lower lip as he concentrates. He slides the buckle taut, creating a tug of pressure across her hips.

“Thanks for helping me.”

“I gotta make up for the hazing somehow.”

“I think I can forgive you.”

“Really?”

“Since I’m about to trust you with my life, let’s say yes.”

“Will you leave me five stars on Yelp if you don’t plummet to your death?”

“You think you deserve five stars for doing the bare minimum of your job? *Men.*”

He holds out his arms proudly. “Full service here. Top-notch.”

His playful enthusiasm is hard to resist. “Fine, five stars.”

“See, now I have a good incentive not to drop you.” There’s that smirk again, the one that reminds her why she stayed past closing time that one night at the pub.

If I were a stepmother to newborn twins, she thinks, I wouldn’t have time to flirt with outrageously charming ropes course instructors. It’s good to be single. It really is.

He puts on his own harness. Vivian cannot resist a glance at the way it outlines the territory between his waist and thighs.

Hooking her harness to the belay rope, he says, “All right, you’re good to go.”

Vivian puts one foot on the bottom rung of the ladder, testing out how it sways. Not bad. She grabs another rung and starts to climb. It’s not necessarily easy—she hasn’t used her muscles like this in years—but it’s not scary, either.

That is, until she steps from a sturdy wooden platform to the catwalk’s first plank. It shakes violently under her weight. She yelps and grabs a rope in front of her to stay upright. She didn’t realize each step would swing independently of each other. On the ground, she felt like hot shit bantering with Caleb about plummeting to her death, but now she’s frozen with fear. She steels herself to look down. The drop only dials up her panic.

“You okay up there?” Caleb asks.

She swallows her pride. “I’m freaking out a little bit. How high up are we?”

“Forty feet.”

“Uh-huh. Cool.” She clings tighter to the rope. “I’m just going to turn back for a sec.”

But as her weight shifts, the plank swings even more wildly. Her stomach drops faster than it did at the sight of Carla’s pregnancy

announcement. *Twins*. How could Oscar not tell her? Fury sucks up too much of her mental energy, threatening her balance.

“Oh, no, no, no, I’m going to die,” she croaks out.

“You’re not going to die. Pinky promise.”

“I can’t reach your pinky.”

“Guess you’re gonna have to come over here then, aren’t you?”

She scowls. “I’m not usually afraid of heights.”

“You’ve got this,” he says breezily. Then his face softens. He adds, “I’m right here with you every step of the way. I won’t let you fall.”

She nods, scanning the length of the catwalk. There are twelve steps to the other side.

“Ready? You can hold on to the rope for balance, if you want, and take a step.”

Vivian squeezes it as she makes her first move. It is terrifying. Caleb encourages her with a whoop and offers advice as she slowly creeps across the next eleven steps.

“Try holding your arms out for balance,” he suggests.

“And let go? Are you nuts?”

“Do you trust me?”

She takes in the practiced way the equipment slides through his hands, and at the pulleys and ropes tethering her body directly to his. “Yes.”

“Then let go. I got you.”

With an exhale, she lets the rope dangle freely in front of her...and then she takes a step. She sways, but thanks to a tilt of her arms, she doesn’t fall. Caleb was right.

“Yeah!” he cheers. “I knew you could.”

Part of her can’t believe people do this kind of shit for fun—but part of her understands the exact appeal. It’s the same adrenaline rush she used to get from being with Oscar. Could she pull it off without getting caught? Without getting hurt? There was only one way to find out. With Oscar, she never felt like she was on completely solid ground. She reveled in the challenge.

Vivian takes the final step from the swinging plank to the fixed platform.

“You did it!” Caleb whoops.

She feels invincible. It’s not lost on her that she’s barely cracked a smile since she arrived in Maine, but Caleb is responsible for half of them.

“What’s my reward for getting across this thing in one piece?”

The side of his mouth quirks up. “Oh, I’m sure I can come up with something interesting.”

She zings down the zip line toward him, feeling weightless.

LUCY

It’s been nearly a month since Lucy was laid off, and her hunt for a new job hasn’t been fruitful. Her application to the one in Portland had gone unanswered, despite her polite follow-up email. She’d resorted to applying to every possible teaching job that fits her certification—English, grades seven through twelve, in Maine—even if that would mean relocating three hundred miles north to the *true* middle of nowhere in remote Aroostook County. She could wind up in Hammond (population: 91), Westmanland (79), or even Hersey (73). She’d rather not go that far, but she likely won’t have a choice.

One sweltering morning, Lucy and Vivian wake up to a fairly bare fridge.

“Let’s go to Miss Pancakes for breakfast,” Lucy suggests.

“Your mom’s place?”

“Yeah. It has central air.”

The house’s one meager ceiling fan makes no difference in this kind of scorching heat.

“Dad never let me go. He always said he could make a better breakfast himself. He’d make the batter into whatever shapes I asked for—hearts, trees, dinosaurs, whatever.”

“He just didn’t want to face her,” Lucy says flatly.

“Would your mom mind if I showed up?”

“No, of course not.”

“Really? I wouldn’t blame her for resenting me.”

Lucy tries a fib. “She never resented you.”

“Come on.”

When she was growing up, Dawn avoided discussing Vivian unless pressed, and even then, her expression was always one of resigned contempt.

“Okay, she *no longer* resents you. Seriously—she’s been asking about you. She’s curious.”

Vivian checks the fridge again. It’s still mostly empty. It hits Lucy: Is she nervous? She’s never seen Vivian like that before. She’s never imagined it was possible, to be honest.

“All right, I’m starving. Let’s go.”



With its formica tables and red vinyl booths, Miss Pancakes hasn’t changed since Lucy’s childhood. When she was in middle school and briefly mortified by her mom’s entire existence, she would sit with her friends by the door, as far away as possible from Dawn’s counter. As she got older, she preferred sitting right there so she and her mom could talk. Now she grabs two cushioned stools for her and Vivian, reveling in the cool blast of air-conditioning.

Customers look up as Vivian’s heeled sandals click across the room. She places her leather bag on a third stool, removes her enormous sunglasses, and leans her elbows on the counter.

“Is she here?” Vivian asks.

The double doors to the kitchen swing open, and Dawn emerges with two plates. She lights up at the sight of her daughter, then freezes as she takes in Vivian, like she’s seen a ghost—though maybe, Lucy realizes, Vivian’s likeness to Hank creates that exact effect.

Like Lucy, Dawn is tall and curvy with huge dark eyes. She has a blond ponytail and wispy bangs with a touch of gray at the roots. She wears a white Miss Pancakes apron over a yellow T-shirt and the thick blue eyeliner she draws on every morning. Lucy thinks her mom is beautiful, but does Vivian see that? Or is she evaluating Dawn's naturally aging skin and plump middle, wondering what Hank saw in her?

"Jesus," Dawn blurts out. "Hi!"

She abandons the plates and comes around the counter to give Lucy a hug.

Vivian offers a handshake, but Dawn looks at her warily and says, "Can I give you a hug? I'm a hugger."

"Oh," Vivian says, sounding a little embarrassed. "Sure."

She gives Dawn a quick, stiff squeeze.

"Wow, you look so much like him," Dawn says.

"It's the nose."

"And the eyebrows, too. I wish I hadn't plucked mine all out in the '90s. How are you holding up?"

Vivian shrugs. "It's been sad. Hard. Weird."

Dawn nods heavily. "I know."

"And how are you doing?"

She opens her mouth but is clearly at a loss for words. Eventually, she manages, "I feel so sorry for you two." Then, after an uncomfortable beat, "You hungry? What can I get you?"



They each order a short stack, plus lemon-ginger tea for Lucy and coffee with skim milk for Vivian (she initially asked for a cappuccino, to which Dawn replied, "Sure, you can get a great one about sixty miles from here"). Dawn asks Vivian about Hank's funeral, but otherwise, the conversation is light and polite: Vivian's life in New York, Lucy's job hunt, Dawn's spin instructor at the YMCA accidentally playing "The Boys of Summer" four

times in a row and shrugging it off with “Technology—I don’t know.” Nobody mentions Hank or the house.

As they eat, Dawn pours coffee for a new customer at the counter, a man of about sixty who Lucy doesn’t recognize. That alone makes her peg him as a summer person.

“Are those your daughters?” the man asks her mom.

He’s in cargo shorts and a white polo with a Red Sox cap on over curly gray hair.

“The blonde is mine.”

“You’re like Goldie Hawn and Kate Hudson.”

Dawn snorts. “I’d give you another Splenda, but you’re already sweet enough.” With that, she grabs fistfuls of silverware and walks off to set a table.

The man clears his throat and leans toward Lucy and Vivian. “I hope I’m not disturbing you. I’m up here for a family reunion, and there are so many kids and grandkids running around, I could use an hour or two away. What do you think my chances are if I asked her out for dinner?”

There’s an optimism in his soft gaze that Lucy can’t bring herself to crush. If history is any indication, luck isn’t on his side. Dawn hasn’t been on a date in five years.

“She’s single, but she doesn’t go out much.”

“So that’s a no?” he asks, leaning forward to snag a third Splenda from the dispenser.

Lucy isn’t sure what to say. “Well...”

“I think you should go for it,” Vivian cuts in.

A minute later, while he signs the check, he shoots Lucy and Vivian a conspiratorial grin, then scrawls his number at the bottom.

“In case you’d ever like to get dinner,” he says, sliding it across the counter to Dawn.

She glances at Lucy in alarm.

“I’m here through Sunday,” he adds.

Dawn reaches for the bill and flicks her bangs out of her vision. For a split second, Lucy thinks her mom might actually consider it.

But then, firmly and kindly, she says, “I’m sorry, I can’t. I hope you have a lovely vacation.”

He takes the response in stride. “That’s all right. Have a nice day.”

Dawn makes a point of refilling their water glasses so she doesn’t have to watch him leave.

As he retreats toward the door, he mouths to Vivian, “I tried.”

Dawn flits around the restaurant as if only just noticing a flurry of urgent tasks. By the time she returns to the counter, all that’s left of Lucy’s breakfast is the sticky residue of maple syrup and a bloated tea bag.

“Mom,” she says, her tone heavy with meaning.

“Mmm?” Dawn is making another coffee.

“Why did you turn him down?”

“Lucy Louise.” Dawn sighs, exasperated.

“He seemed kind of sweet,” Lucy pushes. “And into you. Very into you.”

“I didn’t want to go out with him.”

Vivian shakes her head sympathetically. “The cargo shorts, I know.”

“Okay, fine, it doesn’t have to be him,” Lucy concedes. “I’m just saying, it wouldn’t hurt for you to see who’s out there.”

Exasperated, Dawn cuts her off. “There’s been a lot going on lately. I need some time.”



After the breakfast crowd leaves, Dawn is pulled in fewer directions. Vivian excuses herself to the restroom to touch up her lipstick.

Once they’re alone, Lucy leans over the counter and whispers to Dawn, “What do you think of her?”

“Eh. About what I expected. Not terrible, but a little pretentious, just like her mother.”

“Wait, you’ve met Celeste?”

“No.” Then an impish grin curls on Dawn’s face. “One time, though, I created a Goodreads account under a fake name and left one-star reviews on every single one of her books.”

“Mom!”

It’s childish. Mean. And also, Lucy has to admit, funny.

“It was very cathartic,” Dawn says defensively.

Lucy can’t believe that her mom has been secretly cyberbullying her ex-boyfriend’s famous wife. On a public forum. On *Goodreads*. She chooses not to mention that she’s currently halfway through *Buck Wild in Bali*—and liking it.



When they pull into the driveway, another car is already there and the lights are on inside the house.

“Did you invite someone over?” Vivian asks, frowning.

“No, you?”

Vivian’s already halfway out the door. A moment later, Lucy hears a shout.

“Oh my God, *Mom*?”

Lucy’s intrigued but anxious. She’s not ready to meet the woman her dad chose over Dawn. (And if she’d known Celeste Levy would be waiting for her, maybe she would’ve washed her hair this morning.) Steeling herself, she heads in.

Celeste is waiting for Vivian to walk, stunned, into her open arms. She’s dressed in a cream linen button-down with matching pants and smells like a magazine perfume strip.

“What are you doing here?” Vivian asks, sounding less than thrilled.

“You told me to come, so I did! I have a book tour stop in Portland later today.” Extending a hand, she says, “I’m Celeste Levy. You must be Lucy?”

“Yeah, hi.”

She's caught between two impulses: hating her out of loyalty to her mom and a glimmer of starstruck excitement.

"Nice to meet you," Celeste says, straining again for a pleasant expression.

Lucy can't get over how strange Celeste looks here. She and the lake house aren't so much apples and oranges as they are apples and elephants. It doesn't compute to see her amid the kitschy plastic kitchenware and twist-tied bags of marshmallows and half-empty canisters of sunscreen. Her books are strewn around the living room; Lucy prays Celeste doesn't spot them. She'd happily fangirl over any of her other favorite authors, but this one comes with more baggage.

"I thought you'd get back to me with some dates," Vivian sputters.

Celeste frowns. "Is this not a good time?"

That's when a man walks into the kitchen, holding a measuring tape. It's Harrison.

Chapter Ten

LUCY

Harrison's handsome face falls into an apologetic crumple.

"What are you doing here?" Lucy asks, bewildered.

Vivian tilts her head. "You two know each other?"

Looking uncomfortable, Harrison extends a hand. "Vivian? Harrison Gray, hi. It's nice to finally meet in person. And, well...Lucy and I have gone out a couple times."

Vivian's eyes go wide. "Wait, you're the library guy?"

Something isn't adding up, and it's making Lucy frantic. "How do *you* know each other?"

"He's selling my house," Celeste interjects, leaning a hair too heavily on "my." "Not very quickly, though."

"No." Lucy wants to cry. To Vivian, she says, "You told me it was off the market."

Guilt floods Vivian's face. "It was."

"And now?"

Vivian's pinched expression says it all. The room feels too hot, like Lucy's being boiled alive in her own cluelessness.

"I was going to tell you," Vivian says. "Really. I'm so sorry."

A thousand-pound silence stretches out for too long.

"And you," Lucy says to Harrison. "You told me you were a lawyer."

He shifts uncomfortably. “I’m with my dad’s firm. He just had a knee replacement, so he’s not working much these days. I’ve been helping Vivian instead. I should’ve told you the full truth about what I did earlier. I’m so sorry.”

For lying? Or for taking away her favorite place in the whole world?

“Did you know who I was?” The question embarrasses Lucy—she’s not Celeste, she doesn’t expect people to recognize her—but she has to ask.

“I only pieced it together right as we were saying goodbye last time, I swear. I was trying to figure out how to tell you.”

Celeste marvels at the whole scene. “This is good,” she mutters, like she’s taking mental notes for her next book, probably something called *Betrayal in Belize*.

Dread settles over Lucy like a heavy blanket. She’s really going to lose the house; Vivian never had any intention of keeping her end of the deal. The thought of another family—a nice, normal, nuclear bunch—moving in sickens her.

Harrison rubs the back of his neck. “Celeste, do you still want a ride to Portland?”

“Yes, I should get going.” She pauses uncertainly. “Vivian, do you want to join me? Come to the signing, we’ll get dinner after. You can stay in my hotel, too, if you want.”

“You’re not staying here?” Vivian asks.

“I’m flying to DC first thing tomorrow. It’s easier this way.”

“Um. Sure?”

Celeste squeezes Vivian’s upper arm. “Great, come with us then.”

She leaves. Harrison follows.

“I’m so sorry,” he says as he passes Lucy. He sounds stricken.

She can hardly look at him. “Right. Thanks.”

He pauses in the doorway, wincing like he’s trying to find the right words. But all he comes up with is “Bye.”

VIVIAN

“I’ll be out in a minute,” Vivian tells Harrison.

Then she and Lucy are alone, sequestered in the kitchen like that first awful afternoon they met.

Lucy crosses her arms tightly and stares at the burnished wood floor. Wiping a tear from underneath her glasses, she says, “When, exactly, were you planning to tell me?” she asks.

“I was waiting for the right time.”

Vivian hates to hear echoes of Oscar in her excuse. She needs to stop keeping secrets.

Lucy shakes her head. “You lied to me.”

“I’m sorry. There’s no excuse for that. I should’ve been honest with you.”

Vivian really means it—she feels bad.

“You were going to give this place a real chance. It seemed like you were actually starting to like it here.”

Vivian knew this conversation had to happen at some point, but she wishes it had unfolded differently. “I know. I wouldn’t be doing this if I didn’t really need the money. I’m going forward with opening the bar—just all on my own instead of with my ex.”

Lucy presses her fingers to her temples. “It’s not *all on your own*, Vivian, if you’re funding it with family money. You’re not exactly bootstrapping it.”

“Well, I—”

Lucy cuts her off with a snap. “Dad died and I didn’t even get a sympathy casserole. You’re getting handed a fortune.”

Mortified and ashamed of her lack of self-awareness, Vivian says, “Okay, you’re right. I’m sorry.”

She’s grateful for the foundation her parents laid for her—not just private school but also tutors to get into college and even preschool; \$3,000 transferred to her checking account every month when she was a jobless student, then an underpaid postgrad. And if family money is involved in

whatever comes next, she'll be grateful for that, too. She's unfathomably lucky—she knows that. But there's no point in having all that and not putting it to good use for herself.

"I acknowledge my privilege," Vivian says slowly. "But I'll be running it on my own. Its success or failure will all be on me."

"Sure," Lucy says coolly. "All on you, just with Dad's rich friends and your famous mom's fans stopping by."

Exasperated, Vivian says, "What do you want me to do, take a vow of poverty? I can't help how they raised me."

"Is Oscar okay with you doing this without him?"

"He doesn't know, and even if he did, he probably wouldn't care," Vivian says. "He's too busy taking care of his pregnant wife he was supposed to be leaving."

"His pregnant *wife*?" Lucy repeats, horrified. "He's married?"

Vivian groans. It just slipped out. The stress is getting to her; the fight is spiraling out of control. She tries to backtrack to the important part. Her mom and Harrison are waiting outside; she needs to get going.

"Look, I'm sorry he didn't leave the house to you—but that's not my fault, okay? I didn't ask to be in this position."

"And I did?" Lucy asks incredulously.

"He's the one you should be mad at, not me."

"He's not here!"

"You only put Dad on a pedestal because you didn't really know him. He wasn't a good person, Lucy," Vivian says angrily. "Maybe he was to you for one month of the year—congratulations. But the rest of the time, he screwed over your mom, he lied to mine, and he could be a real piece of shit to me. I can't keep this house just for him."

"What do you know about being a good person, Vivian, sneaking around behind a pregnant woman's back? Real classy. You're just like Dad, a pair of selfish cheaters."

Lucy's face reddens, as if she's embarrassed by her own insults. She grabs her keys. "I'm done. I'm leaving."

"Lucy, wait!"

With a slam of the door, she's gone.



So, Vivian fucked up with Lucy. Again. Everything collided all at once, like two busboys carrying stacks of fine china loaded with surprise visitors, white lies, and unfortunate truths smacking into each other at top speed. Vivian simmers with guilt in the back seat of Harrison's car. She wants to text Lucy an apology, but what is there left to say?

Celeste isn't as bothered. "Did everything settle down in there? Lucy seemed upset."

Vivian pinches the bridge of her nose. "You ambushed us."

"You wanted me to come," Celeste says, surprised. "This date was convenient for me, and it's not like you're doing much these days."

"Normal people schedule visits in advance," Vivian says.

"Oh, come on. I'm your mother. I don't need to be 'normal people.'"

She couldn't if she tried.

"Besides, my tour schedule was posted all over Instagram. It went out in my newsletter. Everyone knew I'd be in Maine this week."

"Everyone but your daughter."

Celeste glances at Harrison. His eyes stay locked on the road.

"Okay, I'm sorry. I should've called," Celeste says, irritated. "I won't drop in on you like that again."

Vivian doesn't get too many apologies from her mother. "Great. Thank you."

"See, what happened is that the first few tour dates got postponed, obviously, and so the whole schedule got rearranged. Portland really only got booked at the last minute. Since I was up here, I figured I'd come check on the house. The original floor plan didn't quite seem accurate to me, I wanted to measure a few things. I didn't understand what's taking so long. Aren't people snapping up houses around here these days?"

"Lucy would say yes," Harrison mutters. "And she's right."

“Anyway, Harrison told me the real holdup was actually you! Waffling back and forth about whether you want to sell it after all.”

Damn it.

Harrison looks at her in the rearview mirror. “It’s okay to take your time if you need it. The market for places like yours isn’t going anywhere.”

“You actually want to keep it?” her mother asks.

Vivian isn’t thrilled about discussing her plans for the future. The house is inextricably linked to the bar, which could tip the conversation dangerously close to Oscar territory. She’s not ready to go there with her mother yet, especially after it had gone so terribly with Hank and Lucy... and that was before anyone knew Carla was pregnant with twins.

“I wish I could. I’d just rather have the money.”

Nobody questions this. Who wouldn’t want to have that kind of windfall?

And yet Vivian is nauseated with shame and frustration. Deep down, she knows Lucy isn’t being unreasonable. And while it’s true that this mess is Hank’s fault, it’s also true that Vivian has the power to right his wrongs. It’s just not fair that she’d have to sacrifice her own dreams in the process.



Celeste’s book signing, a cozy affair in a colorful indie bookstore, is going perfectly. Seated ramrod straight with her legs crossed at the ankle in front of a rapt audience, she reads an excerpt of *Bored Housewives in Bora Bora*. (As she once told Vivian, crossed thighs photograph terribly.) The interviewer, a local author, asks about Celeste’s writing process and career, and Vivian’s mother answers each question with honed charm, maneuvering around one about what she’s working on next.

“I can’t announce it yet, but...trust me, I wish I could,” she says with a wink.

A murmur of excitement ripples around the room. That’s typically the final question, but a middle-aged woman in the audience raises her hand.

“Do you have time for one more?” the other writer asks.

“Of course,” Celeste says, never one to rush out of the spotlight.

“I know you lost your husband last month. I’m so sorry. I’m a widow, too—I know how hard it is. I wanted to ask: How are you holding up?”

The warm energy in the bookstore abruptly vanishes, and it’s replaced by somber tension. The audience waits, immobile. Celeste’s lips pucker. Her grip tightens around the mic. Vivian had been tuning out, ruminating over that awful fight with Lucy, but this snaps her to attention.

With a deep breath, Celeste holds the woman’s gaze and says, “Thank you for your condolences. It was quite a shock. He was incredible—so full of life that it’s surreal he’s gone. I wish you all could have met him, though of course there are pieces of him in every man I write. I only hope each of you is lucky enough to be loved the way Hank loved me.”

Her eyes shine with tears, yet her voice remains steady. The effect is poignant but not too raw; it sounds personal, but it’s actually quite vague. Vivian recognizes parts of what Celeste said from the tribute she posted online, then reused in her eulogy. Several audience members clutch their chests.

When Celeste looks down to switch off her mic, a flicker of anguish slips through her polished mask, subtle enough for only Vivian to notice.



After every book has been signed, every selfie has been snapped, and the crowd has dispersed, Celeste is ready to go. Vivian follows her outside. Celeste folds her arms tightly and walks at a brisk clip.

“Are you okay?” Vivian asks.

“I thought that went well.”

“Yeah, but I meant are *you* okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“That last question...”

“Was nothing new,” she says firmly. “It’s come up a few times recently. I can handle it.”

“Right, but do you have to handle it? Do you really need to put yourself through a whole tour right now?”

Celeste isn’t exactly performing brain surgery, and she’s not a show pony. She’s not in this for the money, not anymore. The world would keep spinning if she gave herself a break; readers would get it. If anything, in Vivian’s opinion, it seems weirder that her mother presses on.

“I’m not going to cancel anything. This could be the last...” Celeste exhales slowly, then shuts down. “It doesn’t matter. Everything is fine.”

Before Vivian has a chance to respond, she barrels on. “Let’s find somewhere to eat. You know, the food scene here is supposed to be incredible? I wanted to go to that place—what’s it called...the one everyone says is amazing?”

“Fore Street.”

“Yes!” Celeste claps her hands in delight. There’s no trace of their conversation from moments ago. “How did you know?”

“Because everyone says it’s amazing.”

Foodies didn’t really flock to Portland until Fore Street opened in the ’90s. Now the small city is practically synonymous with critically acclaimed restaurants.

“Like I was saying, the tour dates kept moving around, and so we couldn’t get a reservation, which is such a bummer.” Vivian knows that “we” means Celeste and her assistant, Jessica, which really means just Jessica. “You don’t think *you* could pull some strings, could you?”

“I don’t know anybody there.”

Celeste tsks. “Well, then where to?”



They get a late lunch at the Press Hotel. Vivian once read that the building was originally home to the *Portland Press Herald*, and today it houses a

newspaper-themed hotel and upscale restaurant. In the lobby, a swirl of dozens of vintage typewriters creates a 3D mural; the scale in the gym once weighed rolls of newsprint; the café is called Inkwell. She can't help but think Lucy would like this place.

The hotel's restaurant exudes cool elegance with sleek walnut furniture and an open kitchen behind a marble bar. They order a few plates to share: charred Brussels sprouts topped with plump dollops of aioli and a slice of lemon; campanelle pasta in a truffle butter sauce with crab and pea tendrils; sea scallops on a bed of corn and bacon bits drizzled in gochujang. Vivian would happily drown in this menu. She picks a French chardonnay that'll stand up to their meal's flavors, one she knows her mother will like. She can't remember the last time it was just the two of them in a restaurant.

Celeste keeps her composure while eating around the pasta and prying for gossip about Lucy and Dawn, but when Vivian mentions Hank, her expression wobbles again. She sniffs once and furtively dabs behind her glasses.

Vivian hesitates before reaching across the table to hold Celeste's hand. "Mom, it's okay to be sad."

Celeste glances around the full dining room like she's scanning for fans from the event. "Not here." She withdraws her hand and changes the subject. "So," she says, insistently stoic. "What else is new?"

Vivian rambles a bit about how she's gotten back into painting and tries to ask about the next book.

Celeste flaps her hand dismissively. "Ugh. It's not going so well. No need to discuss it. Jocelyn's new book is, of course, on the list *again* this week."

"I'm sorry. Though you once had a bestseller for, what, three months?"

"Sixteen weeks."

"You've done it before, you can do it again."

Celeste stares off in stormy silence. "Mm."

Part of Vivian wants to talk about her own career plans, though she knows better than to invite criticism and unwanted advice. But...fuck it.

“I’ve actually been thinking about what to do after the house sells, and I might want to open up my own place—a wine bar.”

Well, not entirely her own place. She’ll have to work on snipping that phrase out of her vocabulary.

This startles Celeste out of her funk. “Really! You’d leave Della?”

Vivian answers carefully. “I’ve learned a lot there. Moving on wouldn’t be the worst thing.”

“You know enough to do that?”

Vivian’s stomach clenches. “I’ll figure it out.”

“There are plenty of wine bars. Aren’t you worried about standing out? Attracting business?”

“I’m going to do my best. I’m really serious about this.”

“And you’d have enough to fund this new place?”

“I mean...” Vivian chews and swallows a Brussels sprout, buying herself time. “I’m still running the numbers. But I think it’ll work. That’s kind of why I want to sell the house.”

Celeste glows. “Fabulous. What would the place be like?”

Vivian doesn’t want to stare, but she revels in her mother’s expression for an extra second. Approval—this is what it’s like, apparently. She describes her ideas and is surprised by how satisfying it is to open up to her mother. She hasn’t been able to talk about this with anybody and hadn’t realized until now how lonely that made her feel. Celeste seems genuinely enthusiastic about the concept and spits out a whirlwind of recommendations: what the design could look like, which publicist Vivian should use.

When they’ve picked over the last of the meal, Celeste signals for the bill.

“I realize that we don’t do this kind of thing enough—spending time together,” she says. “It’s my fault.”

It’s a shocking amount of tenderness for one afternoon.

“It’s not just you, I’m busy, too,” Vivian says, though her mother is right.

Pained, Celeste tries to explain herself. “No, it’s more than that. I...” She drops her eyes to her empty wineglass, rolling the base of it in a circle, and

tries again. “I haven’t been the best parent. I gave too much energy to my career and not enough to you—not that it even did me any good in the end. I want to be better for you.”

An embarrassing lump rises in Vivian’s throat as she sits in stunned silence. Her mother is taking accountability? Actually?

She breathes in the moment, filing it away for posterity. “Thank you. I really appreciate you saying that.”

“Good. I’m glad to hear it.”

They’re both reaching for the right thing to say and only coming up with stilted, oddly formal answers, but for now, that’s enough.

“And I can be better, too,” Vivian says. “Nicer.”

Celeste raises an eyebrow. “You absolutely could.”

Vivian probably deserves that. “You’re coming back next month, right? For Dad’s ceremony?”

“If you want me to, I will.”

Vivian gets a little shy. “I do, yeah.”

“Okay, then.” Celeste smiles.

That night, trying to fall asleep, Vivian wonders: Did she really just enjoy a meal alone with her mother?

LUCY

Lucy doesn’t care where she goes. The only objective is to put distance between her and Vivian. She was once naive enough to think they could be real sisters someday. Instead, Vivian turned out to be Homewrecker Barbie, outfits and accessories included. Fury propels her down the road; familiarity steers her right and left toward Dawn’s house. She drives in apoplectic silence. There’s no need for the radio when her anger is this loud.

Lucy lets herself in. “Mom?”

She hadn’t called, only prayed Dawn’s shift was over. There are footsteps on linoleum in the kitchen, and then Dawn appears in the living

room, looking worried.

“What’s going on?” she asks.

They sit in the small but comfortable living room, where there’s soft blue carpeting, a fully stocked bookcase, and framed photos of the two of them. Lucy recounts her terrible day, starting with the shadowy way Harrison’s face fell at the sight of her, hitting a snag of guilt on the way down. He’d figured out exactly who she was and still didn’t bother to clue her in about Vivian’s nefarious backdoor dealings. He knew how much she hated the idea of locals’ footing in Fox Hill being chipped away by greedy sellers capitalizing on outsiders’ interest. And yet.

“Harrison actually apologized. He texted me an hour ago.” Lucy reads from her phone. “‘I’m so sorry for letting you down. I’m sorry for not coming clean earlier. I understand if you’d prefer space, but I hope I can make this up to you.’”

“Longer than any apology I ever got from a man. What did you write back?”

“I didn’t,” Lucy says, surprised. “I’m not going to.”

She continues, explaining what Vivian—selfish, shortsighted, obnoxiously privileged Vivian, who sees nothing wrong with giving up access to three generations of family history in a pristine paradise just so New Yorkers can have yet another place to drink wine—let slip about her married ex-boyfriend. Lucy doesn’t even want to think about the pregnant wife. The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, but in this case, it’s like Vivian is replicating Hank’s entire unfaithful orchard. It’s abhorrent. Cartoonishly evil. And it’s not like Vivian is lacking in options for available men to date. (Lucy can think of at least one who’d be happy to step into the role of her boyfriend like a golden retriever, tongue and tail wagging.)

“Your dad would be so angry if he knew she was selling it. That place was everything to him. We spent so much time together there,” Dawn says wistfully.

It’s hard to picture somehow. Lucy’s heard about how they met before, years ago, but she wants to hear it fresh. Other kids grew up with photo albums of their parents looking impossibly young in acid-washed jeans and

mullets, living whole lives before their children arrived. They had wedding videos on VHS and old tales worn into a routine from repetition. Lucy had a few vague bits of a story that Dawn never bothered to linger over. She'd always wave Lucy off with, "There's not much to tell."

"Remind me how you met?"

"Oh, you know."

"Indulge me. Please."

She's been through the wringer today; maybe that's what convinces Dawn to open up.

"Okay. It was the summer of 1989. I was seventeen. I was lying out with Cindy on her dock, sunbathing."

"And you saw the boat," Lucy fills in.

"We saw this boat go by with two young guys on it," she confirms. "Cute guys. And then a minute later, it passed by in the other direction, a little bit closer this time. Cindy, who probably started flirting the day she was born, called them over to us. We were chatting for a bit—us on the dock, them a few feet out—and your dad invited us on board."

Lucy sits quietly, trying to memorize every syllable. She's never gotten this level of detail before. She's transfixed.

"And then what happened?"

"The four of us started hanging out all the time. Cindy and your dad's friend Eric liked each other a bit, but your dad and I were inseparable. We were together all that summer, and the three after that. I cried every time he went back to college. He used to come visit me at Miss Pancakes and order endless cups of coffee just so he had a legitimate reason to be there. Roy used to tell him this wasn't like a twenty-four-hour New York diner—he couldn't chitchat with me all shift.

"I learned the hard way that he's all talk, but back then...your dad was charming. When he was in New York, he used to call me long-distance. The phone bills got outrageous, so we'd write each other letters. The mailman was probably sick of me waiting by the mailbox. We were in love." Her voice catches on the last word like she's pulling it, musty and mothballed, out of the attic for the first time in decades.

Lucy has a million questions but can't find the right words to ask them. All these years, Dawn made it sound like she and Hank were just a flimsy little summer fling, something to throw away at the end of the season like a pair of cheap flip-flops. It's disorienting to learn it was far more than that.

Dawn sighs. "But sometimes, love isn't enough. I knew there was a girl at Columbia with him. She pursued him, not the other way around. He was honest with me about her, at least in the beginning."

"Were you worried about him getting serious with her?"

Dawn scoffs. "Ha, no, I wasn't worried about some sociology major who followed him around the library and made eyes at him at parties. I remember asking him, 'What kind of job can you get with a sociology degree?' It's the study of people, right? That girl paid fifteen grand a year in tuition, but I was earning \$3.75 an hour getting the same kind of education with every customer who came in that door. I mean, come on."

Lucy's always admired her mom's spunk. She wishes she inherited more of it.

"Maybe this sounds silly and naive to you, a small-town, teenaged waitress thinking she belonged with an Ivy League guy like him," Dawn says, like she's argued this same uphill battle before and knows exactly where the grooves in the road are.

"No," Lucy protests.

"She might have been the better fit for his life, but back then, he loved me more."

"Then how did he wind up with Celeste?"

"His parents liked the sound of her. He went out with her a few times to appease all three of them. He never planned to *marry* her," she says, like the thought is absurd. "Celeste wanted him to stay in New York with her that summer before they graduated, but he decided to be here with me. I felt like we'd passed a real test together. It was the happiest I'd ever been."

A quiet radiance emanates from Dawn, like she's gotten used to tamping down those memories.

"That next year, 1992, he finished college and started working in May. By August, he wanted to quit. He hated being away from the lake—and me

—all summer, and he wasn't enjoying his job the way he thought he would."

Lucy slots the new information into the timeline she already knows. "That's when his parents died."

Dawn nods sadly. "Hank and I decided we'd had enough of long-distance. He was going to quit his job at the bank in New York and move up here full-time." A tinge of happiness flickers across her face, warming her features before they sink into sadness again. "He was visiting me one weekend when he called his parents to tell them the news. Your grandparents tried to race up here and talk him out of quitting his job, but there was a storm. Their car flipped over on the highway. The guilt...he was never the same after that."

A sickening shiver creeps down Lucy's spine. "Dad told me about the car crash, but I didn't know why they were on the road."

Uncomfortable silence settles between them. Dawn rakes her bangs back. Lucy is overwhelmed by how much destruction this relationship has caused. Maybe her grandparents would still be alive. Maybe her mom could've moved on and been happier with someone else. Maybe she'd have grown up with a sister. It's impossible to grapple with what's been lost.

"So, that was the end of us," Dawn continues, resigned. "He said he couldn't pursue a path they died to prevent him from taking. He stayed at his job. I couldn't make it to the funeral. I wasn't able to get time off work to travel, not during our busy season. And guess who was around to pick up the pieces?"

"That's so awful," Lucy croaks out.

Dawn sighs. "I wanted to be there for him, but he pulled away. He had no family left and Celeste sailed right in."

Her mom must have been crushed. "I'm so sorry."

With a pinched expression, Dawn says, "Don't be. He—I...In the long run, I don't think we would've worked out anyway."

"I've never been able to really picture you together," Lucy admits.

There aren't any photos of them as a couple, but she can almost imagine them sitting by the bonfire, maybe with her in his lap. She'd have a teased

perm, he'd have his old mustache. They'd be sun-kissed and young, vibrant, in love, alive. Lucy wishes she could've seen them together like that even once. Maybe she'll always yearn for it, even if it hurts.

It takes Dawn a moment to speak. "Coming from two different worlds feels romantic when you're young. It's exciting, a challenge. But that gets old once you're dealing with real life."

Lucy was born almost two years after her grandparents died. There has to be more to the story.

"The next summer, your dad came up here for his bachelor party. I was down at the pub that night with some friends when he walked in."

"And you hadn't talked in all that time?"

"No. I missed him like hell. I didn't even know he was engaged until that night."

"So, what did you do?" Lucy asks, nearly breathless.

Her mom hesitates. "I don't know if you want to hear this part."

"I do," she insists, although she isn't sure how much more she can handle.

"Well," Dawn says heavily.

Lucy blinks. "Well?"

"The night of his bachelor party, we had sex," she says, barreling through the word with pink cheeks. They rarely talk about that kind of stuff. "He said he was going to leave Celeste."

Lucy's shocked. "What?"

"Then the next morning, he changed his mind."

"How did you not kill him?"

She throws up her hands. "I was young. But I wasn't a total pushover—I only wanted him if he really wanted me back. So, I sent a letter to tell him how I felt. This was before email, and I didn't want to put him on the spot on the phone."

Maybe Lucy's read too many romance novels, because the image that comes to mind is of Dawn in an old-fashioned dressing gown with loose tendrils of hair curling around her face, writing with a quill and ink on yellowed parchment by candlelight. In reality, Dawn probably used a Bic.

“I told him that I loved him, and that if he wanted to be with me, nothing would make me happier. And I said that if I didn’t hear back from him, I’d take that to mean we were really over.”

“Wow.”

“He never wrote back. Not long after that I found out I was pregnant with you.”

“You told him, right?”

Dawn gives a hopeless shrug. “I’d promised I’d let him go.”

“That’s horrible.”

“It is. And then, the summer after you were born, I ran into him at the market. You were just this tiny little thing strapped to my chest. I remember we were in the canned foods aisle. I wanted tuna fish.”

In Lucy’s memories, Hank rarely lost his cool. She can only imagine his utter panic: eyes like saucers, color draining from his cheeks.

“What did he say when he saw you? What did he do?”

Dawn swallows and blinks up at the ceiling. “He looked at you and said, ‘My wife is coming. You have to go.’ I hadn’t ever heard him sound so cold. It was like he was a different person.”

Something deep in Lucy’s chest chips a little. She knew not to expect too much from her dad, but she didn’t think he had that kind of cruelty in him. He’d never let on that he had any real feelings for her mom—or, really, feelings about anything at all.

“I got out of their way—she never saw me—but I didn’t leave right then. I wanted to get a glimpse of Celeste. I had never seen her before, not even in pictures.”

Lucy hates that she can guess where this is going.

“I saw them one last time, turning the corner of an aisle. She was pregnant.”

It’s an awful story, but Dawn isn’t blameless. Like it or not, this is part of Lucy’s history, as much as her great-grandparents coming over from Dublin and the tale of her own birth, and it was hidden from her. It never occurred to her that her mom would keep a secret like this from her.

“Why weren’t you honest with me?”

“I didn’t want you to grow up hating him. That wouldn’t be fair.”

“And this is?”

“I’m so sorry. I screwed up.” Dawn sounds pained. “I just...You deserved to have your own relationship with him. He thought he should have a fresh slate to be a good dad.”

Lucy narrows her eyes. “He wasn’t.”

Vivian had said Hank wasn’t a good person, as if she’s the arbiter of morality, as if she knows anything about integrity. But Lucy can’t deny that he cheated on Celeste, left Dawn to raise their daughter nearly alone, and let Lucy take on student debt while paying for Vivian’s top-notch education in full. He had done the bare minimum a guy can do while still calling himself a father, and he played favorites with his kids. Nobody is all good or all bad; there are always shades of gray. She just doesn’t want to believe that Hank is even darker than she thought.

Dawn looks so broken, Lucy doesn’t have it in her to stay too mad.

“I guess...what’s done is done,” Lucy says.

Her mom squeezes her hand. “I’m sorry. I love you.”

Lucy barely squeezes back.

VIVIAN

Vivian stays over at Celeste’s hotel, then takes a disgustingly expensive Uber back to Fox Hill Lake the next afternoon. For most of the drizzly ride, Vivian tries hammering out what to say to Lucy, but her brain feels like soup. She can’t figure out how to apologize for going back on her word and sounding like a privileged brat, and then tack on, “But I’m still leaving you out of the sale, sorry.” She feels like a weasel with a throbbing headache.

When she gets back, though, the house is empty. She half-heartedly distracts herself with a reality show. Halfway through the first episode, as a red-faced chef tosses off cruel comments about his competitor’s duck confit, she’s startled by a knock on the front door.

Chapter Eleven

VIVIAN

He cannot be here. Why is he here? She blinks. He's still there, wearing a gallant smile that shimmers with hope. On the front porch stands Oscar, gripping a hefty bouquet of lilies.

Stunned, she says, "Oh my God, what?" before letting him in.

He drops a leather duffel on the kitchen floor, sets down the flowers, and takes her face into his hands to kiss her like he's a war hero returning to his devoted darling instead of a restaurateur trapped in a loveless marriage. Vivian feels faint.

She steps backward and sputters. "Wh-what are you doing here?"

"I told you. I really needed to talk to you."

She drinks him in: He's in black jeans and a rain-splattered short-sleeved button-down, slightly rumpled from the trip. His posture seems confident, but the labored rise and fall of his chest and the intense gaze give away what might be nerves. He studies her—barefaced, barefoot, in a boxy T-shirt that's nothing like the silk, lace-trimmed Kiki de Montparnasse slips he likes to buy for her—as if she's the most precious thing in the world.

"How did you get here?"

"I flew to Portland, rented a car."

"It's Saturday. Who's at Della?"

"They'll live without me for a night."

"You could've just called me."

He grins. “You might have noticed—I tried a few times.”

She can’t deny this. There was a time in the not-so-distant past when she craved his attention like nothing else. But his showing up unannounced on her doorstep is not remotely what she had in mind.

He raps his knuckles on the counter and looks around. “It’s beautiful up here. Rustic.”

Maybe outside, yes, but inside? Oscar scans the appliances pulled out of another millennium, the mismatched cabinet knobs and ugly linoleum, the speckled water damage from generations of wet feet and dripping bathing suits. Perspective is a funny thing. To Lucy, every inch is rich with family history; to Oscar, it’s probably a hovel.

“I take it you didn’t come all this way to sightsee,” she snaps.

“I’ve been going crazy without you.” Sweat beads along his hairline; his voice softens. “And I’ve been worried about you.”

“Oh, really? Funny way of showing it, dropping off the face of the planet.”

He’d discarded her so easily, like she was nothing more than meal scraps, soiled napkins, popped corks at the end of a dinner shift.

He looks grim. “The timing couldn’t have been worse.”

“Got it, I’ll keep that in mind the next time a parent drops dead.”

He winces. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Vivian. I love you.”

“Do you? Or are you ‘so over the moon’ about your ‘sweetest secret ever’ with your wife?”

She makes aggressive air quotes and practically spits out the last word. Once upon a time, *she* was his “sweetest secret,” not that he’d ever describe her in such cloying terms. She barely recognizes this version of herself, this hard, unflappable wrath in Oscar’s presence. Normally, she’s putty in his hands, but his abandonment has broken his spell over her. She’s always sort of known, on some subterranean level, that if he’s betraying Carla now, there’s a chance he could betray her in the future. She just never fully acknowledged it until it happened.

“You forgot to mention you’re having twins.”

He holds her gaze. “I’m so sorry. I wasn’t thinking straight. I thought it’d be better to tell you about the twins later, so you didn’t have to deal with so much all at once, but obviously that was a mistake on my part.”

“Obviously,” she echoes acidly.

With an earnest look, he says, “I want to hear how you’re doing. I’m here for you. Everything’s going to be all right.”

“I’ve heard that one before,” she scoffs.

“I mean it.”

“Sure.”

Exhilarated, he says, “Vivian, I left Carla.”

She stares. “No, you didn’t.”

“I did,” he says with a glint of satisfaction. “It’s done.”

“You actually told her you want a divorce?”

He kisses her and squeezes her shoulders. “Mhm.”

Vivian is speechless. Dumbfounded. Flabbergasted.

“What about Della? Carla’s dad?”

“The *Times* just cemented us as one of the best restaurants in the city. It’ll be fine, even if her dad pulls out.”

Could that possibly be true? “She can’t be taking this well.”

Guilt flashes across his face. “No, but I think she’ll come around.”

That sounds highly improbable. “I mean, there are *kids* involved now.”

“I know,” he says calmly. “She and I made each other miserable. This is going to be a good thing for her in the long run. A healthy thing—for all of us.”

“Did you tell her about me?”

“Are you kidding? Absolutely not,” he says with a dark laugh.

She hardens. “You can’t keep me a secret any longer.”

The plan was to move carefully, one step at a time. They’d wait months—maybe even a year—after the separation to go public with their relationship, and then they’d feign that it had just begun. But now hiding is the last thing she wants to do. She needs a man who’s proud to be seen with her.

He nods. “Okay, okay. I get that. I’ll tell her.”

“No, you won’t.”

“I will,” he says, approaching her gently, as if she’s a skittish cat. He rests his hands on her shoulders.

She shakes him off. “You say you’ll do a lot of things.”

Hurt ripples across his face. Clearly he thought this conversation would take a different route.

“I mean it.” He takes out his phone and pulls up Carla’s contact info. “I’ll call her right now.”

Vivian watches in disbelief as his thumb hovers over the call button. His mouth is a solemn line. He’s really serious this time.

“Wait.” She grabs his wrist. “Okay. I believe you.”

“You want me to tell her?”

She’s so overwhelmed, she’s nearly lightheaded. “Not like this. She deserves better than that.”

He hesitates, then sets down his phone. “I agree.”

“But you’ll tell her in person when you’re back?”

“I will.” He’s unshakable.

She’s cloaked in relief. Oscar wraps her in his arms, and with her forehead tipped against his chin, she starts to cry.



When Vivian was a little girl, she believed in Cinderella and Prince Charming and happily-ever-afters. Overhearing her dad’s phone call popped those delusions like a needle would a balloon. She was disappointed and disgusted by him—and if someone so outwardly normal and respected could cheat on his wife, couldn’t anyone? At first, she was swallowed up by despair, which burned off into cynicism, before eventually crystalizing as cool, numb detachment.

The next year, when she was fifteen, her mother published *Jilted in Jackson Hole*, which was about a woman who discovers her husband’s torrid affair with his personal trainer while they’re on their tenth-

anniversary trip. When she asked Celeste what inspired the book—she'd been pleasantly surprised by Vivian's interest in her work—her mother showed her a *Town & Country* clipping about a ruggedly handsome actor who had recently opened a chic ski resort in the Wyoming hotspot.

“That’s all?” Vivian had asked.

“What do you mean?” Celeste had said.

During her freshman year at NYU, Vivian came back to her dorm room one afternoon to find her roommate, the second runner-up for Miss Minnesota Teen USA and an aspiring speech pathologist, hysterically sobbing. Her long-distance boyfriend had cheated on her with his lab partner. Bewildered about how to proceed, Vivian sat on her roommate's Urban Outfitters twin extra-long comforter and patted the girl's back. “Yeah, but long-distance sucks and a lot of guys cheat,” she said. “What did you expect?” The suite was frosty after that.

Her perspective shifted when she met Noah. She kept waiting for him to break her trust, but the betrayal never happened. They were so solid, she was ready to move in together. By that point, she had begun to believe that infidelity only happened among unhappy couples, usually to spineless people like her old roommate (who once cried over getting a B) or her mother (who still wrote heartfelt dedications to her husband in every book, year after year). Vivian was no pushover. She and Noah were different. But then she discovered he'd been sleeping with the girl who answered the door in the towel—plus a law student and a SoulCycle instructor, too. She was blindsided. Hadn't they been so happy? After that, she had no choice but to conclude that cheating was basically inevitable.

At twenty-seven, Vivian discovered Colby Reynolds, her boyfriend of eight months, had been routinely texting photos of his erect penis to other members of his company's intramural volleyball team. She was furious, but felt she could forgive him as long as he never did it again—or alternatively, maybe this would be the right time to experiment with opening up their relationship. Except when she proposed both of these ideas to Colby, he took her hands in his and said, “We should see other people. Separately.”

Soon after that, Vivian met a psychiatrist who told her up front that he and his wife were polyamorous. She was intrigued; the arrangement felt worldly and progressive. He invited her out for coffee at La Lanterna, a glass-domed Italian café on the edge of Washington Square Park. Over espressos two days later, she stared at the biscotti crumbs clinging to his beard as he explained the plot of his favorite book in excruciating detail. “You’d love it. Though it’s better in the original Norwegian, of course.” His wife’s name was *also* Vivian, which he found hilarious enough to joke about four times in ninety minutes. She politely declined his invitation for a second date. A few days later, he texted, Vivian and I have been talking it over and we really think you should give me one more chance. How about drinks this Friday? She never wrote back.

Despite that, Vivian *did* see where the poly couple was coming from. It didn’t seem realistic for two people to pledge to be with each other and only each other until death did them part. Monogamy was a romantic ideal, but humans were flawed by nature.

So, that night at Della when she kissed Oscar for the first time, she knew her choice was bold. But it didn’t feel wrong—not when he was unhappy and they were drawn to each other like magnets. Fidelity was just a pipe dream anyway.



Vivian isn’t able to resist Oscar anymore. She’d been trying so hard for weeks, ignoring texts and deleting voicemails. For what? Her dad is dead, and maybe it’s Vivian’s fault. Lucy hates her. Choosing to follow her instincts in this moment can’t make her life any worse.

She leads him all the way upstairs to her bedroom and kisses him. At first, cramming into the narrow bed feels juvenile, but anywhere will do now that he’s left Carla for good. God, how she missed this—his hum of satisfaction when she pulls him closer, the feel of his hand slowly caressing

her jaw, even the gentle scratch of a day's worth of stubble against her cheeks. They're alone in this big house, and even after all this time, privacy is still a precious luxury.

Vivian hadn't really believed she'd ever be back in Oscar's arms again, and so she luxuriates in every second, committing to memory the firm press of his fingers interlacing hers and the pleasant heft of his weight over hers. She's forgotten why she'd ever deny herself the pleasure of kissing Oscar. Yes, he's married, but he and Carla never should've gotten that far. It was a mistake. Aren't people allowed to make mistakes? *This* is what he should've been doing all along.

His mouth moves hungrily over hers. She plants a row of kisses down his neck and into the hollow of his collarbone, making him groan softly with heavy-lidded eyes. His hand skims up her bare thigh, catching on the hem of her shorts. His thumb skates over her hip, then into the notch of her waist. She pulls him in even closer with her other leg. They have lost time to make up for.

His breath is hot on her ear as he whispers, "I want you."

She's known this for two years, but the words still send a tantalizing ripple of electricity throughout her body. She can't imagine ever getting tired of hearing that out in the open, not after all that time spent hiding away, deleting texts, suppressing their spark whenever others were around. Sneaking around wasn't thrilling. It was suffocating.

They peel off their clothes. She's more bronzed than he's ever seen her. He cups the places she's still pale, untouched by the sun. After nearly two months of pain, this is a blur of pure pleasure. She relishes the sturdiness of his torso under her palms. He's really here. He's married and she gave him the silent treatment, and yet still, somehow, he blew up his life for her. Vivian is so wanted, cherished, loved. This is all she needed.

LUCY

If the lake house really does have a ticking timer attached, Lucy wants to squeeze the most out of it while she can. She's not eager to spend another night in her childhood bedroom, and a cool, rainy night like this one practically begs her to cozy up by her dad's beloved fireplace. She invites Paige to join, not just for her company but also to serve as a buffer between Vivian and herself. She isn't necessarily surprised when Paige says she can't make it (wish I could, I'm just about to put N down). Given Caleb's friendship—or whatever it is—with Vivian, he's not her first choice. But she'd rather ask him than go solo.

Just please be on my side this time.

Don't worry, I gotcha

Back at the lake, she's surprised to find the driveway cluttered: the truck Vivian's been driving, Caleb's, and another car she doesn't recognize. She's worn out, not remotely in the mood to have a stranger in her house. She parks on the side of the road and runs inside.

Caleb is pacing the kitchen alone with a hand clapped over his mouth. Footsteps scramble down the stairs.

"What's going on?" Lucy asks him, kicking off soaked flip-flops.

"Lucy? Caleb?" Vivian calls from upstairs, sounding a touch frantic.

"I just got here a minute ago," he says, halfway between shocked and amused. "Vivian told me to wait down here. I think she has company."

"Hi," Vivian says, bounding into the kitchen. She stops awkwardly with her hands on her hips and flushed cheeks. "I wasn't expecting anyone."

"You didn't think I'd come back?" Lucy asks.

From above, there's the unmistakable clink of a belt buckle, then feet on floorboards.

"Who's here?" Lucy asks.

"Oscar came up for a surprise visit," Vivian says with a frozen smile, a silent *Crazy, right?*

Whatever's happening here, Lucy wants nothing to do with it.

The man himself arrives, lightly grazing the small of Vivian's back as he extends a hand toward Lucy.

"Oscar Delgado. You're Lucy?"

He's older than Lucy expected but has the kind of freakish Hollywood handsomeness that guarantees he glides through life easily. With molten chocolate eyes and just the right amount of scruff, he doesn't look like the owner of a restaurant so much as the actor hired to play one in a sexy HBO show.

"Yeah, hi," she says, not quite sure what to make of him being here.

It's his left hand, though, that makes a real impression.

Oscar catches her staring at his wedding band. "It's not what you think," he says sheepishly.

Vivian winces.

"And...Peter?" Oscar tries, offering another handshake.

"Patrick's my—my ex-husband," Lucy corrects, sulking through every syllable.

She's surprised Oscar got even halfway there. Vivian bothered to mention him?

"I'm Caleb. Lucy and Vivian's friend."

Oscar glances at Vivian. "A good enough friend to come in without knocking?"

He says it like a joke, but there's a sliver of an edge to his voice.

Unruffled, Caleb grins. "Good enough boyfriend to show up unannounced?"

Vivian shoots Caleb a strangled look. "We never really lock up," she explains to Oscar.

He nods gamely. "Safe."

A tense silence sprawls out until Vivian says, "Anyone hungry?"

VIVIAN

Here lies a dead female, thirty years old, in otherwise reasonable health. Cause of death may include mortification (Caleb) and shame (Lucy), not to mention stress and shock (Oscar). He is *here*, and God forbid they ever get a minute of alone time. Vivian needs to talk to Lucy and Oscar, but not at the same time and not in front of Caleb. If her lives had to converge like this, she'd prefer it happen in a place with walls. Nobody's that interested in frozen pizza, but she busies herself by unwrapping it and sliding it into the oven anyway.

"Lucy, could we talk?" she says quietly, a useless gesture toward privacy.

Vivian isn't thrilled to leave the two men alone together, but it's the best of a slew of bad options.

"There's nothing to talk about. You're selling the house, end of story," Lucy says flatly. "I'm going to go enjoy it while I can."

"Oh. Okay," Vivian says, stepping to the side as Lucy goes to the living room.

There's an awkward beat. Caleb gives Vivian an apologetic look.

Over her shoulder, Lucy asks, "Caleb, can you grab firewood?"

From the front porch, he retrieves a hefty armful of logs, turning his biceps into the kind of thing that would inspire Michelangelo to sculpt a masterpiece.

He gives Oscar a nod as he passes back through the kitchen. "Nice to meet you."

Oscar shoots him a smooth smile, the one reserved for customers who send back exquisitely cooked steaks because they aren't overdone, then have the gall to be offended when the entire check isn't comped.

"Likewise."



When the pizza's ready, Vivian slices pieces for Lucy and Caleb and brings them out to the living room—a peace offering. He immediately chows

down on his, whereas she gives a clipped “No, thank you.” At least Vivian tried. She returns to the kitchen with a plate and an eye roll.

“She seems delightful,” Oscar says in a low, teasing voice.

“Mm.”

“C’mere,” he says, wrapping her in a hug.

She burrows into him. It actually helps. His touch slows her pulse, melting her frustrated anger down from a seven to a five. Vivian is grateful she doesn’t have to soldier through another fight with Lucy on her own.

As Vivian prepares their own plates, Oscar peers at her makeshift wine collection. “You didn’t find these here, did you?”

She glances over at the row of bottles. “I did, actually. Hannaford’s, the market up here—don’t underestimate it.”

She hasn’t ordered a shipment from New York in weeks.

“Hm. I brought something. Snuck it into the fridge when you weren’t looking.”

With a hint of pride, he pulls out the same bottle of Champagne he’d popped when she landed the job. She hasn’t felt cared for like this in a long time. The gesture softens something in her chest; she can feel herself glowing as she nips a kiss.

“Glasses are over there. And before you say anything about them being the ‘wrong shape,’ those are dishwasher-safe and practically indestructible.”

He shakes his head, amused. “Your house, your rules.”

Lucy and Caleb had been talking in the living room, though not loudly enough for Vivian to parse anything. At “your house,” Lucy halts. Vivian can practically feel her resentment seep across the first floor. When Oscar pops the cork, she doesn’t dare cheer.

“Let’s eat out here,” Vivian says.



They sit under the covered front porch, a dry place to talk with built-in white noise and no eavesdroppers. Vivian gestures for Oscar to take the

Adirondack chair with fewer cobwebs.

“You picked a hell of a time to come. Lucy and I had a huge fight yesterday.”

“About selling?”

He takes his first bite, and though he doesn't say anything, Vivian can tell exactly what he thinks about the pizza.

“Mostly, yeah. It's honestly my fault. I didn't tell her I was serious about selling again.”

“Hm.”

Embarrassed, she adds, “And we fought about, uh, you.”

“Me?”

She dreads telling him this part. “I didn't mean to say anything, but we were arguing and it just slipped out—Carla and the twins.”

He grimaces. “Okay.”

“I'm so sorry. I feel like an idiot. Lucy won't tell anyone.”

Vivian has no idea if that's true. Probably not. She'd gone two whole years without raising suspicion, then gave her dad a heart attack and alienated her half-sister with the news in the span of a month.

“What do you think of Lucy?” she asks.

“She doesn't seem to like you very much.”

“We were kind of actually getting along.” She's almost embarrassed to admit it.

“Really?”

“It's been nice having someone to talk to about my dad. And she's not so bad—she's like this sheltered, earnest dork. She didn't grow up with cable, gets drunk off two sips of wine, says things like ‘oh my gosh.’ She's nuts about romance novels, she's been reading all my mom's stuff. She introduced me to her friends, too.”

“I had no idea.”

She reaches for her drink. “You could've asked.”

Oscar sighs. “I know. I'm sorry.”

“Though I guess it doesn't matter much if she never speaks to me again. She hates me.”

He gives her a playful nudge. “Then she has terrible taste.”

She’s too glum to respond.

“How much does her friend know about us?” he asks.

“Just that we broke up.”

“Not how we met? Or anything else?”

“I’m not dumb enough to tell *everyone* I meet.”

“He seems jealous.”

“He’s not.”

“You sure about that?”

Vivian’s never had any reason to tell Oscar about her long-ago rural fling and has no interest in dredging up the story now, not when things are so fragile and fresh.

“He’s just a friend. He knew I was upset. Of course he’s going to take my side.”

Oscar looks skeptical. “Sure.”

Back home, she almost never plays her trump card, but now it feels right. “You’re really going to make a big deal out of me having a single guy friend when you’ve been married this whole time?”

His face falls like a row of dominos. “Fair. Fine. We’re almost in the clear, I don’t care if people talk about us up here anyway.”

“It wouldn’t bother you if this got out?”

He laughs to himself. “Who are they going to tell?”

Vivian wants to be thrilled that Oscar is here—actually *here!*—but something is off. Maybe he’s tired from the trip. Maybe she’s having a hard time whiplashing back into wanting him after weeks of trying to scrub him from her heart. Maybe she can’t shake off the shock of him showing up on her doorstep, or maybe they’re just rusty, or maybe, maybe, maybe. They have such little experience with being out in the open together; they’re always either keeping a careful distance at Della or sequestered in her apartment. In front of an audience, though, it’s harder to find a rhythm. She’d like to ignore the tension between them, which is ticking louder every minute. But she can’t.

She gets up and brushes crumbs from her hands. “Mm. Okay.”

Chapter Twelve

VIVIAN

At that last Father’s Day brunch, Celeste had to scoot out early for an interview. She left as they were finishing up the meal, leaning into Hank for a peck as she stood. He reached for the check—he always reached for it—but Vivian got there first.

“You can’t pay on Father’s Day, Dad,” she said.

She rooted through her small purse for her wallet, pulling out her phone and keys in the process. She left a 30 percent tip because holiday shifts are their own special kind of hell.

“If you insist, I won’t argue. Thank you.”

On the table, her phone lit up, displaying a text from “❤️” and she quickly pulled it into her lap.

Her dad took a casual sip of espresso. “Who was that from?”

Vivian flipped the bill shut a little harder than necessary. “No one.”

“‘No one’ is a heart?” His expression was good-natured, gentle, teasing.

It’s better than a name or even an initial—he should know. She’d been stupid to leave her phone face up; she’d never make that same mistake at Della. But here, seventy blocks uptown, her guard was down.

“Just a friend.”

He nodded, chewing that over. “Dating anyone these days?”

“Work has been so busy lately.”

He held up his hands. “No pressure from me. It’s just been a long time since you’ve told us about anyone special.”

The irony of evading her dad’s questions about an affair is not lost on her. “I know,” she said, intending for that to be the final word.

“You can’t fault me for being curious,” he said lightly.

Vivian felt torn. There was the instinct to quietly preserve her relationship and the dangerous yearning to tell the truth. She loved Oscar, had loved him for so long. Keeping that kind of giddy magic inside for two years took meticulous self-control. Besides, he was mere weeks or months away from leaving Carla. He was practically already separated if you looked at it that way. And if anyone was going to understand an affair, it’d be her dad. Maybe he’d finally feel safe admitting his own truth to her.

“Actually, I am seeing someone.” She rushed to say the rest, afraid she’d chicken out if she didn’t. “Oscar.”

Hank cocked his head. “Really?”

“Really.”

“Isn’t your boss’s name also Oscar?”

Her nerves thumped like a drummer in a rock band. “Yeah.”

“You don’t mean that Oscar,” he clarified.

Shit. “No, I do.”

A deafening lull followed, punctuated only by the low hum of a restaurant’s heartbeat: clattering silverware, overlapping conversations, light jazz, muttered “behind you” between servers. Comforting sounds, usually. But not then.

Hank’s features contorted in disgust. “Vivian, are you kidding me?”

“I know it’s unconventional, but—”

“Unconventional?” Hank almost never raised his voice, but he did now—loud enough to exude outrage, just low enough to avoid causing a scene. “We’re not talking about piercing your nose or running off with the circus. You could lose your job. Your reputation! What were you thinking?”

She felt like she was being boiled alive in a pot of shame stirred by the ultimate hypocrite. If she’d come this far, she might as well fuck all the way up and be fully transparent.

“I love him.”

It’s the most vulnerable thing she’s ever told either of her parents.

“Is he married?”

Vivian hated answering that. “He’s going to leave his wife.”

“Jesus, Vivian.”

“Oh, you’re one to talk,” she seethed, furious.

He recoiled. Pushed his chair back roughly from the table. Blinked.
“What?”

“Dad, come on. Don’t lie to me.”

His jaw hung open as he stared at her. “What are you talking about?”

“You’re going to pretend not to know?”

Bitter silence unspooled between them.

With a groan, she snaps, “Fine. When I was fourteen, I walked in on you talking to someone on the phone. Your daughter. From your other family.”

A vein bulged in his forehead. “That’s absurd.”

“You’re gone all summer! Business trips all the time. And how convenient, you’ve got a second house to stash them away in. I’ve always wondered, where do they go every August?”

“Keep your voice down,” he hissed. He leaned in close and dropped his voice to a guttural scrape. “I’ve been married for thirty-one years, and in all that time, not *once* have I been unfaithful to your mother. Do you hear that?”

“Then who were you talking to, huh?”

He stared at her for a long time. She waited, elbows on the table, fingers twisted and clenched, watching him conjure up a cover story.

Finally, he managed to say, “It’s not what you think.”

She crossed her arms tightly. “Okay, so what is it?”

Stress crinkled his forehead. “It’s a complicated story.”

She braced herself for a convoluted lie. “I’m listening.”

He thudded his fist into the table. Other diners gawked. “The idea of me carrying on some affair—that’s how little you think of me?”

As soon as the words were in the air between them, his face fell, though. He heard what he’d implied. He must think the absolute worst of her.

“I need a minute,” she said, hurrying to the restroom.

She could almost believe him. That was the worst part—his full-body anguish was too visceral to be an act. She should’ve been relieved to discover her dad was innocent, but instead, she felt nauseated with regret. If her dad never cheated, then she’s been icing him out for half her life for no reason. How do you come back from something like that? You don’t. You can’t. Locking herself into the stall, Vivian ground the heels of her hands into her face. If this really was all one big misunderstanding, it was fatal. It frayed their relationship beyond repair. It cauterized the innocent part of herself she could no longer get back.

When she returned to the table, the waiter had dropped off her card—they could leave, thank God. Swaying in the crushing tension, Vivian made her way out onto a sidewalk full of father-daughter pairs. One teen girl swapped paper cups of bright gelato with her dad.

Hank caught up to her. “Can we talk?” he asked in a pained voice.

There was a frantic flicker behind his eyes, like he wouldn’t be able to breathe until this mess had been sorted out. It hurt Vivian to see him like that, but she was afraid to find out how badly she’d messed up.

She backed away. “I’m going to be late for work.”

He opened his mouth as if to protest but didn’t stop her. She left him behind on the sidewalk without a final glance. Less than an hour later, he was dead.

LUCY

So much for enjoying her remaining nights on Fox Hill Lake. Once Vivian was out of sight, Lucy scarfed down two slices of pizza and sat by the fire Caleb had made. Leaning against the stone ledge, her back had gone from warm to uncomfortably hot, but she couldn’t bring herself to move. She quietly filled him in on what Vivian had said about her breakup with Oscar, and everything she was able to glean about him online—which was quite a

bit. Heaps of professional accolades, a session with a photographer to announce his wife's pregnancy, and zero sign of a divorce.

"I just couldn't do it. Cheat," Lucy says, stabbing a finger toward an image of Oscar with one hand around a woman's waist, a sonogram in the other, and an easy, confident smile.

"You've kissed one guy in your entire life," Caleb says.

"Two now." And after being burned twice, she isn't eager to go for a third.

"Excuse me, *two*. You'd skydive into a cage of sharks before doing something like that."

"At least I'd only be hurting myself. That poor woman."

"Maybe Vivian's doing her a favor, then, by taking him off her hands."

"You think they're back together?"

His nostrils flare. "Seems like it."

"You like her," Lucy says, more accusatory than observational.

He makes a sour face. "As a friend."

"Sure. Still, though?"

Caleb hesitates. "We don't know the whole story. People are complicated."

"This isn't. They're running around behind a pregnant woman's back. Do you think he pays her more than everyone else?"

The front door slides open with a bang. "I'm not a nepo mistress," Vivian calls out, annoyed.

Shoot. If it were anyone else on any other day, Lucy would be stumbling over herself to apologize right now.

In a huff, Vivian sinks onto the couch. Oscar trails her, slinging his arm around her shoulders. She doesn't snuggle into him in the way Lucy would expect; instead, she crosses her arms and legs.

"I think it's past time we open a bottle. Who wants Champagne?" Oscar asks.

Caleb nods seriously. "That's my go-to."

Oscar studies him for a second, then smirks. "Funny." With a hand on Vivian's knee, he says, "You're off duty tonight, let me grab it. Lucy, for

you?”

She doesn't want anything from this polished slimeball. “No, thank you.”

While he's up, the house is so silent, they can hear every glug from the bottle and every crackling flame. Vivian stares distantly across the room.

“Thanks, man,” Caleb says, lifting the glass to Oscar.

“My pleasure.”

“I hear you've got quite a place in New York.”

Leave it to Caleb to be pleasant.

“We've been doing all right,” Oscar says in a tone he probably thinks comes across as modest. “What do you do?”

Caleb winks at Vivian. “Every New Yorker's favorite question, right?”

“Mm. Yeah.”

Oscar watches them with disdain.

He doesn't waver. “I bartend and work at an adventure park.”

“Ah, so you're in the industry, too.”

“At the best bar in town.”

“Yeah?”

Caleb rolls out the punch line. “It's also the only one.”

“Of course it is,” Oscar says tightly. “If you're ever in New York, you'll have to stop by Della sometime. Both of you.”

“Next time, definitely.”

Lucy isn't sure Oscar recognizes the sarcasm. Caleb hates New York.

“Though I don't know how you get a moment of peace down there,” he says. “Must be pretty hectic, no?”

“Well, at least there's more than one place to get a drink.” Oscar squeezes Vivian's shoulder. “And soon there'll be one more.”

“There's more to do up here than you might think,” Vivian says. “Boating, hiking, fishing...Town is only twenty minutes away.”

“You *fish* now?”

“I drive a pickup truck, too.”

“What have you done to her?” Oscar says to Lucy, joking.

“Excuse me?”

“It’s like she’s Laura Ingalls Wilder.”

Lucy cannot believe this man. “So, what, unless you live ten blocks from the Met, you’re a hick?”

He holds up his hands. “I was just kidding.”

“Sure,” she says sarcastically. “You’re staying overnight?”

“Yeah.”

Vivian intently examines her cuticles.

Lucy rises. “Well, I’m going, then.”

Her childhood bedroom, unfortunately, awaits.

“Oh, stay,” Oscar says, as if he can order her around. “I was looking forward to getting to know you.”

Lucy actually laughs. Dawn raised her to have better manners than this, but she also passed down a healthy disdain for entitlement.

“I doubt that.”

He looks surprised. “We’ll practically be family.”

“When? When you’re done with your first family? Or are you just going to hop back and forth between the two?”

“*Lucy*,” Vivian breathes.

She’s nearly lightheaded with shock at her own gall. She’d said that? Out loud?

A grim shadow passes over Oscar, but then he collects himself. “That’s a fair question.” With the same cautious, agreeable tone used by hostage negotiators, he says, “I’m not your dad. I promise.”

“You act enough like him,” Lucy says.

“That’s a little Freudian,” Oscar says, triggering a disgusted eye roll from Vivian.

“What do—” Lucy begins.

“As in Freud’s psychological theory that people tend to be attracted to —”

“You really think I don’t know what that means?”

Oscar frowns. “I’m sorry.”

“I was going to say, what do you actually know about my dad? Did you ever even meet him?”

He chooses his words carefully. “I wish I could’ve. I’m sorry for your loss.”

“You don’t have to be nice to me. You’re not going to win me over.”

In a huff, Oscar says, “I don’t even know why Vivian is wasting her time up here with you.”

Vivian interrupts and tugs him away. “Oscar, stop it. Come.”

VIVIAN

“You didn’t have to be such a dick in there,” Vivian says, exasperated.

She and Oscar retreated to the porch again. The air is dotted with mosquitoes.

“I got pissed, okay? She has no right to judge me like that.”

She crosses her arms. “You said I was wasting my time by hanging out with her. And mansplained Freud. And acted like a condescending asshole.”

He blinks in surprise. They don’t talk to each other like that.

“Fine. I’m sorry. There’s just a lot going on.”

“Hanging out with my half-sister and her friend shouldn’t count as ‘a lot.’ ”

“I’ll be better. I promise.” He slaps a bug on his arm and grimaces. “Can we go inside?”

She’s not done with him. “Here,” she says, entering the garage and flicking on the harsh fluorescent lights.

The damp concrete is cold under her bare feet. Wrinkling his nose, Oscar takes in the scent of rain mingling with gasoline and garbage bins, a half-rotted Adirondack chair, and the fine coat of dust over it all. With his Patek Philippe and hair tousled just so, he couldn’t be more out of place.

She needs to ask a dangerous question. “How do you see this all working out?”

“Me and Lucy?”

“No. All of it. Me and you. Carla. The twins. The bar.”

Now that Lucy's said it out loud, it's impossible to ignore how the prospect of Oscar leaving pregnant Carla for Vivian echoes the very real history of Hank leaving pregnant Dawn for Celeste. The circumstances aren't identical, but they're close enough to make her gut roil.

"Plenty of kids grow up with divorced parents and turn out fine. I was one of them. And honestly, I was happier once my parents split up and stopped fighting all the time. They did me a favor."

This seems like a generous version of the truth. Oscar has told Vivian stories about resenting his dad's string of girlfriends and watching his mom, previously a housewife, struggle to find work again. He fell into the restaurant world at sixteen by waiting tables to help his mom make ends meet. He hasn't spoken to his dad since.

Oscar is banking on his kids growing up to understand and respect the choices he's making, but it doesn't always work that way. Vivian and Lucy are living testaments to that.

"You know this isn't as simple as you're making it out to be, right?" she asks.

"It's not ideal, I get that. What are you worried about, her bankrupting me with alimony and child support?" He rakes a hand through his hair with a weak smile, like the idea of Vivian only wanting him for his money is a cute joke. Then desperation softens him. "Being a stepmom? Us not having enough time together with kids in the mix?" His tone is gentle but too light, like none of these silly little fears are actually worth anything. "I know twins sound like a lot. It took me time to digest it, too."

He can't be this shortsighted and selfish. Can he?

"It's not right, doing this to a kid—making a mess of their family before they're even born. If you don't want to be with Carla, fine, but leaving her for me *now*? Why not two years ago?"

His eyes glow with hurt. "Viv, listen, you'll get over this. We can get over this—together."

She has longed for him to choose her for months, for years even, pleaded for it, planned for it. She knows he loves her. But she can't trust him anymore. He loved Carla once, too. After weeks of handling the

consequences of another man's careless decisions about women's hearts made under this very same roof, she refuses to saddle the next generation with more cheating and lies.

She couldn't see this before, but Oscar brings out a nasty side of her, one that ignores how her actions can hurt other people. She easily justified an affair that could devastate Carla because Oscar wanted Vivian and she was morally flexible enough to want him back. She won't do it anymore.

"No," she says.

His mouth hangs open. "No? You want this. I know you do."

"I don't anymore." Her hands shake, but her voice is clear. She knows what she has to do. "You need to leave."

He stares, horrified.

She gestures toward the house. "Go. Get your things."

"Vivian," he pleads. "You can't do this. I left my *wife* for you."

"And while I was making sacrifices to wait for you, you got her pregnant."

She storms past him toward the door. If he won't retrieve his luggage, she'll do it for him.

He laughs. "Sacrifices? Like collecting paychecks on vacation?"

She turns to glare. "Fuck off."

"Hey," he says, catching her wrist. "Hey, wait, I'm sorry."

His touch transports her to every dark corner they've ever found themselves in: the wine cellar, the alley around the corner from his apartment, a dingy bar bathroom in a Brooklyn neighborhood Carla would never visit. She's angry, and yet she already misses this.

"Oscar." Her tone is a warning, but she doesn't pull away.

"Hear me out," he says quietly.

She shouldn't. Trusting him again would be foolish, she knows that, but Vivian's been a fool for him for two long years. What's a few more minutes?

"I'm listening," she says uneasily.

"I've already contacted a lawyer. A great one." His voice is low, thrilling. "He says we can get this done quickly."

Goose bumps break out along her arms. She hadn't expected him to have such legitimate plans ready to be set into motion.

"We can get an apartment, anything you'd like. Or live in your apartment. Whatever makes you happy."

Vivian imagines them escaping her studio for a gorgeous brownstone apartment bathed in natural light. They could have polished hardwood floors, a wine fridge, a fireplace.

"Our bar is going to be a smash hit. It'll be your playground, your vision, your stamp on New York. Everyone will know your name."

She's frozen, transfixed. She should resist him, but he's describing the life she's fantasized about for so long. "And we can travel. Napa, Tuscany, Burgundy, you name it. I'll be there."

The way he says it, she believes it. Wholeheartedly.

"I'll go anywhere for you. I'm here, aren't I? Just like we talked about. I came here to get you out of Bumfuck, Nowhere, and back into the world where you belong."

That last part breaks the spell. Vivian's strength surges back. He's here, but so what? He hates it. Condescension oozes from every syllable. He has no respect for Lucy, none for Caleb. He looks down on this house, this place, this part of her life. He doesn't see that a piece of her, however small and fraught, is rooted here. She rears back, disgusted.

"Vivian?" he asks, confused.

"Look," she says harshly. "I'm glad you checked out when my dad died because it showed me who you really are. You're selfish and untrustworthy and unbearably impressed with yourself. You're rude and condescending, and if you think I need to be rescued from this place, you don't understand me at all. Not anymore."

"I—"

She juts a finger into his chest. "I don't care that you left Carla. We're not moving in together. I'm not going to live out your little vineyard fantasy."

Vivian remembers the despicable way he treated her when she needed him most, and the jolt of satisfaction she gets whenever she imagines

opening the bar on her own. She thinks about sneaking around in the shadows with him, and how golden she feels stretching out here in the sun. She knows she's making the right decision.

“I'm not going to see you again. Because, Oscar? I'm done.”

The last thing she sees before the power goes out is Oscar's slack expression. The man who can talk his way out of anything is speechless. Crushed. And then they're alone in the darkness.

Chapter Thirteen

VIVIAN

Vivian storms into the pitch-black kitchen. Oscar's loafered footsteps scramble behind her, less sure of where they're going.

"Come on," he groans.

He doesn't deserve a reply.

"Vivian, seriously."

She finds his duffel and yanks the zipper closed. "Here," she says, thrusting it into his hands.

She's a little embarrassed that Lucy and Caleb are probably listening to all of this from the other room, but her adrenaline and anger quash that.

"You're overreacting."

"I will email you my formal resignation letter tomorrow," she says, high on the power of acting like a stone-cold bitch. After everything he's done, he's earned it.

"But I came all this way to see you."

He reaches for her waist, and she slaps his hand away.

"I'm sure you can find a hotel."

She senses him crumbling. He's out of cards to play.

"You want to give up everything you've worked for back home? Everything you deserve? Fine."

He's never taunted her like this before, all wounded ego and bitter anger.

"You want to mess up your kids? Fine. I don't want to be involved."

After a steely silence, his voice turns low and threatening. “You’ll be bored by tomorrow—bored of wasting away in the middle of the woods, bored of this isolated life, bored of mucking around with Goody Two-Shoes and your bartender friend. You’ll be irrelevant.”

“Better than being with you.”

They burn in silence for one long moment. She can’t get enough air.

“I thought you were special,” he says.

Vivian opens the door. The wind howls. “Goodbye, Oscar.”

LUCY

The power went out while Lucy was searching for *Loved Up in London*, the book she’s halfway through and wanted to take back home. In the darkness, she carefully made her way down the spiral staircase to retrieve candles, praying that muscle memory would save her from a nasty fall. She and Caleb got stuck in the living room, not wanting to interrupt Vivian and Oscar’s heated argument. They sat by the fireplace, illuminated just enough to have an entire silent conversation with their eyes. Caleb was impressed by Vivian’s backbone; Lucy was begrudgingly grateful that Vivian was kicking Oscar out. They both cringed at his comment about “mucking around with Goody Two-Shoes” and her “bartender friend.”

In his wake, Vivian heaves a sigh. She shuts the door, cutting off the furious splatter of rain. There’s the scrape of pulling out a chair and the thud of her elbows on the table.

“Should we say something?” Caleb mouths.

Lucy dreads the prospect of inserting herself, but continuing to eavesdrop isn’t much better.

“Hi,” she says, coming around the corner with Caleb.

She’s using her phone as a flashlight for now, but her battery is running low. She shouldn’t waste it.

“Oh my God, hi. You’re still here.”

“I was just about to leave.”

Vivian takes a shuddery breath. “Sorry you heard all that.”

“You’re really done with him?” Caleb asks.

“Completely.”

“Congratulations,” Lucy says limply.

Vivian stands and excuses herself. “I’m sorry, I—I need a minute.”

Lucy digs around in the kitchen closet. The flashlight is dead, so she lights a few chunky pillar candles for the first floor. Caleb puts another log on the fire. From upstairs, there’s a faint snuffle.

Then the front door slams shut hard enough to rattle in its frame. Oscar’s shoes squelch as he stomps inside.

“There’s a tree down in the middle of the road. I can’t get out.”

Overhead, Vivian yelps. “What?”

Guided by a thin stream of light, she races down the stairs.

“How long until someone moves it?” he asks.

Filled with dread, Lucy says, “The road might be clear tomorrow. Or the next day.”

“You’re kidding me,” Oscar says.

Caleb stifles a laugh. “Nobody’s going out there to move it *now*.”

Oscar pounds his fist into the counter. “Great.”

As Vivian approaches, he glares at her with cold fury.

For the first time ever, possibly, Lucy actually feels bad for her.

VIVIAN

Nobody knows what to do next. Oscar plucks at his clothes, soaked and plastered to his body from just the run to his car and back. Vivian shifts her weight again and again, unable to find a remotely comfortable, natural position. Lucy cajoles Caleb into Scrabble by candlelight. He protests —“You beat me, like, four hundred to twelve last time”—but gives in, if

only to remove himself from the corrosive tension between Vivian and Oscar. She doesn't blame him.

"Help yourself to whatever you need," Vivian says tightly. "You can sleep on the couch."

There are extra beds. He doesn't deserve them.

"Got it."

"And don't waste water with a shower."

"Fine."

She's never seen him so cold.

"Well. Good night," she says, pointedly taking an Allagash from the fridge and leaving his wine untouched.

It's 9:30, much earlier than she normally goes to bed, but she'll gladly take two or three hours of lying awake if it means avoiding Oscar.

"Night," she says, passing Lucy and Caleb.

She doesn't get into bed. Instead, she leans against it, quietly sipping her drink and taking in the night sky through the picture window. It's impossible to tell where the lake ends and the horizon begins. She ruminates over the day's chaos, still stunned by how quickly Oscar slid from gallant to arrogant to petulant. He couldn't take no for an answer. It's hard to recognize him as the man she loved. Has he always been so smug and selfish? That night, she doesn't sleep. Instead, she tosses and turns until she's entombed by the duvet, wondering what or who had changed—Oscar? Or Vivian?



The next morning, the power is still out. Her phone is dead. They can't make coffee, and the only bananas left are bruised and brown. Fat clouds hang in a bold blue sky. The water is so still that the trees along the shoreline are perfectly doubled, reflected in the mirror of the lake. Vivian sulks on the back deck, examining her flaking-off home manicure and letting the beautiful day mock her misery. She's made a mess of things: She

could've resisted Oscar to begin with, or been honest with Lucy. None of these decisions felt like choices at the time, but they were.

Lucy is reading on the docked boat, and Caleb is out on the water, zipping around on their Jet Ski. Every thirty minutes, Oscar drives a half mile to check on the tree (God forbid he walk). They speak as little as possible.

Lucy heads to the kitchen, barely cracking a smile at Vivian; it doesn't reach her eyes. When Oscar returns from one of his runs, Vivian is close enough to eavesdrop on their conversation.

"You'd think someone would bother moving that thing," he says.

Vivian can practically hear his eye roll.

"You're more than welcome to," Lucy says.

Vivian snickers.

"Ha," Oscar says flatly. "Want to help? Doesn't seem like you're thrilled to be here with her, either."

"I'm not planning on leaving," Lucy says. "Not until I have to."

"Good luck hanging around here with her," he mutters.

"Strange way to talk about someone you claim to love."

"I blew up my life for her."

Vivian can't imagine how devastated Carla is right now, and for that, she is truly sorry.

"She deserves better than you," Lucy says.

That catches Vivian off guard. If anything, she'd expect Lucy to say something like *You two deserve each other*.

Oscar barks a cool laugh. "She's wrong about you, you know? Told me you're so sweet and sheltered. You're a piece of work just like she is."

With every word, Vivian feels even more confident in her choice to leave him. He's nauseating.

"Must run in the family then," Lucy says.

After his next hopeful jaunt outside, Oscar returns with his duffel packed and his hands shoved into his pockets.

"The road's clear. I'm leaving."

It's bright enough that Vivian has to squint up at him. "Okay."

He doesn't move from the doorway. "I guess this is it."

Her heart pounds. Two years of loneliness, adrenaline, and stolen moments, and it all ends here, in broad daylight, in the same spot she once strapped on a kid-sized life jacket and ate popsicles. This is it. Okay. Goodbye to all that.

Chapter Fourteen

LUCY

Oscar leaves. Caleb leaves. Lucy takes her time getting groceries, replacing what went bad. Vivian's been watching her all last night and this morning, waiting for the chance to apologize or double down or whatever she wants to say. There's nothing wrong with dragging out Vivian's anticipation. After all, if things had unfolded differently, Vivian would've waited all summer to confess to Lucy.

The thing is, Lucy isn't capable of giving her the silent treatment for any longer. It goes against her nature; her soft side is—well, most of her sides are soft. Putting up a cold front has been exhausting. After she puts away the groceries, she finds Vivian sitting at the end of the dock with her feet in the water.

As Lucy approaches, Vivian turns, pushes her sunglasses up, and shields her eyes with her hand. From where she's standing, without makeup, dressed in a plain one-piece, Vivian looks smaller, meeker somehow.

"Hi," Vivian says.

"Hi," Lucy says, a little sheepish. The tension between them is as thick as lobster bisque.

"Can we talk?" Even Vivian seems a little shy.

"Yeah." Lucy sits a few feet away, reclining against a post.

She exhales. "I worried you were done with me for good."

“That worries you?” As far as Lucy can tell, Vivian has wanted her to disappear ever since they met.

“I don’t want to ruin things between us,” Vivian says almost shyly.

“Well, you’ve been doing a pretty good job of it.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t want to hurt you. I just—”

Lucy throws her hands up. There’s no use in having the same fight over and over. “You just need the money—yeah, I know, I’ve heard.”

Vivian swallows. “That’s not what I was going to say.”

“Then what?”

Exasperated, Lucy steels herself for the newest excuse.

Vivian straightens up. “I am incredibly sorry I went back on my word. I never should’ve done it. It was selfish—I’ve been appallingly selfish.”

This is not what Lucy expected. At all.

“This place should belong to you as much as it does to me. Let’s forget about selling it for now. At the end of the summer, you and I can make the decision together, fifty-fifty. If we decide to keep it, we’ll share access to the house; if we sell it, you’d get half of the money.”

Lucy flinches. “You don’t really mean that.”

“Even if he only left the house to my side of the family, it’d be a cop-out for me to stick to that. It’s not like I respect any of his other decisions.”

What a delightful way to think about it. “True. But won’t your mom care if you keep it?”

“She’ll get over it. If I steamroll you, I’m just as bad as he was.” Vivian takes a deep breath, straining to find the right words. “I haven’t given you the respect you deserve. I don’t want to be that kind of person anymore—not some self-centered, rich asshole who swoops in from out of town to fuck you over.”

“Are you sure you’re serious?”

“Yeah, I am. I want to do right by you.”

Lucy is stunned. A fresh start. She lets herself imagine it all—more money than she’s ever fathomed having: She could help out her mom. If she lands the Portland job, she could afford to live somewhere nice there—maybe even buy a place. Beyond that, she wants to see Paris. Or maybe

Edinburgh. She imagines green hills rolling with fog, lilting accents, curling up on a tartan armchair by a crackling fireplace to read. Heaven. She could pay off her student loans without much of a dent, go on to get her master's in education, maybe even try writing a novel of her own.

She'd have to give up her dad's house, yes. But with money like that, surely she could afford to rent a cabin for a week or two every summer. Still, she isn't ready to make a decision, or even let her guard down.

"You'd really give all that money to someone you basically just met? You don't even like me."

Vivian's face falls. "That—that's not true."

Lucy isn't sure what to believe. "So, what, you're trying to buy my friendship?"

Hurt, she recoils. "No."

That had sounded meaner than Lucy intended. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean —"

"No, I deserve that one."

"What about starting your business?" Regardless of what they do, opening her bar in New York would probably be out of the question.

Vivian takes a shaky breath. "Don't worry about it."

"What does that mean?"

"It can wait. I can get another job for now."

"Okay, so we 'decide together,'" Lucy says, making air quotes. "Let's say by Labor Day."

That gives them three weeks at most. "What happens if I still don't want to sell? If I never want to sell?"

"We'll...figure it out if we need to."

Lucy can't see her bending, not with something as big as this. She's stubbornly opinionated, fussy when Lucy loads the dishwasher with silverware facing up instead of down.

"That's specific."

"I meant what I said. We'll have equal say. I can sign something, have it notarized."

"Right, but I doubt we'll agree on what to do. We don't now."

Vivian grapples for words. “I don’t know. But I’ll keep an open mind if you will.”

Maybe it’s naive to trust her again, but Lucy wants to believe Vivian. She’s pretty sure the offer is sincere. And if it isn’t...well, Lucy would be no worse off than she’s been all summer. For right now, though, Lucy feels seen and fought for, like the heroine in a romance novel—only here, the hero is Vivian.

“Okay,” Lucy says. It feels like a truce.

“Okay.” Vivian glows with satisfaction. Then, looking a shade shyer, she adds, “I overheard you talking to Oscar this morning, saying that I deserved better than him. Maybe you were just saying that to get to him, but either way—thank you.”

“Oh.” She hadn’t realized Vivian had been within earshot. “Well, it’s true. He’s not very nice.”

Vivian sighs. “I hadn’t seen that side of him before. I guess I’m glad I did before it was too late.”

“Yeah. And...I said some awful things to you yesterday,” Lucy admits.

There’s a pause. “Yeah.”

Everything Lucy said was true, but she no longer wants to hold it against Vivian.

“I’m sorry. I take it all back.”

Vivian arches one eyebrow. “Really? Even the one about me and Dad being selfish cheaters?”

“What you’re doing is the furthest thing from selfish.”

The tension drops from Vivian’s shoulders. “That means a lot. Thank you.”

A pair of loons swims serenely by. The majestic weather beckons Lucy to make the most of it. She might not have too many days like this ahead of her.

“Do you want to take a ride?” she asks.

She half expects Vivian to say no. Instead, she smiles.

“Yeah, let’s go.”



They've fallen into practiced roles by now: Lucy unties the ropes, then hops in as Vivian pulls away from the dock. She steers them toward the Narrows, where they got caught in the rainstorm. This time, they each keep one hand firmly planted atop their baseball caps until they slow to a five-mile-per-hour crawl.

As they motor, Vivian tells Lucy why she finally kicked Oscar out.

"I never thought he was a saint, obviously, but he was different in the city—less selfish, less obnoxious," Vivian says. "Or maybe he's always been this way and I'm just seeing it now. If I've ever been that condescending to you, kill me."

Lucy recognizes an opportunity when she sees one. "You can call it New York, you know that, right? Instead of 'the city.' In case you haven't noticed, there *are* other cities."

"Got it. Thank you. I'm sorry." She blushes. "And I'm sorry he was so rude to you and Caleb."

"He was atrocious."

"And a jerk about Fox Hill."

This doesn't add up for Lucy. *Vivian* is kind of a jerk about Fox Hill.

"That bothered you?"

"Yeah. I can talk shit about this place because it's mine. He can't."

Lucy nods. This is the half-sister she knows. "Sure."

"I don't mean to, though," Vivian says abruptly. "It's beautiful."

Painfully so.

"I stayed with my mom the other night," Lucy says, filling Vivian in on everything she learned about the truth of her parents' relationship, how Hank reeled Dawn in for one last night before cutting her loose, how her last-ditch love letter to him went unanswered.

Vivian shakes her head. "Dick move. Typical."

"You're not surprised?"

She looks grim. “I hate to say it, but no. Warm, fuzzy feelings weren’t exactly his thing.”

Vivian pours out stories: the way he kept himself at a distance most of the time, like whatever was on his BlackBerry was more important than his own family; the impossibly high standards she could never meet, not in school and not in her career, no matter how much she flourished; the cutting comments she can still recite word for word in a dull monotone a decade or two later.

“And then, after I overheard him on the phone with you...he lied straight to my face for years. I knew something was up, he knew I saw through him, and he never owned up to any of it. He wasn’t even a good actor—he always looked weirdly guilty and then changed the subject.”

“I know the exact face you’re talking about.” Lucy casts her eyes away and presses her mouth into a hard line.

With a bittersweet laugh, Vivian says, “That’s it exactly. He was being so hypocritical about Oscar and me, and it pushed me over the edge. I finally confronted him. I told him what I’d heard, what I thought. He denied everything. We had a huge fight, and then an hour later, he dropped dead.”

“I’m sure that’s just a coincidence.”

Vivian hunches over and runs her hands through her hair. “I don’t know.”

Lucy stares Vivian down, willing her to believe what she’s about to say. “This wasn’t your fault. These things just happen sometimes.”

Vivian shrugs, but there’s nothing casual about it. “I guess.”

“*Really.*”

“Mm.” Vivian blinks hard and looks away. “What was he like with you?”

“He didn’t lie. He wasn’t so harsh.”

It’s not a comfortable thing to admit. It was probably easier for him to treat Lucy warmly when he mostly saw her on vacation in his favorite place. This wasn’t his real life; she wasn’t his regular, full-time daughter.

“But he missed out on so much. A lot went unsaid. He didn’t want to talk about his life in New York, and I didn’t want to risk pushing him

away.”

Instead, she put him on a golden pedestal and contorted herself into the role of an adoring daughter.

They’re halfway into the Narrows by now, floating by an A-frame cabin with a long, skinny dock jutting out like a crooked finger. There are two little girls on it—maybe eight and ten, one blonde, one brunette—who keep flinging themselves off the end, splashing exuberantly into the lake, and scrambling up the ladder to do it all over again. They leap in together, holding hands, arms overhead. For a moment, neither Lucy nor Vivian can look away.

VIVIAN

The forecast promises another cool gray evening, ruining another sunset. The night doesn’t have to be a bust, though. Vivian suggests a foray into Portland for dinner and nabs a last-minute reservation at Izakaya Minato, a cozy Japanese spot that consistently garners awestruck reviews. She can’t wait to try it.

In the car, they’re both quiet, lost in thought, with the radio filling the silence. Vivian’s still shocked that she really offered Lucy half the house, and a tiny bit proud of herself, too—though she recognizes she shouldn’t congratulate herself too hard for simply being nice and fair. The thought of going back to work for what, statistically, will be another arrogant man instead of becoming her own boss crushes her. But at this point, it’s the best option she has—the only one she can live with.

When they arrive at the white clapboard restaurant, Vivian opens the door and falls through a portal into a trendy corner of Brooklyn—or, rather, Brooklyn with better lighting. The host has a short, asymmetrical haircut springing with shiny curls and a trail of tattoos crawling like ivy up one arm. At one table, a woman dines in a cool olive boilersuit with sculptural gold jewelry and three-inch clogs. Her date could be a body double for

Vivian's upstairs neighbor. An upbeat tune floats through the sleek black-and-white space.

"The omakase is forty dollars? Is that a typo?" Vivian asks.

In New York, that kind of money disappears without her even realizing it, slipping away in six-dollar lattes and three-dollar subway fare. She can't remember the last time she had omakase; the additional zero on the price tag is usually enough of a deterrent.

Their waiter drops off a parade of mouthwatering dishes: oysters broiled in miso custard with ponzu sauce; steaming hot, Japanese-style fried chicken dusted with spice; bacon-wrapped mochi. Vivian sips down a cocktail made with tequila, pineapple juice, and an explosive kick of wasabi. She's rarely at a loss for words when it comes to a meal, but tonight she's stunned into silent, sacred appreciation.

"This was such a good idea," Lucy says, scooping up the last morsel from her plate.

"I feel like I died."

"I need to be rolled out of here. That was, what, seven courses?"

"Eight, I think. Let's walk it off."



After dinner, they meander fifteen minutes to the waterfront, the historic heart of Portland. The neighborhood is full of turn-of-the-century buildings with storefronts on the ground floor and residences on top with elegant cornices and large display windows. String lights wind through leafy green trees. They wander down the quaint brick sidewalk of Exchange Street, dipping in and out of Sherman's (the bookstore), FatFace (a boutique bursting with stripes, of both the nautical and rugby varieties), Coastal Maine Popcorn Co. (boasting thirty flavors), and plenty of others (Lucy blushes when they pass an adult store). It's a Friday night and the city is bustling with energy—not the frantic kind, like New York's rush hour, but somehow both vibrant and relaxed.

When they pass a darkened dive bar, Lucy wrinkles her nose. “That place has a different Jell-O shot flavor every night. I could live to be a hundred and still never forgive Caleb for taking me there on banana-schnapps night.”

They stop at the marina, where clusters of sailboats sit like jewels in a shop window. Under the heavy gray sky, boats bob, a cover band jams from beneath an awning, the briny air smells like vacation. Vivian leans her elbows on the damp, weathered wooden railing and takes it all in.

As John Updike once said—and zillions of basic girls have posted on Instagram since—“The true New Yorker secretly believes that people living anywhere else have to be, in some sense, kidding.” Vivian once agreed, confident to her core that anywhere else would be criminally boring. On any given day, you could see a man in a top hat with a parakeet perched on his shoulder riding the A train, or wait on Sarah Jessica Parker at dinner, or stumble into a burlesque show held in a nineteenth-century lesbian socialite’s impeccably decorated parlor. You could get hit in the face by a stray pastrami sandwich while biking past the legendary Katz’s Deli, which sounds like it would be an urban myth, except it really did happen to Vivian on a Sunday afternoon in tenth grade.

During the past couple years, there have been no underground parakeets, no flying deli meats. Between working with Oscar, lusting after Oscar, and keeping her relationship with Oscar a secret, Vivian was stretched too thin to appreciate any of New York’s wild offerings or, more importantly, to notice how unhappy she was. Sure, she could get absolutely anything and everything in the city—Sri Lankan food at two o’clock in the morning, fifty thousand works of art at the Met, vintage Pucci or Prada—but when was the last time she actually sought those things out?

She’d overlooked the fact that certain pleasures can only be found elsewhere: cheap lobster, bucolic fields, a blanket of stars, chicken coops, dusty pickup trucks, the thrill of stumbling across a radio station without static, loons gliding over the rhythmic slosh of the lake, pine-scented breeze, and whole days spent barefoot outside. A chic wine bar wouldn’t flourish in Fox Hill, but Portland could be a different story. She’s never

given herself a real chance to appreciate anywhere else. Now, though, she wonders.

Chapter Fifteen

VIVIAN

One lazy afternoon in mid-August, Vivian makes an accidental discovery. She'd been nibbling on a caprese salad and leisurely working through the crossword puzzle she found in an old magazine when her pen runs dry. She rummages through her purse and the kitchen junk drawer for another pen and comes up with bubkes. That's when she has the idea to check the bedside drawer in her dad's nightstand.

She holds her breath as she pulls it open, praying she doesn't find anything weird or deeply private. The drawer comes out halfway, then jams. She relaxes at the sight of an innocent assortment of items: a bottle of melatonin, a spare pair of goggles, loose change. She sweeps her hand toward the back half of the drawer, hitting something solid. With a little maneuvering, she pulls out an old, narrow shoebox.

Inside, plain white envelopes are stuffed, sealed, and packed like sardines. There must be more than two dozen. She pulls one out and spots Dawn's name in her dad's angular handwriting on the front. The next one does, too. She riffles through the rest. They're all nearly identical, with two exceptions: one for Lucy, one for Vivian. As much as she's dying of curiosity, she knows it would be wrong to open them all.

Vivian doesn't care about the pen anymore. She puts the envelopes back in the order she found them, then carries the box down to the lake, where Lucy is reading in the boat. Her footsteps pound down the dock.

“You’re never going to guess what I found.”

Lucy glances up from yet another one of Celeste’s novels: *Tied Up in Tahoe*. It came out the year before *Fifty Shades of Grey* did. Celeste was still bitter that the other author got all the credit for sparking an international BDSM craze.

“What is that?”

“I think Dad wrote a bunch of letters and never sent them. This is full of envelopes with your mom’s name on them, plus two separate ones addressed to us.”

“What? Let me see.”

“Not here, I don’t want them blowing away.”

They move to the circle of chairs by the bonfire. Vivian rips hers open; Lucy carefully unseals hers. Both are dated to May of their senior year of high school.

Vivian,

I wish I could be in New York to see your art show today. You’ve worked hard and done a beautiful job. With your graduation right around the corner, I’ve been thinking about the past 18 years, including how I could’ve been a better parent—which brings me here. I have something difficult to tell you, though I believe you already know some of it. I probably should’ve discussed this with you sooner, but I didn’t think you were ready. I’m putting this in writing because I think it will be easier for both of us this way. Come to me if you’d ever like to talk about it.

Before Mom and I were married, I reconnected with an old girlfriend, Dawn Webster. We dated on and off while I was in college. After our relationship ended, I was surprised to learn that she had given birth to our daughter, Lucy. I had my life in New York — my work, then you — and it didn't make sense for me to uproot our family. Instead, I see Lucy a few times a year, primarily in July. I'm not really on a business trip right now. I'm in Fox Hill to celebrate Lucy's graduation.

Up until now, I haven't shared any of this with you or Mom because I didn't want to hurt you. I didn't want you to have to live with my mistakes. I've done my best to be discreet, but clearly, you've caught on. I'm sad to see that we aren't as close as we once were, and I hope that we'll find a way through this.

Family is always the most important thing, and I got lucky with two great kids. If you'd like to meet Lucy, now or in the future, I can see if she'd be open to it. I think you'd get along.

I hope you can forgive me. I love you.

Dad

Vivian is dumbstruck. Furious. Writing this down instead of telling her face-to-face was a cop-out. He was a lying coward 'til the very end. She's stunned by the verbal gymnastics he used to tidy up the timeline of his

affair, and the arrogance of his assumption that Vivian could just swallow this and ride off into the sunset with him and Lucy. He called her a “great kid,” not that he ever said as much to her out loud. The words “I’m sorry” do not appear even once.

If she’d read this twelve years ago, she probably would’ve forgiven him eventually. She could’ve had more of a father, and then a more miserable—though less complicated—experience grieving his death. Her parents likely would’ve divorced, but they could’ve been happier, and maybe she’d appreciate them more. She and Lucy could’ve forged a relationship back when they were on the cusp of adulthood, more pliable. She waits quietly for Lucy to finish reading hers. When she looks up, there are tears in her eyes.

LUCY

Lucy,

In a few short hours, you'll be a high school graduate. Congratulations! I can't believe you're old enough to be walking across that stage. I know I haven't been here for every milestone, but I hope this makes up for some of my absences. Please know I think about you every day. I'm sorry our time together has been so limited.

I used to think that avoiding the subject of my life in New York was the kindest choice I could make. I didn't want you to feel left out. Sidestepping your questions

was difficult, and made me feel guilty at times, but as the years piled up, the idea of being fully honest with you got more and more daunting.

You're smart, resourceful, hardworking — I'm sure you've picked up on more than your mother and I have let on. Your poise around this subject has been remarkable. I imagine it hasn't been easy. If you have any questions, or if there's anything you'd like to tell me — about what growing up has been like for you, or maybe just telling me to go to hell — I'm ready to listen (though I hope it's not too much of the latter).

Most importantly, I want you to know that I didn't keep you at a distance from the rest of my family out of shame. I'm so proud of you, Lucy. I'm just not proud of the decisions I've made.

If you're okay with it, I want to be a bigger part of your life. Let me know when you'd like me to visit next, or if you'd like to come to New York. If you're interested in meeting Vivian, I can see if she'd be open to it. Maybe we can all spend time at the lake together this summer.

Love,
Dad

Lucy is gobsmacked. He actually apologized. It's no small thing; he'd never once been so direct about his flaws and poor choices. She rereads the

compliments several times, glowing: He called her smart, resourceful, hardworking, poised, and even remarkable. *Remarkable*. It's nice that he suggested visiting Fox Hill more often, but it's the invitation to New York that makes her cry.

He wanted to welcome her into his life—his real life. How many times had she fantasized about that? She wouldn't care about catching a Broadway show or dining in steakhouses with twenty-five-dollar cocktails. Instead, she thought about sitting at his kitchen table on a Sunday morning, sheets of newspaper strewn between them as she passed the cream cheese. Or they'd bump into his friend on the subway and he'd say, "This is Lucy, my daughter." Or she'd notice he was out of dish soap and pick some up at the bodega. Or she'd be the kind of person who calls it a bodega. Or he'd ask her to swing by his office, and he'd give her too many detailed directions, forgetting that she could pull up the route on her phone in five seconds. She wouldn't interrupt him, even if it was a little annoying, even though they'd have had this same type of conversation too many times, because she'd know that's just how he is.

Scraps. She wanted scraps. He'd apparently been right on the brink of giving them to her. And he changed his mind? It kills her.

Vivian asks if they can swap letters. Lucy hesitates, feeling exposed, but hands it over anyway. They're in the trenches together. As she reads Vivian's, it sinks in that Lucy was able to love him in a less complicated way because he truly treated her differently. Even while apologizing to her for serious sins, there's an undercurrent of warmth. Meanwhile, he seems to have held Vivian at arm's length, too afraid to show her any of his good qualities for fear of accidentally revealing his bad ones. It's strange to see proof that in certain ways, Vivian got the short end of the stick. Jealous as Lucy was, she wouldn't trade her relationship with her dad for all of Vivian's financial privilege.

"Wow," Vivian says, when she reaches the end of Lucy's letter.

"What do you think?" Lucy asks.

Vivian's nostrils flare. She pulls her knees up to her chest. Half her pedicure has chipped off.

“I can’t,” she says, glaring out at the water. “He’s...ugh.”

Lucy just listens.

“I could strangle him. Even when he was doing ‘the right thing’ by finally coming clean, he still lied to me. He spun the story in his favor. He didn’t apologize.” She spits out the last word. “But he apologized to you.”

“I’m sorry about that,” Lucy says quietly.

“It’s not your fault.”

“Still.”

“It’s just wild to see your letter, how sweet and caring and...*paternal* he was with you. And I wonder if...if he loved you more, why did he stick around for me?”

Lucy has no words. She’s used to Vivian breaking her heart but not like this. Finally, she manages, “I don’t know. It wasn’t fair.”

“No. It wasn’t.”

Thirty feet away, Hank’s boat sways in the waves. He got what he wanted: his two girls at the lake for the summer.

“How do you feel about yours?” Vivian asks.

In despair, Lucy thinks. But instead, what comes out is, “I’m done with him. That letter would’ve meant everything to me back then. It could’ve changed my life. And he just...what, decided not to bother with giving this to me after all?”

Vivian nods. “He was a coward.”

“Why do you think he didn’t send these?” Lucy asks.

“Because he was a coward.”

Lucy frowns. “No, seriously.”

“That was me being serious.”

“Did something happen that made him change his mind? Maybe your mom brought him to couple’s therapy or maybe...”

Vivian thinks. “No, this was right when my grandma died. My mom’s mom. I bet he realized it’d be a particularly bad time to walk out on her.”

He couldn’t leave her. Celeste was the one person Hank leaned on in the aftermath of his parents’ deaths. Apparently, that would’ve been too cruel even for him.

“Was it kinder of him to stay and support her?” Lucy asks. “Or would it have been better to leave—not right then, but in a year or so—instead of carrying on a charade for the rest of his life?”

“I don’t know if ‘kinder’ is the right word. Maybe it was easier for him to keep plodding along. That’s what he did with us.”

“That’s cruel.”

“My mother knew about you. She could’ve chosen to leave years ago—she didn’t.”

Lucy holds one of her mom’s letters up to the light, but whatever’s inside has been folded once or twice over, so it’s impossible to make out whatever he wrote.

“My mom has to see these.”

VIVIAN

Dawn is working, so they invite her over that night for dinner. Suddenly, the afternoon seems endless; Vivian is dying to know what the letters say. The prospect of sitting around the house for the next few hours makes her antsy, so she decides to kill time by preparing a true feast. If the letters contain something terrible and wreak total havoc, at least Vivian can soften the blow with an exquisite meal.

She and Lucy drive over to Millie’s, a general store that carries quarts of milk, cartons of cigarettes, six-packs of Sam Adams, and dark blue speckled lobsters crawling slowly along the bottom of a long tank. If you know to ask for it, you can pay cash for a growler of moonshine out the back door. It’s owned and manned by Millie herself, who’s been around long enough to have probably sold Hank’s parents their first Maine lobster. She has steel gray hair pulled back in a waist-length braid and a colorful fox tattoo on her forearm. When Vivian and Lucy walk in, she’s playing a handheld game of Yahtzee.

“Lucy! I was so sorry to hear about your dad.” She gets up, knees creaking, and comes around the cash register to give her a hug. To Vivian, she asks, “Where are you visiting from?”

“Oh, no, I’m—I—I’ve been coming up every summer since I was born.”

She’s been here a dozen times, always alone, never making small talk or lingering for long. She wouldn’t expect Millie to remember her, but still, Vivian feels left out.

“This is Vivian, my half-sister,” Lucy says.

Millie gawks. “Your dad...?”

Lucy tries and fails to wrangle a smile. “The rumors are true.”

Vivian steers the conversation firmly. “We’re here for lobsters.”

Millie blinks and clears her throat. “You’re in luck—we got big ones today. They’re beauts.”

Vivian bends down to examine them. The lobsters crawl more slowly than turtles. Thick yellow rubber bands hold their claws together. They only turn bright red once they’re boiled.

“How big are they?”

“Bigger than the rat my second ex-husband calls a Chihuahua.” Millie winks. “Most are pound-’n’-a-halfers. We got a couple pound-’n’-a-quarters in there, too.”

Vivian asks for three, a pound and a half each. Millie plunges a gloved hand into the tank and drops the wiggling lobsters into a white paper bag.

LUCY

Lucy plays sous chef to Vivian’s head chef, and together, they prepare a classic Maine dinner to be enjoyed alfresco on the back deck. On the cedar picnic table, there are bright red lobsters, hot to the touch; hunks of melted butter infused with basil; a verdant salad bursting with cherry tomatoes and drizzled in homemade balsamic vinaigrette; and sunny ears of corn wrapped in tin foil. A bottle of pale gold chardonnay sweats in an ice bucket, and

there's an assortment of silver lobster crackers and tiny forks made for digging out that precious, tender, speckled meat.

When Dawn arrives, she offers to help in the kitchen, but Vivian shoos her away. "No, go sit, enjoy."

Outside, Lucy's mom braces herself against the deck's railing and soaks in the view. The sky is inching toward sunset, and tonight's already promises to be spectacular. There's a rosy glow with fluffy lilac clouds. Peach streaks of light will soon turn to fiery orange embers. A water-skier skims the lake's surface in wide, arcing curves. Sweet barbecue smoke and Creedence Clearwater Revival wafts from a few hundred feet away.

Dawn exhales. "I haven't been here in years. I've missed this."

Lucy remembers her mom picking her up and dropping her off in the driveway here as a kid, but she's never seen her mom enjoy Fox Hill Lake like this, though she must have spent countless summer nights here before Lucy was born.

"Is it weird to be back?"

"It's like stepping back in time."

Vivian ducks into the house to grab plates and handfuls of silverware.

Once she's out of earshot, Dawn says to Lucy, "I can't believe she's giving it all up."

"Well, we'll see," Lucy says quietly.

"What do you mean?"

"She said we can make the decision together—to sell it or keep it."

Dawn is stunned. "Shut up. Seriously?"

Lucy grapples for words. "I mean, she sounds serious."

"You want to keep it, right?"

It's a good question. "I—"

The sliding door thwacks open. Lucy doesn't want to get into it in front of Vivian.

Somehow, they make it through dinner while safely skirting around any sensitive subjects. They crack open claws and tails and discard the shells in a communal bowl. Lucy can actually taste the harmony between the buttery chardonnay and their feast—maybe she's finally learned something through

osmosis. When they take a sunset cruise, Vivian drives at precisely four miles per hour, what she's christened Wine Speed because it's the fastest you can go without spilling a drop. (According to her. Lucy could probably pull off a quicker, smoother ride, but won't burst her bubble.)

Mostly, Dawn unearths more stories about Hank that Lucy's never heard before: the two of them capsizing the kayak when she swatted at him for making some dumb joke; sneaking a handle of whiskey into disco night at the bowling alley; her and Cindy cheering on their men as they furiously competed in a swimming race to the island (Hank won, so Eric paid the whole bar tab that night). The stories are sweet. Lucy hopes the letters won't tarnish those memories.

Once they've docked, Lucy says, "Mom, we found something in the house that we think you should take a look at."

Dawn smooths down her bangs, whipped into a frenzy during the ride. "What is it?"

Vivian finishes knotting the last line and gives it a tug. It's well done—Hank would approve. "I stumbled across a box of our dad's things. It looks like he wrote a stack of letters to you and never sent them."

Dawn blanches.



"Hope you don't mind if I take a little more," Dawn nervously says back at the house, pouring herself another glass of chardonnay. "Liquid courage."

Vivian pushes the shoebox her way. "Please, go ahead."

"God, I don't know if I'm ready for this," she says, but she pulls off the lid and takes a shaky, reverent breath. "But I might as well get it over with."

She unseals the first envelope, careful not to tear it, and slides out a folded piece of notebook paper. Even in thirds, Lucy can see it's covered top to bottom in dark ink. Dawn's hand quivers as she begins to read. She raises a hand to her mouth. Curiosity eats Lucy from the inside out, but the

whole point of waiting was to give her mom the respect of having the first—and maybe only—look.

Eventually, looking pale, Dawn passes the letter to Lucy. It's dated July 7, 1994—mere days after Hank learned of Lucy's existence, and apparently, what would've been their fifth anniversary if they'd stayed together. It's full of shame and regret. "I was shocked. I panicked. And God, I'm sorry for it. I love you, but you deserve so much better than a guy like me, Dawn, and so does our little girl. What's her name?" A small splotch in the margins of that letter is a shade darker than the rest of the page. A tear? Lucy's never seen him get emotional, not once.

"Can I?" Vivian asks gently.

Lucy hands it over. "I don't understand why he didn't reply to the letter I sent after his bachelor party."

"Maybe he thought it was too late, you'd already moved on?" Lucy guesses.

"Fine, but later? He knew I was single. He could've come back to me—no offense to you or your mom, Vivian."

"None taken whatsoever."

Dawn's right. When Lucy spent summers with Hank, he'd occasionally broach the subject of her mom's relationship status with the same casual curiosity he had about her friends' lives. She answered with the heavy-handed spiel of a salesman. *No, she doesn't have time to date right now, but she's doing great. Amazing, actually. We were at Cindy Monahan's wedding last month and the groom's cousin kept asking her to dance all night.* Do people like Lucy ever stop harboring a secret wish that their parents will get back together?

"Maybe there's another letter in here that responds to the one you wrote the year before," Lucy says.

Dawn carefully folds the paper along its original creases and slides it back into the envelope, treating it like a valuable antique. They repeat that routine again and again, mostly in silence, as they unpack all thirty. He wrote one a year on their anniversary.

The pages from the mid-'90s have a formal distance to them. He says he's giving her space—partly out of respect, a desire not to interrupt her life, and partly out of self-loathing. "I hope this finds you well. That is, if I ever find the resolve to send this." By '97, the letters sound more content. Lucy spends Julys with him now. "I wish you could've seen her in the kayak. I took her for a ride—with a life jacket, of course—and she got such a kick out of it, asking when we'd find 'fishies.'" Lucy blinks back tears at that one. She's never heard her parents bond over her.

There's another shift in tone around the new millennium. He makes veiled hints to a less-than-blissful marriage in some letters, and outright statements in others. "Celeste believes divorce traumatizes children forever, but is the alternative any better?"

"Could've been," Vivian mutters darkly.

And then: "I made a mistake. I hurt you. I chose wrong." Another: "As I write this, Lucy is sitting on the end of the dock, splashing her feet in the water. I'm so happy she loves it here. The only thing missing is you." A small sob escapes Dawn.

"Mom?"

She shakes her head, lips pressed together. "Let's keep going."

They tick up through the aughts and 2010s. It's late—crickets chirp in the navy darkness—but none of them wants to stop. He offered resigned well-wishes during the years Dawn dated Dennis and Wayne. There are compliments on how well she's raising Lucy ("so mature, so funny, such a brilliant kid"), and wistful nostalgia ("Remember when we went up to Acadia to sleep under the stars?"), and unabashed longing ("Not a day goes by when I don't think about what could've been—I couldn't stop if I tried"). Every single letter is signed with "love."

"I've never heard him sound like that," Vivian comments. "So lovesick."

"Really?" Dawn asks.

"About my mother? No way."

Dawn lets out a weak little "oh."

The more they read, the more heartbreaking the letters become. He must have known he wouldn't have the courage to send these, either. Still, he

wrote them faithfully every year anyway. Dawn finishes '24's letter and reaches for the next, but of course, there isn't one. A heavy hush falls over the room.

After a moment, Lucy asks, "Mom, what do you think?"

She pushes back her bangs in frustration. "I thought he was done with me! I mean, how could I have known any of this? He iced me out."

"Would you have gone back to him?" Vivian asks. "If you knew. If you could've."

"I wanted him to want me. And he did, so..." Dawn offers a weak smile. "Everything would've been different."

If Hank had left Celeste for Dawn in the '90s, Lucy would've grown up with a solid nuclear family, sister included, probably in New York. Fox Hill would be just a kitschy vacation spot to her. She could work in publishing, maybe even write. Patrick would be an unimaginable stranger. Would Hank be alive if he hadn't spent thirty years brokenhearted?

"I can't believe I could've had all this for real." Dawn sweeps her hand over the pile of Hank's true desires. "He could've been here when..."

She doesn't need to finish that thought out loud. When her parents died. When she got sick. When the diner nearly closed in 2020. Dawn puts her face in her hands. Her shoulders shake with sobs. Lucy gets up to hug her.

"I'm not crying because I'm sad," Dawn insists. "I don't like who he turned into, this uptight suit who could barely emote, who couldn't bother to show up for any of us, not even his own kids. It's just overwhelming."

"I know," Lucy says.

"You probably shouldn't tell your mom about this," Dawn says.

"Mom, you can't ask her to keep secrets," Lucy says. "There's been enough of those."

"No, I won't," Vivian decides. "She's already a wreck. I mean, what would she even do with this information at that point?"

"I don't know," Dawn says.

Lucy has to wonder: What will her mom do with it?

Chapter Sixteen

LUCY

Lucy is reading on the boat—or, rather, meant to read but is morosely researching how much she could make with a side hustle tutoring—when a text from Patrick sends her adrenaline into overdrive.

Do you want to come over for dinner tonight? I was thinking of making that creamy lemon chicken

What's the occasion?

Nothing, just dinner

She doesn't understand. She loves that dish. He's never made it once. Her mouth is dry, and when she reaches for her glass of water, her hand trembles.

Who else are you having?

No one

It sounds oddly close to a date, which makes her nervous. As badly as she misses him, seeing him could knock her over again. If he's going to

leave her, he might as well *really* leave her and let her make a half-hearted attempt to move on.

I don't know if that's such a good idea.

Why not?

I'm not sure I'm ready to be friends yet.

Or ever. It's mortifying to admit. She feels like a loser—too sensitive to be in the same room as someone who no longer loves her. She shields the screen from the sun, watching as Patrick types and deletes and retypes something. Finally, the message pops up.

Don't worry about the label



Driving home is eerie, maybe because of just that: It still feels like home. This part of Fox Hill is less forested than the lake side of town, with plain, single-story construction in white or gray vinyl siding. It has its charms—the steepled town hall was once a Puritan church and still looks the part—though not the rustic coziness of Loon Road.

Lucy's been anxious all day, spinning between two extremes. Her inner romantic is desperate to believe he wants her back, while her bruised side—pummeled, really—tries to rein in her expectations. She can so easily see herself getting lost in some fantasy and wind up crushed again. It wouldn't be the first time Patrick blindsided her.

Ringling their doorbell and waiting for him to greet her would be too weird, so instead, she pushes the door open while rapping on it twice. "It's me," she calls.

Stepping inside, her chest tightens with nervous anticipation. When he appears, it takes all of her concentration to fight muscle memory and resist

kissing him hello. *Don't worry about the label*, he'd said, which makes no sense. He knows Lucy worries about everything.

"Hey." With a flicker of self-conscious hesitation, he hugs her for a split second longer than a friend might. After he steps back, the feeling of his hands lingers.

The living room isn't quite as it was. Yes, there's the brown tweed couch that looks straight out of a British library, the deep cranberry carpet that reminded her of the rug at the lake house, the striped throw pillows—but the coffee table is invisible beneath clusters of beer bottles and video game controllers. The shoe rack is half empty. Nobody's dusted.

"I know it's a mess," he says, frazzled. "I ran out of time to straighten up."

"That's okay."

In a way, she appreciates the proof that her absence is so visible. It would be easy for her to grab the open bag of chips and a few bottles on her way to the kitchen, but this is not her job anymore. He's made that clear.

"How are you?"

How ah yeh. It's like a bite of homemade chocolate cake after the store-bought version she gets from Vivian. She can tell he's aiming to act casual, but he has this flustered air of nervousness, too. He doesn't seem to know exactly what to do with his hands.

"I'm..." *Sad. Confused. Floundering. Dating someone else?* "Okay, I guess."

"Actually?"

Maybe it's embarrassing to be such a wreck when he was able to walk away so easily. But she's never been able to hide anything from him.

"I mean, I've been better. You?"

His gaze is still. "Same."

She swallows, too afraid to push for more lest the answer disappoints her. "How can I help with dinner?"



Patrick seasons the chicken. Lucy minces garlic. They bump into each other when reaching for the silverware drawer at the same time. She tells him about Vivian staying for the summer, the celebration of life ceremony she's planning for her dad, the job search, and diving into Celeste Levy's books. He vents about his boss and catches her up on the latest twist in the saga down the road—the never-ending drama about one neighbor's dog getting into the other's herb garden, with each one posting thinly veiled shade in the Fox Hill Facebook group.

The conversation is perfectly pleasant, but it doesn't melt the tension from his shoulders. Lucy still feels wary. Patrick doesn't casually cook with friends. He barely cooks at all; he'd rather microwave a Hot Pocket than scramble eggs.

By the time they sit down to eat, she can't ignore the maddening strangeness any longer. "What's happening here?"

Patrick looks up from cutting his chicken, eyes wide. "I wanted to have dinner with you."

"Yeah, but exes don't typically hang out like this."

He grimaces at that word. "You're going through a rough time. I don't want you to be alone."

"So this is a pity dinner?"

"No, it's..." He sighs and puts down his utensils. "I was going to get into this after we ate."

Rigid with anticipation, Lucy curls her fingers around the edge of the chair. "Okay. Well. Can we talk about it now?"

He clears his throat, scoots in, sips his Sam Adams. "Fourth of July? I... liked being there for you. It felt right."

"It did," she admits.

"Good." His gaze drops to the table. After a labored inhale, he finds eye contact again. "I've missed you."

The words are electrifying, though she refuses to agree out loud. Not yet. She's humiliated herself enough already.

"I wonder if..." He swallows. "I wonder if I made a mistake."

"What?"

Lucy feels faint. Frustrated, too. If he'd sorted out his feelings this spring, they both would've been spared the heartache.

He looks at her for what feels like an eternity. "Maybe I gave up on us too soon."

She goes very still and strains to glean every nuance of his expression and voice. "What are you saying?"

"I don't want us to rush into anything, but...I want to spend time with you. Not as your ex. Not as a friend."

"As what, then?"

He rubs his jaw and looks away. "We're family, Luce. That's what marriage is. No matter what happens, I'll always care about you."

Care. Not love.

"You don't throw away family," he adds.

"But you did," she says bitterly.

His face goes from serious to mournful. "I'm sorry. I really thought separating was the right thing at the time, but now...I don't know."

Her heart hammers against her ribs. "You don't know? Or you've changed your mind?"

He hesitates. "I love you. I want us to try again."

Time slows down. Lucy has the surreal sense of watching herself from above. Whatever she says next will change her life. It's bigger than saying "yes" when he asked her to marry him, bigger than saying "I do" at their wedding, because this time, there's no easy response. Yes, she wanted him back. Yes, this is exactly what she hoped to hear. But now that it's happening, the gravity of it all terrifies her.

"Why, though? You said we 'lost the spark.'" The simple act of reciting his words hurts.

He's quiet for a moment. "I took our life for granted. I shouldn't have. I miss you, and I want to be here for you—here for it all."

He reaches across the table to slip his clammy palm into hers. His calloused thumb strokes the back of her hand and slides over her knuckle to skim the edge of her wedding band. They'd promised themselves to each other once.

“You didn’t take it off,” he says, touched.

Her voice quavers up, high and tight. Blinking back tears, she lets her words slide free. “I’ve missed you, too. I love you.”

He exhales with relief. “Come here,” he says, standing and pulling her up to him.

Unlike the other night with Harrison, here, there’s no awkwardness, no stomach-lurching fear of making the wrong move. She slides her arms over his shoulders and his hands settle on her hips; it’s as natural as breathing. Patrick kisses her tenderly. Flush against him, she senses his frenzied pulse and the smile tugging at his lips. Being this close to him again is like the sweet relief of unbuckling too-tight ice skates. It’s hustling out of the frigid cold to warm up, pink-cheeked and toasty, in front of a roaring fire.

When Lucy was young, she’d fully bought into the romantic ideal of high school sweethearts and felt lucky to have found her ultimate match when she did. Their future would spool out naturally for decades: bleachers and prom corsages, then wedding bells and a house of their own, then cribs and carpools. Each checked milestone would make them even happier. She was too young to realize that was an airbrushed fantasy, or at the very least, a mere outline, yet to be shaded in with the mundane details and squabbles of real life. Now she knows. Maybe their separation only gives their story a few blemishes—character—and isn’t that better, anyway, because it’s real?

The kiss feels like home, pure and simple. They’re back.



The chicken goes cold and neither of them cares. The air feels buoyant, like the catharsis that comes after a good cry. On the couch after dinner, she nestles into him and he drapes a comforting arm over her side. Her head rests on his chest. The motions of marriage are like riding a bike. She’d been yearning for this particular route.

With the tension broken, they can talk for real. She’s honest about how ferociously lonely she’s been, how much she missed him, even while on

dates with someone else.

He almost chokes on his beer. “What? With *who*?”

“Nobody you’d know—and I’m not remotely interested anymore.”

Patrick squeezes her a little closer. “Obviously.”

She secretly likes his flash of jealousy. Anyone could make her swoon under a blanket of stars, but this is all she wants.

He admits that Brody insisted on hauling him out to the strip club on Route 95 to get his mind off the separation. The plan backfired when Patrick declined a lap dance; the girl’s blond hair and brown eyes reminded him too much of Lucy’s. He spent the rest of the night in the parking lot.

They decide that Lucy will stay on Fox Hill Lake through Labor Day. She wants to keep her word to Vivian, and if she’ll only have access to the house for so long, she wants to make the most of it. Patrick agrees. They shouldn’t rush back into living together. But that night, Lucy sleeps next to him in her own bed. When he reaches for her, she indulges in his heady, familiar comfort. For the first time in weeks, she falls asleep easily.

VIVIAN

That weekend, Vivian invites Caleb over for dinner on the boat. Lucy has plans with Patrick that night, but that’s okay. They have their own friendship outside of her anyway. When she hears the crunch of his tires on dirt, she finishes what she’s doing on her phone and flips it face down on the counter. It wouldn’t be right if he got a glimpse of the project Vivian’s been working on at Dawn’s request. That’s private.

Caleb slides open the door, clad in a burnt orange T-shirt that brings out the amber in his eyes. This late in the summer, he’s tanner than she’s ever seen him. He’s clutching two plastic-wrapped whoopie pies with creamy filling spilling out from between rich chocolate cakes.

“I thought I’d bring dessert,” he says. “They aren’t homemade, but that’s probably a good thing.”

“These look amazing, thank you.”

The effort is sweet. They remind her of the extravagant flower deliveries Oscar would send to her apartment, trimmed from the restaurant’s florist budget, similarly intended to make her smile. Those were huge, stunning—but something about them always felt a smidge inappropriate. She’d sometimes hear coworkers grumble about their paychecks and know exactly where Oscar could find a few extra bucks.

He peers into a brown paper grocery bag. “All right, put me to work.”

She ropes him into shelling shrimp, then cooks them in a tomato-garlic sauce with a heavy dose of red pepper flakes. She uncorks a bottle of white and pours it into Mason jars.

“Okay, do your wine thing,” he says, giving his glass a clunky swirl.

If she has nothing else—no Della, no place of her own—at least she’ll have this.

She flashes the label at him. “This is a pinot gris from Alsace.”

“Pinot grigio?”

“Good, but no. That’s from Italy. This is French. The shrimp is spicy, right? This is light, tart, notes of citrus and green apple on the palate—it balances out the heat.”

There’s more she could say, but who cares. He grabs the bottle, standing an inch closer than a friend might while he reads it, near enough that she can feel the soft puff of his breath. She’s acutely aware of the slight flush that rises in her cheeks and takes a step backward.

“Cool,” he says, placing it on the counter.

His eye contact makes her skin tingle. “Yeah.”

Carrying dinner down to the dock, Vivian notices that the sun is lower in the sky than it used to be at this hour. The season slips away a little more with each nightfall.

He bends to undo the right knots and hops easily into the boat. “Want me to drive?”

“Oh, I—” She’s about to say she’s got it. She often takes the wheel around Lucy just to prove that she can, but it’d be nice to relax. “Sure, thank you.”

After they've untied and reversed past the dock, they loop around the lake at forty miles an hour. He steers with ease, even as wind blasts their hair in every direction. They rocket by the island topped by scrappy trees. A white bird skims low over the blue depths. This place sometimes makes her feel like a fish out of water, but she grew up on this lake, too. It's home.

When he slows to a serene crawl, she kicks her feet up onto the glove compartment and unscrews her jar.

"So, guess what I did today?" he asks, drumming his hands on the steering wheel.

"Get that grumpy waitress to smile?"

"I'll win her over someday, I swear. But no—I bought a one-way ticket to Thailand. I leave next month."

She should've seen it coming, but the news smacks her with loneliness. She shoves it away. This isn't about her.

"Caleb!"

He's lit up with embarrassed pride.

"Oh my God, amazing. You're going to have the best time."

She imagines him trekking through jungles, devouring delicacies he hasn't even heard of yet, letting loose under the moonlight. It couldn't be more perfect for him.

He shakes his head lightly, like he's not entirely convinced it's all a dream. "Finally."

"How long do you think you'll be gone for?"

"Three months, maybe? That's the plan for now, at least."

There's a weird sinking feeling in her chest.

"I'll miss you." The thought slips out by surprise and hangs in the air.

"Yeah?" he says, grinning a little bit.

Flustered, she pivots. "I don't know what I'm going to do next, but..."

"Aren't you opening your bar?"

"That was the plan. But now, solo, I don't know. It depends on..." She waves her hand vaguely toward the house.

"Ah."

For the weeks she'd allowed herself to fantasize about that prospect, the dream had nourished her. She can see snippets of it like a movie: She'd pull bottles for customers, pour samples of deep ruby liquid into tasting glasses, eavesdrop on first dates; spend late nights and early mornings balancing budgets and restocking inventory. It would be overwhelming and invigorating and hers—in name and in spirit, if not entirely in dollars and cents.

And now it can't be hers. Or could it?

Despite the utter chaos of this summer, Vivian's happy here in Maine. She likes the canopies of pines and the rhythm of the sunsets. She wants to try Millie's moonshine, and paint landscapes of lupines and snowbanks as the seasons change. She could hang out with Lucy and Caleb—and even Paige has warmed up to her. And she's forming a friendship with Dawn; lately, they've been texting a few times a week. Sure, she'd miss the city, but her lease will be up in October, and returning to Della isn't an option.

“Do you think I'd like living here?” Vivian asks.

“Like, for real?” he says in disbelief. “In Fox Hill?”

“Portland, maybe.”

Leaving New York would be radical enough; she doesn't have to hack life in the woods, too. She badly needs a fresh start—not because she's running from home, but because for the first time in her life, she wants to unfold a new kind of future somewhere else. Running a business in Maine would require her to stand on her own two feet in a way she'd never quite be able to in the city. She'd be a newcomer; there'd be no home court advantage. It terrifies her in the best way possible.

His eye contact makes her heart beat a little bit faster. “I'd really like that. It'd be cool to see you around.”

They're both quiet for a moment amid the engine's low rumble.

“I don't know how I would've gotten through this summer without you,” Vivian says. “Things were so bleak—and having you in my corner made everything feel a little lighter.”

He reaches for her hand in a friendly squeeze, but neither of them lets go right away. Caleb looks down at their intertwined fingers.

“Don’t forget about me when I’m gone,” he says lightly, skimming his thumb over her knuckles.

“Never,” Vivian promises.

“This—” he says.

“And—” she starts.

“You go ahead.”

“No, you first,” she insists, burning with anticipation.

He clears his throat. “This summer wasn’t the right time for us. But when I’m back, if you’re nearby...I’d want to see you. It could be as a friend, if that’s what you want. But...maybe as something more.”

She watches this daredevil fight, syllable after syllable, to openly state how he really feels. His eyes glint with tenderness.

“Do you want to be something more?” she asks.

She remembers Caleb as an irresistible flirt, an intoxicating fling. She knows him as a friend, too. This romantic side, however, is uncharted territory. Delicate.

The answer is all over his face before he says it out loud. “Yeah.”

For weeks, she’d been telling herself that this was solely platonic. But she can’t pretend anymore.

“I do, too.” She can’t predict when or how it would work, but now there’s no doubt she wants to try. “I’d really like that.”

Vivian leans forward and kisses him. It’s nothing like their first adrenaline-fueled tangle. This time, it’s slow and sweet. He grins into the kiss and then there’s the gentle sweep of his tongue. She cups his jaw and feels a soft bristle against her palm. His fingers skim up and down her arm, but that’s it, like he’s in no hurry to unfurl their connection again, as if he believes there will be plenty of time to explore that later. She hopes there will be.

“Please don’t tell me we need to wait another four years for that,” he says.

She can’t tamp down her grin as she pulls them onto the bench seat in the back. “No, I don’t think we will.”

Shyly, they lean against each other and admire the brilliant yellow glow slipping between periwinkle clouds. The boat rocks slightly over the shimmering lake. The wine is a crisp zing of citrus. Something floats between them, promising and intangible. Now simply isn't their time. But in spite of everything Vivian thought she wanted, she can imagine sitting here next summer, curled closer under his arm, night after night after night.

LUCY

The email finally arrives on Tuesday afternoon. She can barely breathe as she scans it: An administrator from the Portland school district apologizes that Lucy's application got lost in her inbox. If she's still interested, would she like to come in for an interview? The message came while Lucy was desperately scrolling through other job listings—she could potentially find part-time employment as a call center representative, or temp work leading leaf-peeping tours from Kennebunkport to Bar Harbor. She scrambles to reply that she's available to meet as soon as Wednesday. Her escape hatch is here.

The next morning, as she's getting ready for the interview, she brushes her teeth and studies the whorls in the bathroom's wooden door, the chip in the warm tan paint, and the dated paisley shower curtain with proof of her one-time pink dye job streaked down the corner. This could all be half hers, half Vivian's—or they could walk away from it entirely. Both options feel tantalizing and bleak.

On the drive over, Lucy circles through the talking points she prepared. In theory, a job interview is supposed to be nerve-racking, but she feels grounded and calm. There's even a flicker of excitement in her chest—not optimism, just solid confidence that she's a single conversation away from landing the position—the life—she's wanted for so long. She's an excellent teacher and she's hungry for more. There's no reason this school wouldn't want her. She can do this. She's ready.



Zippering home from Portland has never felt faster. Giddy and flush with satisfaction, her head spins at seventy miles per hour.

“Patrick?” she calls out, letting herself in.

She’d let him know that she was on her way over.

Two seconds later, he meets her by the front door with a kiss. She doesn’t take that kind of automatic affection for granted anymore. They were barely separated for three months, but that was long enough for her to miss it.

“Hey. You’re dressed up.”

She’d worn slacks and a blouse to the interview. (“*Slacks*,” Vivian had said on her way out. “You sound like my grandma.”) It was a step up from the usual jeans-and-sweater combos she typically wore to work, and fussier than what Patrick liked, but the professional outfit imbued her with confidence.

“I had a big day. An interview.”

“Yeah? How’d it go?”

She can’t help but beam. “Really, really well. At the end, she said the job was basically mine. She just needs to send over some paperwork.”

Patrick lights up and hugs her. “That’s amazing! This is the Lewiston gig?”

She stiffens ever so slightly, watching for his reaction. “No, they’d already hired someone. It’s in Portland.”

His brow wrinkles. He puts the Sox game on mute and drops onto the couch. She follows him.

“Are you going to take it?”

She’s surprised—and a little hurt—that he’s even asking. “Of course.”

“That’ll be a hell of a commute. You’d have to leave here at, what, six a.m.?”

“Well, not necessarily,” she says slowly. “I’d want to live nearby.”

His focus had drifted to the TV, but that snaps his attention back toward Lucy. “You’d want to move?”

“Yeah,” she says, disheartened by the way his face falls.

“But my work is here.”

She twists her wedding band around her finger. The modest diamonds come and go like painted horses on a carousel.

“I know. But you could take jobs there.”

He gives a frustrated laugh. “You know I’m booked out for the next few months.”

“So, it would be a few months of back-and-forth. We wouldn’t have to move right this second.”

“Our whole life is here.”

She stares at him, feeling disappointed and stuck. “I don’t know what to tell you. I need to work.”

“It’s wicked expensive there.”

“I’d be making more money, and... Vivian and I could sell the house.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “You’d do that?”

“Maybe.”

She’s still torn. He gapes. She can practically see him calculating what he could do with that kind of money. Building their own house from scratch would be first on his list.

“I’m sorry, Luce, but I really don’t want to move. Even if we could swing it.”

Her heart sinks. “Remember how we wanted to live there after college?”

“*You* wanted to live there.”

“You did, too,” she insists. “Not forever, but for a while.”

Even if Portland had been more of her idea than his, he’d been on board. He wanted to make her happy.

“We were kids, that was different.”

Lucy had practically been vibrating with excitement ever since she got the job offer. Now the news feels tainted.

“I’m going to accept the job. I basically told them I would—I just haven’t signed anything yet.”

“Great, take the job,” he says simply. “But stay here.”

He heads into the kitchen. Lucy follows him. There’s a stack of dirty dishes in the sink and clutter on the counters.

“Won’t you just consider it?” she asks.

He rips open a bag of potato chips and pops one into his mouth. “Luce,” he groans, exasperated.

“Please.”

“I don’t need to consider it. I know I’m not going to change my mind. No.”

She stares at him for a long time, seeing all the versions of him layered like sheets of transparency paper: the boy she fell in love with, the man she exchanged vows with, the husband who disappointed her time and time again. Now he’s too comfortable for his own good, already too set in his ways. But Lucy is on the brink of a whole new chapter. She’s sad, angry, and, most painful of all, powerless to sculpt Patrick into someone he doesn’t want to be.

“You don’t really care about me,” she says, stunned as the idea clicks into place. The heartache is instant and real, an actual pang in her chest.

“Are you kidding me?” he says incredulously. “I’ve checked in on you every single day after your dad died. I held back your hair when you were throwing up. That’s not enough for you?”

“But when it comes to the big picture, it’s all about you. I want to move, you say no. I wanted quality time, date nights—you made an effort for a few weeks, then dropped it. I wanted to be married,” she says, voice hardening. “And you decided we were over.”

He shakes his head. “This is bullshit.”

“I wanted to get back together, and you said no, right up until you changed your mind,” she says. “Then, boom, you made one chicken and got me back.”

“We’re back together just like you wanted and now you’re mad at me?” he asks incredulously. “I don’t get what you want.”

“Marriage should be more than a piece of paper. It’s work sometimes. That’s okay. That’s love. And if you can’t agree with that—can’t even

consider what I want—then I don't want you back anymore.”

Her voice is surprisingly steady. Once upon a time, she was willing to pull his weight in the relationship, but that's not the case any longer.

He gapes. “Lucy.”

“I'm serious. I can't do this again if it's going to be more of the same.”

“So that's it? We're really done?”

“You don't want to fix this?”

He throws up his hands. “There's nothing to fix.”

He doesn't even put up a fight for her.

A lump is rising quickly in her throat. “Then that's it. We're done.”

Amid the low hum of the fridge and the air conditioner's white noise, the silence between them is eerie and heavy. Lucy knows what she's getting herself into: brokenhearted days, lonely nights, long stretches of feeling like a hopeless failure. But she's also making room for something better.

“I'm sorry, Patrick.”

She slips on her sandals, grabs her purse, and takes one last look at him before walking away.

Chapter Seventeen

LUCY

One morning, Lucy heads down to the lake in a swimsuit and cutoffs, carrying a water bottle and her long-awaited copy of *The Mistress in the Mountains* down the stairs. It's another dazzling day: clear skies, calm waters, a slight breeze. The worst of the summer's heat has burned off in the storm. On board, she smears herself with sunscreen and sprawls out to read. She's devoured enough of these books to anticipate the premise by now, and this one's classic Celeste Levy. The setting: the scenic Adirondack Mountains of upstate New York, specifically a cozy cabin on Lake George with a stone hearth and a lawn bristling with fallen pine needles. The protagonist: Seraphina Hargrove, a spirited and sensitive ballet instructor. The love interest: Rex Windermere, confident and charming, a sales executive and three-time marathon runner. They intend to spend a week swimming and kayaking to celebrate their first anniversary, but soon long-buried secrets make that impossible.

The morning glides into afternoon. Lucy's parched, and her shoulders are probably starting to burn. Sweat seals her thighs to the seat. But she doesn't want to move. Because buried between the lines of this elusive novel, the one she spent all summer trying to get her hands on, is a scandalous secret Celeste would never want Lucy to know. Her skin prickles; her pulse races. Transfixed, she keeps turning the pages.



The box of letters got Lucy thinking about Harrison again—not because they’d had a saga like her parents’ (it was just two dates), but because Lucy saw how much Hank and Dawn had missed out on when they were afraid to talk to each other. It wasn’t right for Harrison to hide the truth from Lucy, but people mess up. What if the bigger mistake is refusing to hear him out?

He apologized, after all. Maybe it’s worth writing back to him. She types and deletes and retypes messages, finally settling on Hi. Her phone lights up almost immediately with a response.

Hi, how are you?

I’m okay. I’m ready to hear you out.

Really?

Let’s do something this week?

Absolutely.



That’s how they end up at the blueberry farm. Lucy doesn’t want a dinner date—that’s pressure she doesn’t need. No, she wants to pick berries to make a pie, so that’s what they’ll do. If Harrison can win back her trust, all the better. The farm is spread across forty acres, hidden behind a tangle of narrow country roads. There are twenty rows of blueberry bushes, maybe more, each sprouting clusters of berries, and the well-trodden grass is sprinkled with them, too. Rows of apple trees grow in anticipation of impending fall, and a pretty pond sits in the distance by a pumpkin patch. There’s a shed where you can sometimes pay the cashier by the pound, but if nobody’s there to ring you up, you’re supposed to leave your best

estimate in cash tucked under a rock. A laminated note taped to a plastic jar says, "If your teeth are blue, consider leaving a tip."

Hank used to take Lucy here on damp days like this one when it was too cold to enjoy the lake. It felt kind of magical to have the whole farm to herself, like she was a princess with her own vast kingdom. (Of course it was a safe bet for him to assume nobody else would be at the farm that day.) They'd come home with armfuls of buckets, each filled to the brim, and she'd spend the rest of the afternoon in the kitchen with flour-dusted hands while he stoked a fire. Now white skies trigger an automatic craving for blueberry pie.

Harrison is already there when Lucy arrives. "It's so good to see you again," he says.

He's gotten a fresh haircut and looks eager to impress, like a kid on the first day of school. Lucy would take a nervous student over a blasé one any day. It means they care.

She breaks the ice with a hug. "You, too."

They stalk past the picked-over aisles and find one where each bush is a sea of juicy indigo fruit, ripe and fat with flavor that proves Maine blueberries are indeed the best in the world. Knee-high grass tickles her bare legs. They move slowly, with Lucy picking from the left, Harrison from the right, keeping a solid three feet between them as they drop sweet berries into their respective bowls.

Harrison clears his throat. "So, first of all, I wanted to say how sorry I am. I really didn't know who you were—not at first. I didn't put all the pieces together until we were leaving the Pond the other night, when you mentioned Vivian and Fox Hill Lake. I should've said something right then and there, but I couldn't have. The listing for the house wasn't public yet; I'd be breaking attorney-client privilege."

Can she trust that he's telling the truth? Lucy has a pretty good radar for made-up excuses; her students tend to lose their grandparents at an alarming rate, always right around the time major papers are due. Harrison's expression is bright with hopeful intensity. She decides to believe him.

“You know your dad and mine were friends? I was so sorry to hear he was gone.”

“Really? What’s his name?”

“Eric Gray. My family has a place on Fox Hill Lake, too. That’s how they met.”

It all clicks. “He dated Cindy Monahan in the late ’80s, early ’90s, didn’t he?”

Harrison’s eyebrows shoot up. “How’d you know that?”

“She’s still my mom’s best friend.”

He shakes his head. “Small towns.”

There’s something touching about this surprise—it proves that even if Hank is gone, new pieces of him can still bubble up out of nowhere.

They turn into the next aisle. “If we’re going to see each other again, I need to be able to trust you.”

“I agree,” he says quickly.

“I have a lot to say,” she warns. “And a lot of questions.”

He pops a berry into his mouth. “Please.”

She rolls a cluster of fruit between her fingertips, pulling off the stems. It’s time to be brave. “I’ll start with a confession. After our last date, my husband—ex-husband—and I got back together for a little bit.”

Harrison flinches. “Wow. Okay...”

“It was a mistake,” she says firmly, pleased by how deeply accurate that feels. “And we’re really, *really* over. I actually landed a job in Portland—”

She doesn’t miss the hint of a grin on his face. It warms her right up.

“And he put his foot down about moving. Regardless of the move, we just aren’t right for each other anymore. I figured you deserved to know the whole story.”

He congratulates her warmly and asks about the job. It’s all the excitement and pride she’d wanted from Patrick.

“If you need any help finding a place...”

“I’ll let you know. And you don’t mind that I went back to my ex?”
Feeling guilty, she adds, “It was brief.”

“Do I *mind*? It’s none of my business.”

“Right, but...” How does she say this? “It doesn’t change things between us?”

“I mean, personally, I’d rather you be sure about moving on from him. So, no.”

Oh. She hadn’t thought of it that way.

“Great. So, house aside, is there anything else you’ve been keeping from me?”

She stops trailing through the bushes. He stands still, too. In the time it takes for him to think it over, a familiar sense of dread creeps into Lucy’s stomach. She’s already beyond her limit for the number of deceptions she can process at once while remaining upright and functioning.

“I’m actually not the biggest fan of blueberry pie,” he admits.

She laughs. “Seriously? Then what are you doing here?”

“I’ve never had *your* pie. And besides, you like pie. I want you to have pie.”

She won’t argue with his logic. His lack of selfishness is refreshing. As they start walking again, she shoots off ruthless, rapid-fire questions. After all, he opened the door for this.

“Are you currently seeing anyone else?”

“Nope.”

“Would you ever get married again?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want kids?”

“Three or four, if I could.”

She’s always wanted a big family, too.

“Have you ever cheated?” she asks.

“No.”

“Do you think you ever could?”

“Knowing how horrible it feels to be cheated on? I think it’s safe to say absolutely not.”

“Okay.” She sighs, satisfied. “Your turn.”

“I get a turn?” he asks, bewildered.

“Of course! I’m not grilling you as punishment. I just want us to get any awful surprises out of the way now.”

He laughs. “Okay, okay. I like that. Well. Let me think...I take it you don’t want Vivian to sell the house?”

“I don’t. I didn’t.” She heaves a sigh. “I don’t know. We’re figuring it out.”

She didn’t realize her response would be so open-ended. How does she really feel?

He shakes his head good-naturedly. “My dad and I are never going to see a dime on the sale, are we?”

She doesn’t want to dwell on it, and frankly, she doesn’t want his opinion weighing on her. It’s a decision she needs to make on her own.

“We’ll keep you posted. Next question.”

“Are things okay with you and Vivian? Celeste was telling me about your...situation.”

Lucy cringes at the idea of Celeste framing their complicated dynamic from her point of view: *Technically speaking, yes, my husband had another family, but it wasn’t anything trashy or scandalous. No, he lived with us, and every once in a very long while made a quick visit. Just to be polite, of course.*

“Gosh, I don’t even want to know what she said.”

She fills him in from her perspective, explaining the arrangement her parents came up with and the little blips of information she gathered about Vivian over the years. She recounts what that first horrific day was like when her half-sister descended on the house, and how they’ve been attempting to coexist ever since.

“I won’t lie, she was awful at first...and there have been ups and downs.”

To put it lightly.

“But I think we’re sort of starting to find our groove.”

Harrison gapes. “And she never knew about you?”

“Not exactly. She suspected our dad had another daughter, but that’s it.”

It’s actually a relief to have everything out in the open.

He peppers her with questions about it: “I don’t mean to pry, but…” and “You don’t have to answer this, of course, but…” Answering is less terrifying than she’d expected.

For months now, Lucy has felt weak, worn out, a husk of her former self. She’s surprised to find that opening up to Harrison makes her feel strong. He knows she can handle the breakdown of a marriage, the death of a parent, a hurricane of a sister, losing her job. She can weather storm after storm. She’s still hanging on.

Neither of them is picking blueberries anymore. His gaze has snagged on her mouth, and when he notices her looking, his dimple flexes.

“I like you, Lucy. A lot. I want you to know that.”

She’d been developing a hunch that was true, but hearing it out loud gives her goose bumps. “Yeah?”

He steps closer. “Yeah.”

“I like you, too,” she says softly.

The impact of her words cracks over his features, leaving a smile as sunny as an egg yolk. Framed by all this saturated greenery and a pale sky, he’s a work of art. He takes another step toward her, closing the gap between them. When he kisses her, it tastes like hope, like a fresh beginning. Later, when they go to pay at the empty shed, their teeth are tinged blue. Lips and tongue, too. There’s a new buoyancy to him, and her cheeks are flushed pink. Lucy and Harrison leave an extra-big tip.



Lucy and Harrison swing by the market to pick up pie supplies. They decide to bake at Harrison’s lake house, a cozy red cabin not far from her own. It once belonged to his grandparents. In the living room, the walls are raw wood and the ceilings are low enough for Harrison to touch. Fishing gear hangs on hooks up and down one wall over a braided rug. A retro television rests atop a cabinet bursting with books, and a nubby brown couch is draped with a handmade afghan. In the kitchen, there’s a black,

cast-iron wood-burning stove; the drawers creak as they slide open. Thankfully, there's none of that kitschy decor that often springs up in these parts—faux-hand-painted signs featuring anchors or lobsters that read, "Life is better at the lake," or "Lake it easy," or "Even Jesus had a fishing story."

"It's small, but..."

"I love it," Lucy says honestly. "It's perfect."

He puts on old soft rock, and Lucy shows him how to pinch the crusts closed with fluted, wavy edges. They coat a vat of blueberries in lemon juice and sugar. As a light drizzle rolls in from across the lake and the rich, velvety fragrance of warm berries fills the cabin, the afternoon takes on a filmy aura of comfort. When the pie is ready, Lucy cuts two generous slices. The crust is golden and flaky. A thick waterfall of deep purple fruit spills from underneath. Scoops of vanilla ice cream melt in sweet swirls.

"Okay. You convinced me. I like blueberry pie," Harrison announces after his first bite. "Thank you."



The kitchen is small, and as they clean up, they inevitably bump into each other no fewer than three times. Each brush of their bodies brings Lucy back to earlier this afternoon when they kissed between the hedges. She leans against the counter and watches him dry his hands on a dish towel.

"Harrison."

His eyes flick to hers. "Yeah?"

"Come here," she says coyly with a self-assured tilt of her chin.

It comes out in a confident, unhurried fashion. No one would ever guess she's felt rejected and undesirable for years.

Harrison bites back a grin and moves toward her. Anticipation tugs low in her belly. As it turns out, she likes being brave. She runs her palms lightly over the width of his chest, feeling the warm muscle and insistent pulse. His hands slide up the nape of her neck and into her hair. When his

lips are on hers, she tastes the tartness of the pie. In one smooth move, he places her on top of the counter and steps into the spot where she'd just been standing, skimming her thighs and tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. He plants a kiss on the newly exposed skin. Lucy can't remember the last time she was treated with this level of reverence.

Despite their uneven start, Lucy feels comfortable with him. They both know what it's like to have love, once as solid as stone, evaporate. They've been molded by the pain of being discarded, left behind, irrevocably alone. And yet they found each other. Even more wildly, they have whatever intangible chemistry draws two people together. Their broken pieces aren't just shards but files, sanding down each other's painfully sharp edges into something soft. She's happy.

VIVIAN

Lucy comes home with pink cheeks and half of a homemade pie. Fat indigo berries spill from beneath the flaky crust. She cuts two slices and watches them spin in the microwave. The afternoon's gray drizzle passed, and the timing is just right for a sunset cruise, so Vivian grabs a chilled screw-top bottle of rosé and two Mason jars.

They amble toward the center of Fox Hill Lake at Wine Speed, passing a few other boats facing the horizon, waiting for the show to begin. While Vivian drives, Lucy settles in the bow of the boat with one leg dangling lazily over the lip. Usually, she brings a book on rides like these. Tonight, Vivian's glad she didn't.

"Dad would've loved this," Vivian says, gesturing back toward the last stretch of golden hour. Pale light washes over the pines on the eastern shore and reflects off their own house's tall windows.

Lucy nods solemnly. "He would've."

Vivian imagines him cruising in the driver's seat instead of herself. He'd have one hand loose on the steering wheel, an Allagash in the other, and a

spray of freckles over his nose that would disappear come September. She's not sure if she misses him, exactly, but thinking about him weighs her down.

"Do you think I was too hard on him?" Vivian asks.

Lucy doesn't look away from the apricot and aquamarine sky. "I don't know... You had good reason to be."

"Did I? I've been thinking—I think I finally get why he was so secretive, why he kept us apart," Vivian says.

"Yeah?"

It's an idea she's been putting together bit by bit over the course of the summer, as she's learned more about his past. Meeting Lucy filled in the missing pieces Vivian didn't know she needed.

"He was alone after losing his parents. After going through something like that, why would he risk coming clean and pushing me and my mom away? He couldn't, especially not since he'd ruined everything with your mom, too. He was a liar, yeah. But maybe he was also just hurt."

"And selfish."

"And human."

Lucy nods. "Just human."

There's a quiet lull, but not an uncomfortable one. It's peaceful, being out here on the lake together.

After a time, Lucy asks, "What's going on with you and Caleb?"

Adrenaline jolts through Vivian. She wants to play it cool for now.

"What about him?"

"Is something going on between you? The way he talks about you... I don't know, I've never seen him like that."

Her instinct is to keep her mouth shut and deny, deny, deny. Part of her, though, wants to be able to tell Lucy everything.

"I...like him." The admission gives her a nervous thrill. "And he likes me, too. We've only kissed once, though—I mean, once recently."

Lucy's brows shoot up. "Just saying, I'd ship you."

Her approval makes Vivian feel like she's glowing. "Really? It wouldn't be weird for you if we got together?"

“And he became, what, like my brother-in-law? I don’t know, sounds ideal to me.”

It’s a wild image, a future with both of them.

“Are you still making your way through my mom’s books?”

Lucy clears her throat. “Yeah. I finally got the first one. Have you read it?”

“Not that one, no.”

“How much do you think she pulls from real life?”

Vivian purses her lips. “You’ve read *Naked in New York*?”

Lucy groans. “I couldn’t get through it.”

“Ugh.”

“Her other books, though?”

She shrugs. “I know she sometimes puts people she doesn’t like in books and barely bothers to disguise them. When I was growing up, one of my classmates’ moms, this woman Clara, rubbed my mother the wrong way—she never shut up and always tried roping people into volunteering for bake sales and whatever. My mom published a book with a nearly identical character named Farrah.”

“Did Clara ever find out?”

“She loved it. Even recommended it to her book club. Nobody ever recognizes themselves.”

Lucy chews on her thumbnail. “Hmm.”

As they talk, the sun inches lower and lower until it’s a spray of flames on the horizon. They haven’t discussed the potential sale since Vivian gave Lucy equal say in the decision. She hasn’t wanted to press. But Labor Day is only two weeks away. Vivian tries her hardest to soak it all in: the glittering waves, a brilliant oil painting of a sky, Lucy admiring a line of loons in the distance. She doesn’t know if she’ll have many more perfect summer nights like these.



Vivian crumbles Reese's into popcorn while Lucy picks a movie. She's been scrolling through endless choices for five minutes.

"I'm kind of feeling a rom-com tonight...What do you think about *You've Got Mail*?" Lucy asks. "Or, ooh, maybe *Sweet Home Alabama*..."

"Someone's in a romantic mood," Vivian teases.

Lucy ignores her. "*When Harry Met Sally*? I used to watch it and wonder what life would be like, growing up in the city."

"'The city'? *Just* 'the city'? You're calling it that now?"

Lucy flushes. "You got to me, okay?"

"Let's watch it."

This gives Vivian an idea. She should fix something that's been gnawing at her for weeks. She shifts on the couch so Lucy can't see what's on her phone—not that she's paying attention anyway—and opens her email. It takes her a minute to find the address she needs, but once she does, composing the message is easy. Her fingers fly over her screen as the opening credits roll.

"You need a sec?" Lucy asks.

Vivian hits send and tucks her phone away. "Nope, I'm good. Let's go."

Lucy hits play. As the opening credits roll, she says, "Do you miss New York?"

Vivian watches the movie's idyllic portrayal of the Upper West Side, the neighborhood she called home for the first eighteen years of her life: all stately brownstones, shelves of novels at Shakespeare & Co., steak frites at Café Luxembourg, crackling orange leaves in Central Park. It's picturesque, permanently woven into her DNA. She does miss it. But she doesn't crave it enough to go back.

LUCY

Lucy barely absorbs the movie. She's seen it a dozen times. No, instead, her focus wanders over the charred logs in the fireplace, the floorboards

spattered with water stains from two generations of kids running around in swimsuits, the hanging hats ready to be grabbed on the way outside. Fraying threads escape from the seams of the couch cushions, and the one she's currently sitting on is sunken in the middle. She could close her eyes and draw it all from memory.

The house is charming; the view, spectacular. Anyone can appreciate that, even Vivian. For Lucy alone, it's a time capsule, pulling her back to a childhood spent happily in the dark and teen years when she locked away any shred of inferiority and resentment. She didn't realize it until this summer, but she'd been exhausted from the effort of playing the easy, happy, loving daughter. That was her character. The house was the set; her dad was both the audience and producer funding the whole show. She'll always love this place, but she doesn't need it anymore.

With her healthy new salary—for a teacher, anyway—Lucy could get by in Portland. She'd be fine. But she wouldn't have the opportunity and peace of mind afforded by a few more zeroes at the end of her bank statement. She didn't do anything to deserve that kind of money—nobody does. She was simply born, though on the wrong side of the tracks. It would begin to even the scales between Vivian and herself. A fresh start.

She pauses the movie. "Vivian, can we talk?"

Chapter Eighteen

VIVIAN

On the eve of what would've been Hank's fifty-fifth birthday, Vivian picks up Celeste from the Portland airport. They've had a few phone calls lately. Celeste relayed amusing stories from the road and chronicled the ups and downs (and further downs) of grief. Unexpected things broke her: the final squirt of the toothpaste they'd shared, a hotel minibar stocked with the crackers he liked. Vivian mostly just listened. Now, though, Celeste has questions: how Vivian is doing, when she's coming back to the city, how the sale is coming along. After her surprise visit, Vivian barred Celeste from contacting Gray Realty; she appreciates that her mother actually seems to have respected that request.

Vivian turns down the radio. "You know, I'm not actually sure I want to come back. What if I moved to Portland? I think I'd like it there."

"What if you did *what*?" Celeste asks, as bewildered as if Vivian confessed to dreaming of herding cattle in Montana.

"Move. Live in Maine year-round."

"You know the A-C-E doesn't run this far north, don't you?" Celeste asks dryly.

Vivian sighs.

"You'd leave the restaurant? Your friends? Your home?" It's like Celeste refrains from adding, "Me?"

"Well," Vivian says evenly, "I quit my job."

She hadn't wanted to get into all that over the phone.

"Already? Don't you want to wait until you're further along with the bar?"

"It was time for me to go."

Celeste stares. "Are you crazy?"

Vivian sighs. "I know how it sounds."

"That job was everything to you."

"It was."

"Didn't your boss give you the summer off? Maybe you should give it a few more weeks before making any rash decisions. I bet you could get your job back if you wanted it. He seems really impressed with you."

Vivian has had so many years of keeping things from Celeste that it's second nature to evade her questions. But secrets, she's learning, build walls between people that can't be scaled so easily. She doesn't want one between her and her mother anymore. She has to share the real reason she left Della.

"He wasn't just my boss. We were seeing each other for almost two years."

There. It's out. This is all Hank had to do with Vivian: one burst of bravery, one puff of breath to confess.

Celeste's mouth forms a perfect O of shock. "Did he fire you? You could sue him for that, you know."

"No, no, no. I left on my own terms. Before I quit, he was going to leave his wife—we were going to be together. He was going to open the bar with me." She pauses, wincing at her mother's pinched expression. "But his wife got pregnant. It turned out he wasn't the person I thought he was."

Celeste swallows this information. "Well," she says slowly, "I'm sorry he disappointed you."

Vivian can't believe this. "You don't think I'm awful?"

She hesitates. "Not necessarily. I know these things are complicated. Maybe he was doing her a favor, letting her move on."

Vivian was expecting judgment, maybe a few zingers expertly crafted to take her down a peg. Instead, she hears her mother's compassion.

“Tell me about Oscar. As much as you want to share.”

Enraptured, Celeste listens as Vivian describes that first stolen kiss, their vineyard getaways, how he made her feel so special and loved. Their plans to leave Della together. Her fight with Hank the day he died. She feels lighter once it’s all out there. She told her mother the full truth, and it was received well—she’d been underestimating her.

Celeste stares out the window as they roll by a chicken farm, mind swept off elsewhere. Eventually, she says, “I shouldn’t be saying this to you...”

Vivian’s stomach tenses. “What?”

“Do you know how mortifying it is to write romance for a living and feel like no matter what you’ve tried over the years, there’s this distance with your husband that you just can’t bridge?”

She’s stunned by her mother’s transparency. That irony had always been one of the elephants in the room that Vivian felt she had to ignore. Her dad did it well.

“No.”

“I’m supposed to be this expert. And, well...” Celeste trails off bitterly. “Let’s just say I wasn’t writing much from personal experience.”

“I’m so sorry, Mom. I hate that he made you feel that way.”

She must have been lonely. Vivian thinks about Hank’s letters to Dawn, and guilt twists in her stomach.

Celeste shakes her head. “He made all of us feel this way. He shut down after his parents died, and that was it.”

“Why didn’t you leave him?”

“I loved him.” She shrugs helplessly. “Then I didn’t want to rock the boat while you were growing up. And then...I was successful. I write about *love*. I couldn’t leave and look like a failure in front of all those people. It’d be humiliating. A career killer.”

“I don’t think your readers would judge you for that, though.”

Celeste looks perturbed. “They’d think I’m a fraud. I can’t gush over him in my dedications and acknowledgments, and in interviews and at events, and all over the internet, and then turn around to say, ‘By the way, my dead husband and I were essentially roommates.’ ”

“Well, you wouldn’t have to phrase it that way.”

“How would you say it then?”

Vivian’s mind goes blank. The paved street has disappeared, and now there’s just Loon Road’s winding strip of dirt under the truck’s wheels.

“You’re the writer, you could figure out something. My point is—maybe this would make you more real to them. More relatable.”

“But I’m not. Martha Stewart sends me Christmas cards.”

Ah, there’s the mother Vivian recognizes. They pull into the driveway.

“If anything, I need to be *more* impressive. I need this book to be a bestseller.”

Vivian takes one last stab at attempting to help Celeste. “You don’t have to be perfect.”

Celeste frowns. “Well, you don’t build the kind of career I have by being mediocre.”

She tried.

Celeste gets out of the car and smooths her clothes.

“Can you get my bag from the trunk?” she calls, striding toward the house. “I don’t know how to open the hatchback or tailgate or whatever it’s called.”

Vivian sighs and unclips her seat belt.

LUCY

Lucy and Vivian coordinated their plans so that Vivian and Celeste would arrive at the lake house after Lucy had already left for dinner at Dawn’s. This way, the Levys have the space to catch up before the four of them reconvene tomorrow to say goodbye to Hank for good. On her way over, Lucy picks up a box of Foxy Roxy’s wings.

Between bites, she tells her mom about the latest with Harrison. She’s embarrassed to flaunt how happy she is, especially to her mom, who hasn’t bothered with dating for decades. But then Dawn surprises her.

“So,” she says, a hair too loudly, like she’s been holding this in all day. “I met someone.”

Lucy drops her fork. “What? Who? When?”

Dawn holds up her hands. “Whoa, one at a time.”

She tries to compose herself. “Okay. Talk to me.”

“This summer, I’ve been realizing that I don’t want another thirty years to go by with me sitting on the sidelines. And I know I’m old, I’m too set in my ways, I’m scarred and flabby and my jeans don’t fit the way they used to. But—”

“You deserve to be happy with someone,” Lucy finishes.

Dawn considers the idea. “Yeah, I guess you could say that.”

Apple, tree, Lucy realizes. It had taken them both far too long to figure that out.

Dawn fidgets with a half-eaten wing. “I asked Vivian to help me get set up on Match.”

“I’m sorry, you did *what*?”

“I figured, you know, a girl like that from New York, she must know a thing or two about online dating. *Sex and the City*, that kind of thing.”

Lucy blinks. “Sure.”

Dawn says that everything about her maiden Match voyage startled her: how setting up her profile felt astonishingly like a doctor’s intake form (height? body type? does she drink? smoke?); the swift judgment she was expected to pass on the other users; the equally critical lens the men must be turning on her; the banal conversations; the pressure to boil her life down into a few sentences that convey who she is and what kind of person she wants to be with. That last part stumped her. As Vivian had asked, what *is* Dawn’s type? She doesn’t know. Her past boyfriends, Dennis and Wayne, were primarily appealing because they were the opposite of Hank.

Some people online had clearly been around the virtual block a few too many times. One wrote: “I’m sick of people who lie. All I want is someone who’s trustworthy, honest, respectful, and who wears their heart on their sleeve like myself. If that’s a problem, we probably wouldn’t be a good match.” Another simply stated, “I really do not want to be online dating.”

The negativity extended to harmless subjects, too: “I hate country/rock music, or as I call it, crock.” Others were maddeningly vague: “Looking for an awesome woman!!” or “Just be ur self.”

She encountered an abundance of mirror shots, car selfies, photos of motorcycles, proud portraits showing off fish. There were a surprising number of references to preparing for the impending zombie apocalypse, though whether these men believed that was real or fictional wasn’t always clear. An “entrepreneur,” as he called himself, wrote, “I’ll bring home the bacon, you’ll cook it.” (She says she’s done enough of that at Miss Pancakes, thank you very much.) A tattooed fifty-nine-year-old advertised his weakness for braces, making Dawn wonder exactly how old he wants his matches to be.

So, when Dawn was asked out by Curtis, a contractor with a grizzled beard, Vivian encouraged her to say yes. Nothing about his profile particularly called to her, but there were no blatant turnoffs, either.

Lucy understands completely, but she can’t help the salty reaction that slips out. “Because it’d be such a terrible thing if word got around and I found out?”

“You weren’t going to tell me?” Lucy asks.

“I was,” Dawn protests. “I am.”

“But you could talk to Vivian about this kind of stuff?”

“Lucy Louise,” Dawn says, sighing, “I know you worry about me being alone. I didn’t want to get your hopes up if I went out on a few dates and decided to call the whole thing off. Does that make sense?”

Lucy unfortunately has to admit that it does.

On Dawn’s first date with Curtis, the conversation was stilted—even though, thanks to thirty-five years in the service industry, she can usually spark a friendship with a brick wall. The stale stench of cigarette smoke clung to his fingertips. She was grateful for the waitress who quickly cleared their plates and brought the check. She wanted to split the bill, but he insisted on treating her.

“How’s this, you get the next one?” he had said.

When he signed the check, she peeked at the tip. Not even 15 percent. That's when Dawn decided there would be no second date. She slipped a ten-dollar bill into the booklet on her way out.

After that, she went out with Rick, a fireman five years her junior. He had a buzz cut and a banjo, which he played with confident enthusiasm in a video on his profile. They met at a dive bar for drinks and pool. Dawn's normally a good shot, but that night, she was having too much fun talking to Rick to bother aiming straight. Afterward, he asked if he could walk her to her car. They lingered. His voice trembled ever so slightly when he asked if he could kiss her. He could run into burning buildings and still be unnerved by a crush, which made her feel powerful. She said yes—and enjoyed it very much.

“We've only been out twice,” she explains. “It's nothing serious.”

But her pink cheeks and barely concealed satisfaction are significant. The last time Dawn had a budding crush like this, Lucy was studying for the SATs. Her mom is finally doing something for herself.

“I'm proud of you, putting yourself out there,” Lucy says. “And happy for you, too.”

She clamors to see photos, which Dawn bashfully supplies. (His uniform unquestionably suits him.) They have an upcoming date planned, a bluegrass concert. Maybe this will become something, maybe not. But either way, Lucy knows her mom is open to a new kind of future—finally.



On Hank's birthday, Lucy enters the lake house with an uncharacteristically quiet Dawn behind her. Her mom's hair is blown out in a soft curtain around her shoulders, and she's carrying a beautiful bouquet—not overdyed grocery store roses, but exquisite dahlias from the good florist over in Sanford. Celeste is working at the kitchen table; the rhythmic clack of her nude-polished nails against the keyboard halts as they enter.

Celeste stands up with a gleaming smile. “Good to see you again,” she says, embracing Lucy with an air-kiss.

“Yeah, hi,” Lucy says, fumbling for her words. Her mom’s nerves amplify her own.

Then Celeste floats toward Dawn with her hand extended. “Celeste Levy,” she says, as if there’s any remote chance Dawn wouldn’t know her name, wouldn’t have a whole collection of voodoo dolls in her likeness at home.

“I know who you are,” Dawn says, sounding polite but determined.

“So, we finally meet,” Celeste says.

Dawn nods. “Here we are.”

There’s an awkward beat of silence, then footsteps coming from the back deck. Vivian enters the house and hugs Dawn.

“These are gorgeous,” she says, leaning close to sniff the bouquet. “Thanks for bringing them. Let’s put them in water.”

“Here, I’ll grab a vase,” Celeste says, opening a nearby cabinet, then frowning at the sight of plates and bowls.

“No, Mom, it would be—”

Dawn already has her fingers around the knob of the correct cabinet. A flash of guilt crosses her face when she realizes what she’s done.

“Lucky guess,” she tells Celeste.

“Well, it is just so lovely to meet you,” Celeste says, a touch too enthusiastically. Everyone knows it’s a line and nobody calls her out for it.

“Thank you for coming all this way. The drive is, what, six, seven hours from New York?”

“I flew.”

“That’s nice.”

“Ugh. It’s only my third flight this week.”

Nervous energy crackles between the women.

Lucy attempts to break the room’s tension. “So, the weather…”

“Might not be perfect,” Vivian jumps in. “Sixty percent chance of rain.”

“When was the last time you checked?”

“I mean, yesterday, but...” Vivian glances outside, where radiant sunshine brightens the lawn. “I’ll check again now.”

They all watch as she retrieves her phone from the charger. Dawn fidgets like she isn’t exactly sure how or where to stand comfortably.

“You never know! It could be beautiful.” Lucy has the frantic positivity of a cruise director on a sinking ship.

“Yeah, no,” Vivian says flatly. “It’s nice now, but it’ll get cloudy and chilly. Maybe drizzly. Sunset is at 7:34 p.m.”

“Well. We’ll see,” Lucy says.

“We can’t do it now?” Celeste asks. “Instead of waiting around all day?”

Embarrassed, Lucy says, “He loved the sunset. I’d rather do it then.”

Vivian backs her up. “We’re doing it at sunset.”

Celeste sighs and sinks into a chair. “Is it too early to open a bottle of wine? I’d say I’m joking, but I’m not really.”

Dawn chuckles awkwardly.

“It’s barely noon,” Lucy points out.

Celeste claps. “A round of mimosas, then!”

“Everyone having?” Vivian asks.

Three heads—even Lucy’s—nod desperately back at her.



Every minute of painful small talk ticks by slowly. Celeste makes four unnecessary references to her marriage. Dawn innocently asks Celeste if she ever pays attention to Goodreads. Lucy asks about life on tour. Vivian tops off every glass the minute it’s halfway empty.

In a lull that stretches on for too long, Vivian catches her eye. Lucy hesitates, then nods. They need something to fill the hours before sunset.

“So, we have news,” Vivian says.

“Oy.” Celeste takes a dramatic sip. “More?”

“It’s been a busy summer,” Vivian says. “Lucy, do you want to tell them?”

She does and she doesn't. She's worried about how her mom might react, though she's confident they've made the right choice for themselves.

Spine tall, palms flat on the table, Lucy looks straight at Dawn and says, "After your construction is done, we're going to put the house back on the market."

Dawn gasps, but she takes this gamely.

"This is news?" Celeste asks.

"Once it sells..." Lucy says. "Vivian, you tell them this part."

Vivian clears her throat. "I'm splitting the money with Lucy."

Dawn's hands fly to her mouth.

Celeste's eyes bulge. "What?"

"She has just as much of a right to this place as I do."

The words still make Lucy flush with pleasure.

"And we're both moving to Portland," Vivian says.

"Separately," Lucy adds.

"Right. I'm going to find a space for my bar. I already have appointments to check out a few spots."

"And I found a job."

Dawn squeals and hugs her daughter. "You did it."

"You really don't mind me moving?" Lucy asks.

She nods emphatically. "I'm so damn happy for you."

The kitchen is silent as Celeste finds her words. Lucy senses that Vivian craves her mom's approval more than she might admit. Something shifts within Celeste, like she's seeing her daughter in a new light.

"This is really what you want?"

Vivian doesn't hesitate. "One hundred percent."

Celeste nods. "Okay, then. I'm proud of you."



They scatter to separate corners of the waterfront, reading in the shade, floating in the lake, tanning on the dock, taking the Jet Ski out for a spin.

It's a good way to pass the afternoon. When the day is winding down, Vivian goes upstairs to prepare a salad for dinner, and Dawn offers to help.

"Need another hand?" Lucy calls from the boat.

"Nah, I'm good," Vivian says.

They climb the stairs, chatting on their way up. Lucy listens for the sound of the screen door sliding shut behind them. Only then does she approach Celeste, who's writing by hand on an Adirondack chair.

"Hi," she says.

Celeste looks up. "Hi."

"Mind if I join you?"

Celeste puts down her pen. "Sure."

She sits. "I finally found a copy of *The Mistress in the Mountains*."

Celeste's poise doesn't waver. "Oh, really? Have you read it yet?"

"I just finished it. It was great."

With a gracious tilt of her head, Celeste says, "Oh, that is so lovely to hear, thank you so much." She resumes writing.

Lucy barrels through her nerves. "There was one scene I found particularly interesting."

Celeste looks up again. "Mmm?"

Holding her gaze, Lucy says, "I think you know which one."

If Lucy is wrong, things could get ugly. She has no choice, though. The ceremony will start in two hours, and it wouldn't be right to have Celeste lie her way through it.

Celeste's lips press together in a tight line. The polite camaraderie they built up over the course of the day has hardened into something unrecognizable.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Chapter nine?"

"The whole thing is a work of fiction," she says icily.

"Your ideas have to come from somewhere."

"*Vogue* once called me 'magnificently creative.'"

"But still."

Celeste sighs. “Have you told Vivian about what you read? About whatever it is you think you know?”

“No. I wanted to come to you first.”

“Well, I appreciate that, thank you,” Celeste says curtly, rising from her chair.

Lucy isn’t done. Far from it. She stands to meet her, eye to eye, and spells out her theory. She’s never felt this bold in her life.

Celeste squints out at the lake. Lucy takes her silence as all the confirmation she needs.

“I’m right, aren’t I?”

“That is an awful accusation,” Celeste says, sounding a hair shakier than usual.

“But it’s true, isn’t it?” Lucy presses.

“I’m not having this conversation with you.”

“I won’t say a word to Vivian until you do,” Lucy promises. She means it. “And I need you to tell my mom the truth, too.”

Celeste whips back. “Are you serious?”

Lucy can’t second-guess herself. Not now. “If you don’t tell them, I will.”

“Please don’t,” Celeste croaks. “Please.”

“No more secrets.”

Chapter Nineteen

VIVIAN

“So, is she better or worse than you expected?” Vivian asks Dawn.

Dawn’s knife cuts through a cucumber with a thud. “Your mom?”

“You can be honest with me—I know she’s a lot.”

A coy smile creeps onto Dawn’s face. “She’s certainly confident. A big personality.”

“Honestly, I think she’s overcompensating for being nervous.”

“You think?”

The screen door to the back deck slides open with a bang. “How can I help in here? Put me to work.” Celeste’s cheeriness is as loud as a Hawaiian-print shirt.

“We’re almost done,” Vivian says, curling a strip of prosciutto into a rosette.

Celeste peers over her daughter’s shoulder at the array of cheese and charcuterie. “Mmm.”

There’s something strange and cagey about her behavior. She crosses the kitchen, folds her arms, then restlessly scans the contents of the fridge. Sighing, she shuts the door.

“Dawn, can I borrow my daughter for a moment?”

She puts her knife down. “Of course.”

Celeste gives a thin smile. “A moment *alone*.”

“You got it,” Dawn says, leaving her cutting board behind.

Celeste nods toward the front porch. Outside, she says, “There’s something I need to tell you.”

Dread crawls up Vivian’s spine. “What?”

“It’s about Dawn and your father,” Celeste says slowly.

Already, her mind is off like a Saratoga racehorse. “Okay...”

“Please keep in mind, I was young. I was twenty-four. I wish I’d known better.”

“Mom, what is it?” she snaps.

Celeste takes a shuddering breath. “Right before we got married, I was going through the mail and saw a letter from Dawn addressed to your father. I knew she was an old girlfriend of his, and curiosity got the better of me. I opened the letter.”

Vivian freezes.

“She had written about having a *night* together,” Celeste says, sounding exasperated and scornful. “And she asked him to call off the wedding. She said if she didn’t hear back, she’d understand he didn’t love her anymore.”

“You never gave it to him,” Vivian guesses, horrified.

Celeste’s voice rises, turning spiky and fast. “I was two weeks away from marrying him. I saw a solution right there: If she never got a response, she’d leave him alone. I’m not proud of it, but...what was I supposed to do?”

“Talk to him about it?”

She snorts. “Come on. I wasn’t going to blow up my whole life.”

Vivian is speechless. Does Celeste have any idea he pined for Dawn for the rest of his life? Should she tell her about the box of Hank’s letters after all?

“I didn’t know what I’d set into motion.”

“Obviously,” Vivian says snidely.

She knew. This whole time, Celeste let them believe she was the doting wife whose love was strong enough to withstand an affair, when actually, she’d sealed Hank and Dawn’s fates and, by extension, Vivian and Lucy’s, too. She’d spent thirty years pretending to be innocent.

“I’m sorry,” her mother says.

Vivian can actually hear that she means it. But still.

“Why?” The word comes out hot and shaky. “Why tell me now?”

She could add “now that we’re kind of actually talking to each other for real,” but that strikes her as embarrassing.

“I did a lot of stupid things when I was young, okay?” Celeste says warily. “I think I’ve proved that to you already.”

“Yeah.” Vivian’s tone is razor-sharp.

“There’s a love triangle in my first book, and one of the women intercepts a letter from the other. She threw it away before her husband could read it. Lucy pieced it together and just confronted me.”

Lucy kept a secret like this from her?

“So, Dad knew about what you did?”

“He never knew about the letter to begin with.”

Vivian makes a face. “Are you sure?”

Celeste’s nostrils flare. “If he knew, he didn’t say a peep. On some level, I’m sure I wanted him to see it.”

“And just so we’re clear, if Lucy hadn’t stumbled across this, would you have ever told me?”

Time stretches out. “Probably not.”

“Great,” Vivian says, brittle enough to snap. “What if I’d found it on my own?”

Celeste purses her lips. “That would require you to actually read my work.”

“Oh, come on!”

Celeste moves her hand onto Vivian’s back. Vivian flinches and shrugs it off. Celeste falters, then drops her hand in her lap.

“I’m sorry, that was the wrong thing to say,” Celeste says, pained. “I take it back. I’m trying to be better, I promise.”

The apology would mean more if she gave it freely, without Lucy’s shove. Anger rockets through Vivian.

“Well, you have a lot of work ahead of you.” She strides back into the house and slams the door shut.



She storms into the bathroom and locks the door behind her, slumping down on the floor with the cool porcelain of the tub against her back. It's as good a place as any to stew. Her mother is a nightmare. An honest-to-God, certified nightmare. It's appalling—the scheming, the selfishness, the stupidity of it all. The destruction she caused. Five lives could have been radically different if she hadn't interfered. The scope of damage gives Vivian chills. Vivian's no saint, but with parents like hers, did she ever stand a chance? Fury pulses through her, hot and familiar.

Can you come up here? I'm hiding out in the
bathroom

Lucy's response comes ten seconds later.

On my way

A minute later, there's a soft knock at the door.

"Come in," Vivian says.

The pressure valve in her chest loosens a tiny bit at the sight of her. She doesn't have to deal with this alone.

"Hi."

Lucy takes a seat against the opposite wall. The bathroom is narrow enough that their legs touch. She gives Vivian a tender look like she's gently gauging how broken she feels.

"Everything could've been different," Vivian says hotly. "Everything!"

"I know."

"And she just pretended nothing was wrong. For decades. While putting it out there in a book for anyone to see."

"It's wild."

“She’s insane.”

Lucy pauses. “I feel like I shouldn’t call your mom insane.”

“But she is!”

“She is,” Lucy concedes.

“You’re not mad at her?” Vivian asks, incredulous.

Lucy exhales. “I don’t know. I am...but I get it. You do stupid things when you’re in love.”

“It’s not just throwing out the letter. It’s lying about it. I mean, I protected—”

Vivian’s voice breaks. She’s startled by her own tears. Lucy leans forward to put a hand on her knee.

“I thought he was cheating on her,” she continues, voice high and strained. “I hid that from her to keep her happy. That’s a lot of pressure for a kid.”

“You were in a horrible position.” Lucy pauses like she’s weighing whether to say her next thought out loud.

“What?”

“Messing with Dad and my mom, that was wrong. But hiding it from you...Maybe she just didn’t want to hurt you.”

Vivian presses her hands to her face. Shuddering, she says, “I can’t believe you figured it out.”

“I only put it together a few days ago. I thought you should hear it from her.”

Vivian waves this away. Lucy’s steadiness cools off a touch of her anger. It occurs to Vivian that she didn’t think twice about asking Lucy to join her. The text was purely a reflex: She’s upset, so she wants her sister. She’s relieved she doesn’t have to weather this on her own. It’s undeniable that her parents failed her—and Lucy, too—but maybe damage to their bond isn’t irreparable.

How much time has she spent being mad this summer? Over the course of her life? First at her parents, then at Oscar, and now this. She has every right to be upset, but she’s also sick of her own rage.

Vivian used to think of her mother as just cold, but now she sees something else. Celeste is constantly fighting to pull a polished veneer over a pit of sadness and insecurity. That's why she snipped Dawn out of Hank's life. It's why she doesn't want to let people see the cracks in her marriage or the trouble she's having with her next book. She can write "the full spectrum of human emotion," as *Glamour* once put it, but only wants to acknowledge the shiny, poised, public-facing side of herself. Worse, Celeste never fully felt loved—not by Hank and maybe not by Vivian, either. In that light, of course she had retreated from her family and gravitated toward readers who could embrace her from afar.

Celeste apologized. More than that, she promised to be better. Vivian didn't realize those were the exact words she's craved for so long. So Celeste made the wrong choice at twenty-four years old. Who hasn't?

Vivian finds Celeste still on the porch, deflated and defeated.

"I get it," she says faintly, sitting down and pulling her knees up to her chest.

"You do?" Celeste asks, bewildered.

She tries to put her tangled thoughts into words. "I mean, what you did was awful. You ruined people's lives and lied about it."

To her credit, Celeste doesn't flinch. "I know."

"You deserve whatever consequences come your way."

Her mother wilts. "I do."

"But I want us to move on. I want a clean slate."

"Really?"

Vivian gives her a tight nod.

Celeste looks pained. "I love you."

Vivian doesn't want to say those three words back out of reflex. She wants to mean them.

Weighing her decision, she says, "I love you."

It's taken far too long for them to get to this point, but she's glad they've arrived. She buries her face into her mother's shoulder and gives her a long hug. Pressing heart to heart feels foreign. They've never had the easy magic

that exists between other mothers and daughters, but they only have each other now. That has to be enough.



From the back deck, Vivian and Lucy watch Celeste descend to the waterfront to approach Dawn. They have to strain to hear the interaction, and even then, it's just barely audible. Dawn is silent as Celeste recounts what she did.

"I'm so sorry," she says, voice quavering. "I wish I could take it all back."

Dawn sighs, like whatever open wound once needed to hear this healed long ago. "What's done is done."

Then she explains the box of letters Hank never sent. It only seems fair now. If she wanted to get back at Celeste and really twist the knife, she could brag about how Hank loved her until the day he died. Instead, her tone is regretful: not angry with Celeste, just sad things didn't work out differently.

"He loved you," Celeste says, tender and strained at the same time.

"He did," Dawn admits.

"You must be furious with me."

Dawn's voice is calm and clear. "I should be."

"You aren't?"

"I spent too many years being jealous of you. I'm not going to waste any more time holding a grudge."

Lucy clenches her fist to her mouth. Vivian squeezes her other hand.

Chapter Twenty

LUCY

At seven o'clock, all four women descend the forty-seven steps to the waterfront. Vivian clutches four bottles of Allagash, cold from the fridge—Hank's favorite. Dawn carries a bowl of tortilla chips with salsa. Lucy brings a tote bag with a speaker, plenty of candles, and a lighter. Celeste follows them all, holding the urn tight to her chest. It's cool enough that they've all layered up; Lucy's in the green sweatshirt she once saved from her dad's closet.

It's Wednesday, so the weekend people, with their noisy barbecues and buzzed boating escapades, are mercifully nowhere to be found. The sky is heavy and white, a sharp contrast to the dark green trees fringing the lake. There won't be a real sunset, not the kind that Hank loved, but there's nothing they can do about that. Crickets chirp rhythmically off in the distance. When the loon family swims by, it's not easy to distinguish the babies from the adults—they've gotten so big.

Down at the dock, Lucy climbs into the driver's seat and Vivian unties the ropes, holding them steady. The boat has clearly seen a full summer: The carpet has a new stain from a knocked-over Mason jar, the cup holders have rings of dirt, and most of the aisle is taken up by a tangle of foam noodles and nylon ropes.

Dawn steps into the boat. "Where should I sit?"

Still somewhat on edge, the four of them fall into a dance of deference: The lover makes way for the wife; the New Yorker steps aside for those with better nautical skills. Lucy directs Dawn into the passenger seat to her left, and Celeste into the bow, where Vivian will join her. When it's Celeste's turn to climb aboard, she tucks the urn to her chest with her left arm and uses her right hand to steady herself as she approaches the boat.

"Wait," she says, panicked. "I'm afraid of dropping this."

"Here, let me help," Dawn offers, outstretching her arms.

Ever so carefully, Celeste passes the urn over the strip of water between dock and boat and makes sure Dawn has a grip on it before she lets go.

"Got it?"

"Got it."

"Are you sure?"

"Yep." Dawn holds the urn and even helps Celeste climb in.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Celeste nestles the urn into a compartment between the seats. Vivian tosses the ropes into the boat, jumps in, and steps over the snack bowl to sit up front with her mom. Lucy reverses smoothly, conscious of the precious cargo. As she navigates toward the center of Fox Hill Lake—the spot they had ultimately chosen because it meant his spirit would always have a direct view of both their house and the sunset—it hits Lucy that this is really happening. Her chest is tight with nervous anticipation. After she slows to a stop, waves lap steadily against the side of the boat, and the engine rumbles on, but that's it. The lake is quiet.

"So, how do we do this thing?" Dawn asks.

Vivian pries open a beer bottle. "For starters, here you go."

"I don't suppose you happen to have a Sancerre on board?" Celeste asks hopefully. She glances around. "Is there a mini-fridge somewhere?"

"It's one beer. You'll find a way to live," Vivian says, distributing the rest. Then, to Lucy, "Ready?"

She takes a deep breath. After nearly two months of rocky buildup to this moment, she expected to feel some kind of sacred reverence, or a

cathartic burst of grief that could give her some kind of closure. Instead, the atmosphere is unsettling.

“Yeah.”

She queues up the playlist she’d put together earlier this summer, starting with John Denver’s “Take Me Home, Country Roads.” The song had initially struck her as thematically appropriate, but here, as Celeste recoils in surprise, she’s painfully aware that the guitar’s plucky twang and John Denver’s earnest voice are too sentimentally campy to serve as tribute to her dad. She lowers the music a little. Vivian slots candles into cup holders and lights each one. The stage has been set.

Lucy wanted to lead the ceremony, which was more than fine by Vivian. She hoped it would offset how hurt she’d been by missing his funeral. This is her first time ever celebrating her dad’s birthday with anything more than a phone call and a mailed gift.

“I thought we could start with a happy-birthday toast,” she says tentatively. “No singing, just...”

They clink drinks, each mumbling, “Happy birthday, Dad” or “Happy birthday, Hank.”

Three expectant faces turn toward Lucy.

“Instead of any sort of religious ceremony, we thought it would be more appropriate—more him—to stay secular,” she continues. “So, we—I—have a few things lined up, starting with a poem: ‘Warm Summer Sun’ by Mark Twain.”

She and Vivian each have the words on their phones, and they each move closer to their moms so they can see, too. Sound carries out here; their words will wash ashore.

Warm summer sun,
Shine kindly here,
Warm southern wind,
Blow softly here.
Green sod above,
Lie light, lie light.

Good night, dear heart,
Good night, good night.

Their four distinct voices blend into one, blurring their accents. The poem sounded better in her head last week before she heard the singsongy rhythm out loud.

“Next, Celeste...I hoped you might do a reading for us.” She pulls *Trouble in Tahiti* from her bag and turns down Billy Joel’s “New York State of Mind.” On second thought, she kills the music entirely.

Celeste startles. “Oh, really?”

“You wrote this passage about carrying on the memory of someone you love after they die,” Lucy says, feeling shy again. “It really resonated with me.”

“Oh, well, okay.”

Celeste rises and reaches for the book. A sticky note marks the right page.

“So, the premise of this one is that Ellington Fitzgerald III, an oil scion, is on vacation in Tahiti with his wife, Priscilla, when he dies of a sudden brain aneurysm. Their kids and siblings all fly in, and so does Clementine Atwood, a stranger pretending to be a distant cousin in order to get a slice of the will.”

Vivian purses her lips and peers out at the water, annoyed.

“As Clementine spends more time on the island, she begins to fall for a man she meets at a beach bar—only she doesn’t realize he’s actually the private investigator Priscilla hired to sniff out Clementine’s true identity. Anyway, in this scene, Priscilla is reflecting on her enormous loss the morning after her husband’s death.”

Celeste clears her throat and begins to read. Her voice shifts, richer and slower. Each line is delivered stylishly, with intention and warmth. Vivian leans in, listening closely. When she finishes, Celeste is applauded by the smallest audience she’s ever had.

“That was great, Mom,” Vivian says, reaching out to squeeze her hand.

Dawn looks begrudgingly impressed. “Maybe I should start reading your books.”

“I’ll have some sent over to you, whichever ones you want.”

“Thanks.”

“I think you’d like *Loved Up in London*,” Lucy suggests; it’s the tamest of the bunch. “And maybe, um, skip *Naked in New York*. No offense, Celeste, I just—”

“Completely understood.”

“And, Mom? You brought something to read, too,” Lucy prompts.

“Oh, I did, but...should I?” She glances at Celeste. “It’s personal. An old diary entry from the end of our first summer together. I don’t want to read it if it’d make you uncomfortable.”

“Please. I’d actually like to hear it,” Celeste says sincerely.

Lucy and Vivian exchange wild glances. They had hoped for a moment of peace like this, but never fully expected it to come to fruition. They’d assumed Dawn’s history with Hank would be an unforgivable sin to Celeste, not a subject of interest.

Dawn retrieves a journal, pink with a worn-down spine. She removes a glossy five-by-seven used as a bookmark, exhales, and takes the plunge.

August 27, 1989

Dear Diary,

Hank is leaving tomorrow. I hate it. He does, too. Last night, he wanted to plan something special for me so that I’d remember him when he’s gone. (Ha—as if I could forget!)

We went to the market to pick up sandwiches and s’mores supplies and a bottle of wine. When we got to the register, he realized he’d left his wallet at home. I offered to pay for the food, but I didn’t have a fake ID like he did, so that was a bust. I knew Mom and Dad weren’t home, so we swung by the house and snuck out a bottle of white zinfandel, then went over to the Pond. Nothing went according to plan!

We forgot a corkscrew. A dog ran off with my sandwich. Mosquitoes ate us alive. The minute our fire got up and running, it started to pour. I mean, it was ridiculous!

We wound up sitting soaking wet in his car, starving, splitting one sandwich and eating soggy marshmallows, sharing a cigarette. I was in flip-flops, so my feet got all muddy and disgusting. But you know what? It was perfect anyway. He pulled off his T-shirt and wiped my feet clean. We grooved along to the radio and kissed, and I was just so happy. It hit me how hard it would be, missing him.

We made plans for staying close: phone calls on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Sundays at nine o'clock, and he'll visit over his winter break, if not before then. I cried and cried, but he promised we could get through it together.

When I went home that night, I knew I loved him. Really loved him, not like when I thought I loved Paul Covey in eighth grade because he bought me a Hershey's chocolate bar for Valentine's Day. And I have a pretty good hunch he feels the same way, because drying my feet? Wiping my tears? You don't do that for just anyone. I want to tell him soon, before he goes. The next time I write, I hope I have good news.

Dawn closes the journal, looks down, and tucks her hair behind her ears. Lucy has chills.

"I'm clearly not the writer," she tells Celeste.

Celeste stares wistfully at the horizon. "That was beautiful. Really. It sounds like you two were...happy."

Lucy cranes her neck. "What's that bookmark, a photo?"

Dawn glances at it, laughs to herself, and hands it over. She and Hank look baby-faced and completely smitten, seated at the bar at Foxy Roxy's. Dawn, with swipes of blue eyeliner and a platinum-blond ponytail, rests her head on Hank's shoulder. His hand is curled around her waist, holding her close with his fingers hooked through her belt loops.

"This was the summer we met," she says.

Lucy's never seen it before. She wants to keep it forever.

Pushing away the lump in her throat, she says, "It's amazing."

But the lump doesn't vanish. Instead, hot tears spring to her eyes.

"I'm sorry, I've just never seen..."

When her voice fails her, Vivian sweeps her into a hug. "It's okay."

Lucy is still heartbroken over losing her dad. She always will be. In equal measure, though, it pains her to accept who he really was. She'll forever feel like there's a hole in her chest, a crucial piece gone missing. But she also feels profoundly, phenomenally lucky, because this nightmare of a summer cemented a real kind of sisterhood between her and Vivian. Lucy is no longer a jealous onlooker, but a friend in the flesh.

Eventually, she pulls herself together enough to share a few of her memories with him: his Fourth of July bonfires and that one Fifth of July boat parade; picking blueberries in rain jackets; spending night after night watching the sun going down.

"I wish we had a better sunset for him tonight, but...Vivian, do you want to say anything?"

She'd told Lucy about not wanting to speak at the service in New York. She hesitates, then stands.

"I know this is the wrong thing to say at a funeral, but this is the weirdest funeral I've ever been to—or celebration of life, whatever—so I'm just going to say it: He could be an asshole sometimes."

Celeste chokes on a sip of beer. Dawn catches Lucy's eye with an expression that blares, *Whoa*.

"He lied to all of us. He created a mess."

"You're not wrong," Lucy mutters.

"His *intentions* were good," Celeste says. "Mostly."

Vivian shoots her a look.

"But you're right, he wasn't perfect," Celeste adds.

"He got in his own way. He was selfish," Dawn says. "Not to pile on..."

"I'm sorry if I'm being too harsh, but someone had to say it," Vivian says. "But still, I wish I could see him one more time, just to have one real, honest talk about all of this. He owed us that."

Celeste nods.

“I hate that he’s gone,” she continues. “He didn’t deserve to go so young like that.”

“He didn’t,” Lucy says.

“No,” Dawn agrees.

“And I forgive him.” Vivian’s voice cracks; she blinks up at the graying sky.

Lucy considers it for a moment. “I do, too.”

There’s no visible sun to set, just a sliver of moon glowing faintly through the clouds. A half mile out, the house looks so grand, perched up there on the dark hill. The oversized windows glow gold from within. It’s time to do what they came here for.

“Are we ready?” Lucy asks.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” Celeste says, resigned.

“Go ahead,” Dawn says, squeezing Lucy’s arm.

She retrieves the urn from safekeeping and—hands trembling—carefully unscrews the lid. She steps toward the bow, facing the horizon. The water below is a deep slate blue.

“Okay...” she mutters to herself, gazing into the vessel.

Inside, the contents are tree-gray fine dust. A larger-than-life man, his whole being, reduced to this. Tension has forced her shoulders toward her ears; it takes a hefty exhale to relax her frame. Her throat is too dry to say much more.

Vivian takes a step closer. Her arm brushes against Lucy’s.

“We love you, Dad,” she says quietly.

“We really do,” Lucy ekes out. Her whisper sounds like a prayer.

The loon family watches from afar, one clan of lake lovers to the next. Hank’s daughters count down from three. With a simple pour, he is gone, swirling into the waves, swallowed up by the loving arms of Fox Hill Lake.

VIVIAN

A half hour later, they sit down for Hank's favorite feast, cheeseburgers and hot dogs. Vivian has finally mastered the barbecue, no help needed. Dawn's flowers take center stage on the table, and Lucy's kicked the playlist back on. It's not a cohesive mix, but neither was he. People are complicated. Vivian is grateful to see all sides of her dad in full technicolor, even if that came too late.

"When do you fly back?" Dawn asks.

Celeste dabs around her lipsticked mouth with a napkin. "Tomorrow."

"Oh, you aren't staying?" Lucy asks, a tinge of disappointment in her voice.

"I have a few book signings back-to-back: Boston, New Haven, DC."

"Fancy," Dawn says.

Celeste glumly spears a leaf of lettuce. "I've gotten used to it. Maybe too used to it. I'm trying to soak everything up this time around, because who knows if there will be any more of these events next summer?"

"Why not?" Lucy asks. "I'd love to go to one."

Celeste sighs. "The novel I've been working on, *Pleasure and Spain*, hasn't been going well. I have three hundred pages of straight trash."

"I'm sure that's not true," Lucy says diplomatically.

"I was never that excited about this book to begin with. I wanted to go with a different idea, but that would've required a research trip to New Zealand."

Dawn lights up. "Ooh, that'd be fun."

Celeste describes the dream vacation she wanted to take with Hank. They'd visit glow worm caves and bubbling mud pools, explore Marlborough vineyards, climb the volcano on Rangitoto Island, learn about Māori culture in Rotorua. He claimed he wouldn't be able to take enough time off work for a trip to the other side of the world. Celeste could still go on her own, of course, but it wouldn't be the same.

"Although," she says heavily, commanding attention, "I think I might scrap my draft and start from scratch with something new. I think there's a book here."

Lucy's eyes bulge. "What?"

Celeste starts off strangely flustered but regains poise as she explains herself. “Inspired by him. And us. And this summer. It’s been more twisted than anything I could dream up—and trust me, I’ve tried. What would you think if I came back here for a research trip for a few days? Maybe Labor Day weekend?”

Vivian freezes, speechless.

“Oh my gosh, I’d love that,” Lucy says.

Dawn laughs. “You better make me look good.”

“Vivian? What do you think?” Celeste asks.

The spotlight is on her. She knows her opinion counts. She imagines every wild jolt of this roller coaster of a summer—grief, shock, heartbreak, sisterhood, new beginnings—soaped up in a juicy beach read, shelved in people’s homes, tucked into suitcases for summers to come; the inevitable press tour where Jenna Bush Hager or Reese Witherspoon asks about her mother’s inspiration. They’d all be reborn with ridiculous new names: Desdemona, Lavinia, Vesper, Chrysanthemum. Vivian can practically guess the title already: *Misery, Marriage, and Maine...Lovers and Liars on Loon Road...The Floozy of Fox Hill...Okay, maybe not that last one.* It would be everything. Out in the open. As it should be.

“Mom, that sounds great.”



Dawn shoos Vivian out of the kitchen after dinner. “You cooked, we’ll clean.”

She settles onto the couch with her laptop, scrolling through apartment rentals, while Dawn, Lucy, and Celeste make quick work of clearing plates, rinsing dishes, and wiping down the counter. There isn’t quite enough space for all three of them, so Dawn encourages Celeste to sit this one out, too. Honestly, it’s probably easier for the Websters to maneuver without her worrying about dirty dishwater splashing her white eyelet blouse.

A minute later, Celeste inhales a strangled gasp. “Oh my God.”

That kind of response doesn't mean much from her. Was the president assassinated? Has Bloomingdale's begun stocking its fall collections? Equally possible.

"What?" Vivian asks.

Celeste claps a hand over her mouth. "Oh my God," she repeats, staring at Vivian.

Now Vivian's intrigued. "*What?*"

It takes her a moment to find her voice. "Lucy, Dawn, come here," she calls. "You're not going to believe this."

Dawn wipes her hand on a dish towel. Lucy sets down the Tupperware.

"I got another email from my lawyer following up on a note he sent after your dad died—I guess it got lost in my inbox. I wasn't exactly on top of it after, you know."

"An email about what?" Vivian asks.

Celeste's eyebrows might as well hit Mars—that's how stunned she looks. "Trust funds. For...all three of you."

With a chill, Vivian shuts her laptop. "What?"

"Apparently..." Celeste squints at the screen. "He set them up years ago to kick in after he died."

Lucy's jaw drops. "No way."

Dawn gapes. "Are you serious?"

Vivian grabs her mother's phone and scans the email. "Oh my God. We all got the same thing."

Each lump sum is roughly equivalent to the value of the house. She passes it to Lucy. Dawn cranes to see. Overwhelmed, Lucy sinks onto the couch, covers her face, and sobs.

"He—he *what?* Are you sure?"

"Completely."

Dawn, equally dazed, rubs circles on her back and sniffles. "I can't believe this."

"It's real, all right." Celeste sighs. Inspecting her cuticles, she adds, "And it comes out of my inheritance."

"You'll be fine," Vivian says, not conjuring much sympathy.

Because she will be. There's more than enough to go around. Hank finally got it right.

"I do have my royalty checks, that's true," she says.

Dawn's mouth twitches in amusement at Celeste's stiff upper lip in the face of such hardship.

"There you go," Vivian says, hardly paying attention anymore.

Because now she can afford a lease wherever she wants, even smack-dab in the middle of the trendy, alarmingly expensive blocks of the West Village. She imagines her bar's write-up in the *Times* and customers passing by Della to get a more interesting drink around the corner at her place instead. She could make her own stamp on her hometown. This should thrill her, but instead, the news hangs like flat Champagne. She'd gotten used to the idea of starting over in Portland. She's genuinely looking forward to trying a new kind of life with Lucy. No matter what's in her bank account, she can't give up that opportunity.



The Levy women are both quiet on the morning drive to the airport. Vivian is content to let the radio fill the silence as she figures out how to translate her feelings into words. Celeste watches the scenery slip by, slowly morphing from tree-lined Loon Road to bright, open hills dotted with old farmhouses to the scattered businesses along Route 109.

"Thank you for coming up here. Again," Vivian says.

"Of course."

"I wasn't sure you'd actually come back."

Celeste looks surprised. "Really?"

"I know this isn't your favorite place, and meeting Dawn couldn't have been easy."

"I never really had anything against this place. I was just afraid of what would happen if we ran into her."

"That wasn't so bad, was it?"

“No.” A beat later, she adds, “I like her. I like both of them.”

A thought flashes through Vivian’s mind, but she’s too afraid to say it... except, damn it, she wants to be honest with her mother. It’s long overdue.

“I was worried about what it’d be like, having the four of us all together. Partly because I didn’t know how you and Dawn would get along, but also because I knew you and I aren’t like them. We’ve never been best friends. I worried it would be awkward and sad, seeing us compared to them.” She glances over at Celeste, who’s listening with intense stillness. “But I think this was really good for us.”

Celeste swallows. “It was. And I’m sorry I didn’t try harder to fix things between us sooner. It felt like I was one way, and you were another, and as hard as I tried, things were never...”

“Effortless,” Vivian supplies. “We’re no Rory and Lorelai Gilmore.”

“Can I tell you, that show is bullshit? Mothers and daughters don’t act like that. A woman needs friends beyond her teenage daughter to stay sane.”

Vivian laughs, delighted by Celeste’s snarky side now that it’s not aimed at her. “Unrealistic expectations, I agree.”

She pulls up to the curb at the airport and helps Celeste with her luggage. When they hug, she inhales Celeste’s perfume and feels the faint thump of her mother’s heartbeat pulsing against her own. She doesn’t have her dad, or Oscar, or a job, or a place of her own in Portland (yet). But she has this. Right here. Finally.

LUCY

On the last quiet day of the summer, the Thursday before Labor Day, Lucy and Vivian set out chips and salsa and wine on the back deck as the afternoon tips into evening. Soon Fox Hill Lake will fill up with weekend people, families on vacation, hordes of boats towing tubers and water-skiers and blasting Springsteen for one final hurrah. There will be barbecues,

bonfires, backyard parties toasting to the end of season. Celeste will arrive, notebook in hand, ready to spill the secrets that could never stay contained in this house with no walls.

Then the leaves will crackle into brilliant shades of flame red and butternut yellow; the air will turn crisp; people will pull out their boats and docks, leaving the water bare. The lake will freeze over, then thaw, and when it's finally hot again, Lucy will be able to take Celeste's manuscript down those forty-seven steps, sit in the boat, and turn the pages that tell the story of their lives.

But before that, Lucy will be living somewhere new: a one-bedroom rental in the heart of Portland, not far from Vivian's, the perfect place for her to thrive until she's ready to put down more permanent roots. The apartment brims with charm. It has the loveliest herringbone floors, a working fireplace, a quaint reading nook flanked by built-in bookshelves, and even a modest scrap of a backyard. The move-in date is October 1. Harrison already offered to let Lucy stay at his place for as many September nights as she'd like to cut down on the commute time to her new job. She starts Tuesday. She can't wait.

Vivian uncorks a bottle of prosecco with a festive *pop!* and fills up two flutes—real glassware, not the old plastic standbys. She finally bought a whole array of wineglasses in various shapes and sizes to keep in the kitchen now that they'll both be spending a lot more time here. They'll never toss the ugly plastic cups and Mason jars; those are part of the house. But it's healthy for them to curate a new generation of family keepsakes to live beside the old. Already, they stuck that old photo of Hank and Dawn on the fridge and propped up a signed copy of *The Mistress in the Mountains* on the mantel. Soon they'll hang a few of Vivian's watercolors, and stock the kitchen cabinet with locally handcrafted mugs. They'll find a few throw pillows for the couch and decide it's a good place for drinking wine after all.

"I might place an order for the bar. What do you think of this bottle?" Vivian asks.

She secured a lease for her business—a cozy space on a cobblestone street just blocks from Portland’s waterfront. It’s really happening.

Lucy takes a small sip. “It’s fizzy.”

Vivian waits for more.

“And very nice,” Lucy adds.

Vivian has so much to teach her. “Oh, hold on, I have one more thing.”

She darts back inside. Lucy hears her scrambling all the way up to the third floor. A minute later, she returns, holding something behind her back.

“There’s something I had to make right.”

“Yeah?”

Vivian thrusts a rolled-up copy of the *New York Times* into Lucy’s hands. “Section A, page 14. It’s at the bottom.”

Lucy looks up blankly, but Vivian’s eager expression doesn’t give much away. Intrigued, she slides the paper out of its plastic sleeve and flips through the flimsy newsprint until she lands in the right place. There’s a list of corrections. One leaps out at her immediately.

The obituary of Henry “Hank” Levy, the private wealth manager from Manhattan who died on June 16, omitted the name of his older daughter, Lucy Webster.

She carefully sets the paper aside before wrapping Vivian into a long hug, too overcome to speak. It’s only one sentence, but it means so much. When she finally steps back, even Vivian has welled up.

“Thank you,” Lucy whispers.

Vivian nods. “Of course.”

Lucy puts the paper back together carefully and carries it into the house for safekeeping. Maybe they’ll frame the correction. It could go on the mantel. She settles back into the Adirondack chair and kicks up her feet on the footstool between them. The sky is morphing into a pale golden glow. Wisps of clouds swirl delicately across the horizon. Somewhere between here and there, Lucy believes their dad is watching this, too. The family of four loons, all grown up now, swims past their house, illuminated by a ray of the setting sun. Lucy isn’t quite sure where loons go to hibernate for the winter, but she knows they’ll be back here next summer—as will she and

Vivian, together, for July and August and any other time they please, for countless years to come.

Acknowledgments

Fox Hill, Maine, doesn't exist, but it's based on a real place—the small lake in southern Maine where I've spent every summer of my life. As a kid, I liked to hang out on the dock with a notebook while the sun set, trying to describe all the colors and shapes of the clouds. For the past decade, I've written and edited novels in the same spot. There's nowhere else I feel happier, more at peace, or more connected to my family.

I wrote *Maine Characters* in hopes of sharing this beautiful place with you, but for a while, I didn't know if the book would ever end up in your hands. For three years, I wrote and rewrote drafts, struggling to get it right. That final summer, I knew that if it didn't sell, I'd need to move on. When I arrived at the lake in June, I stashed a bottle of prosecco in the fridge just in case my agent happened to call with good news. July went by, then August, and by Labor Day, it was time to say goodbye.

If I wasn't ever going to celebrate the book with readers and friends, I wanted to toast to it privately. On our last day at the lake, I sat with my dad on the back deck overlooking the water and popped the bottle. We played John Denver's "Take Me Home, Country Roads" and I cried into my prosecco. I figured that was it.

As it turns out, it wasn't. Cassidy Sachs, thank you for fighting for this book as hard as I did! I'm ecstatic that you gave it a home at Dutton. Thank you for championing my work and elevating it to a new level. As a result of

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About the Author



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HANNAH ORENSTEIN is the author of *Maine Characters*, *Meant to Be Mine*, *Head Over Heels*, *Love at First Like*, and *Playing with Matches*, as well as the deputy editor of Lifestyle and Wellness at *Bustle*. She splits her time between Brooklyn and Maine.



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