



Chasing the Horizon

Author: *Katie Winters*

Category: Romance

Description: A miracle pregnancy. A fractured father-daughter bond. A single moment that threatens to unravel everything.

At forty-two, Valerie Sutton has finally found calm after the storm. Reunited with her husband Alex, expecting the baby she thought she'd never have, and leaving behind the chaos of her past, she's ready to embrace a more hopeful future.

With cautious optimism, Valerie begins collaborating with her father, Victor Sutton—a world-renowned psychiatrist known for helping others—on a long-awaited book about healing after trauma. It's meant to be their shared redemption story. Around them, Valerie's mother Esme and the rest of the family begin building the foundation for a new beginning.

For a moment, they can all breathe. They celebrate the holidays. They find joy.

But peace doesn't come easily in the Sutton family. Beneath Victor's public persona lies a man still unable to confront the emotional wreckage he helped create. Unspoken pain bubbles back to the surface, pushing Valerie and Victor's already-tenuous relationship to its limits. As Valerie grapples with the uncertainty of motherhood, Victor must face something he's never dared to admit: his need for help and the role he's played in breaking the people he loves. Then, on a harrowing June night, a violent car crash shatters everything. Valerie's life—and the life of her unborn child—hang in the balance.

It's a stirring, emotional novel about the courage it takes to forgive, the strength required to start over, and the unbreakable ties that can survive even the darkest of seasons. For Valerie and Victor, the question isn't just whether they can heal—but whether they're brave enough to try.

Dive into book seven of The Sutton Book Club series, which digs into the heart and soul of the Sutton family, the power of truth and love, and the complex nature of human relationships.

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Chapter One

June 2025

Just as soon as it hit the flame, the title page turned to black ash, rising up through the Nantucket winds and tracing a line down the sand. Good riddance, Victor thought, reaching for the second page. It felt particularly dramatic to burn each one after another, to feel the density of his and Valerie's words disappear into the air. But he was prepared to be out here all night.

A book is a dangerous thing, Victor thought. It's too honest. It betrays too much.

It was a chilly fifty-eight degrees despite the day's high of nearly eighty, but Victor had been too distracted to grab a sweatshirt. Instead, he stood in a pair of jeans and a white tee, shivering as he continued to burn the manuscript. It was the only copy; he'd deleted everything else off the cloud, his computer, and his emails. The modern age made it difficult to really get rid of anything fully, but he was adamant that it be gone.

Too much had happened in the Sutton family. Why had they thought it was a good idea to dredge all that up? Why had he thought it would all be okay?

After he burned the eighth page, he glanced back up at the house to see the upstairs light still on, proof that Esme was in bed but still awake, snuggled in and maybe reading her book. His heart seized with a painful love for her. What would she say if she looked out the window and saw him like this? Would she say she knew he couldn't change?

He knew he wasn't good enough for her and his family's love. He knew he was too angry, too prone to emotion, too messy.

A strange voice in the back of his mind told him to call his therapist and talk this over. But Victor shook that voice right out. The fact that he even had a therapist was a rather new development and one he hadn't entirely gotten used to. Victor Sutton, world-renowned family psychiatrist, had a therapist of his own? Who was he kidding? How could he possibly trust anyone with his innermost thoughts? How could he trust anyone to "fix" him?

After page ten, he threw a big chunk of the manuscript into the flames and watched it erupt. His heart was pounding. Suddenly exhausted, he sat on one of the camping chairs around the bonfire and wrapped the rest of the manuscript into a tight cylinder. Here was another thought he couldn't banish: What would Valerie say when she found out he'd burned the manuscript?

And then another: She didn't want anything to do with him.

Victor knew it was too late to apologize.

Victor knew that at this rate, Valerie would never talk to him again.

What would happen when the baby came? Would Victor be allowed to meet him? Would Victor be allowed to play "grandfather" from the beginning rather than trying to makeup for lost time, as he found himself doing with Rebecca's and Bethany's children now?

He loved his grandchildren. He did. But sometimes he had the sense that they still thought of him as a stranger or a man who was around right now but wouldn't be forever. He couldn't blame them. Children knew their environments. They could sense things others couldn't.

Suddenly, the door to the back porch opened, and light illuminated the backyard all the way to the frothing waves along their stretch of beach. Esme was on the porch in her pajamas, a look of confusion and fear warping her pretty features.

Victor prepared a lie. I'm just thinking. I made a fire to calm myself down.

But Esme didn't give him a chance to say anything.

"It's Valerie," she cried, scurrying down the porch steps in her bare feet. "It's Valerie. There's something wrong." She took Victor's shoulders in her hands to support herself. It looked as though she couldn't stop shaking.

Victor stuttered. "What are you talking about?"

"What about the baby?" Esme rasped, her eyes enormous. "What if there's something wrong with the baby?"

Chapter Two

October 2024

Eight Months Earlier

Valerie was almost too frightened to enter the clinic. Poised outside with her hand on the railing and the October sunshine on her back, she gazed through the glass door at the waiting room, filled with other expectant mothers, fathers who looked jittery and nervous, and toddlers who played with wooden blocks on the floor. Valerie had been inside such clinics before. She'd received marvelous news, shared smiles with other pregnant ladies, and counted down the days till she became a mom. But previously, those "joyous" days had died abruptly. She'd become a woman who'd had a miscarriage. She'd been a woman who was cursed.

Was it possible for curses to just go away?

“You ready?” Alex’s voice was soft in her ear.

Valerie turned to gaze into his puppy dog eyes. His hand was on the handle to the clinic door, and it was turning, turning. She had to be ready, she knew. They had to be brave and confident and sure of this next step.

They were back together after years apart: a married couple who’d never bothered to get divorced and who’d almost immediately gotten pregnant after their reunion.

It was almost too much to bear.

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Inside, Valerie filled out a form about her health thus far and waited, her knees jumping. Most of the mothers in the clinic were at least ten years younger than she was, and she pictured their ovaries and uteruses as bright and shining machines, whereas hers, at age forty-two, was a clunker. (She'd read enough online to know that plenty of women had babies of her age all the time, but all that reading had done little to reduce her fears. She was sure she wouldn't be calm again until she had her baby in her arms, and she knew, too, that having her baby in her arms would bring about another era of fears.)

"I was thinking," Alex said now.

Valerie yanked her head around to look at him, suddenly panicked. But his eyes were mischievous and eager, meaning he'd just thought of a joke he wanted to share.

"Oh yeah? What about?" Valerie asked. Calm down. Be a good partner to Alex.

"I was thinking we should name the baby after my favorite film director."

Valerie snorted. "Greta Gerwig?"

"Close," he said. "Francis Ford Coppola."

"Francis. That's sort of nice," Valerie said, surprised at how genuine she felt about it. "And The Godfather is still one of my favorite movies of all time."

But Alex shook his head. "No, you're not quite getting it. I want the name to be Francis Ford Coppola Garland. The whole thing."

Valerie giggled. “Oh. I see. That’s quite a name for such a little baby.”

“Maybe he or she will enter the world as a film genius,” Alex suggested. “I want him or her to be prepared.”

“I don’t think the name sets you up for greatness,” Valerie said. “I think greatness comes from within.”

“Name one famous person with a lame name,” Alex said.

Valerie thought for a moment, clicked her pen once, twice, then stopped when another pregnant woman glared at her. She was maybe six months along and clearly uncomfortable, adjusting her sweatpants frequently and puffing out her cheeks. Valerie imagined that most things in life irritated her at this point.

Valerie prayed she’d be that far along soon. She prayed she’d be allowed to be so irritated.

“I’m waiting,” Alex teased.

Suddenly, the woman with the glare called out, “Ryan Reynolds. That’s sort of a nothing name, right?”

A few other pregnant women nodded in agreement.

Valerie bit her tongue to keep from laughing. Somehow, they’d brought everyone in the waiting room into their game.

“I don’t know,” Alex said thoughtfully. “Ryan Reynolds has that alliteration going for him. That’s powerful.”

“Kristen Bell,” another pregnant woman, a redhead with a severe bun, said.

The other pregnant women looked at her with surprise, and the redhead shrugged. “I don’t like her.”

“She’s one of us,” another said. “She has a few kids, right?”

“There are plenty of mothers with cool names,” the redhead said. “Just because she’s a mom doesn’t mean I have to like her.”

“Lots of opinions around here.” Alex nodded with encouragement.

The women began to argue about which celebrities had “cool” names and which didn’t. Alex raised his shoulders, and Valerie buried her face in his shoulder. Tears filled her eyes.

It occurred to her that Alex was her partner in all things.

He was her greatest love. And he was funny to boot.

How lucky was she to go through this process with him? How lucky was she to have made yet another baby with him?

A few minutes later, Valerie and Alex were called into the back room for their first ultrasound. Valerie felt exposed and silly, laid back on the white paper as the technician covered her lower stomach with cold goop. Alex looked nervous and jumpy. Before long, he asked the tech which celebrity she thought had a “lame” name.

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The tech furrowed her brows in concentration.

Valerie had the sense that she'd been asked plenty of silly questions over the years. Parents with nerves said the darnedest things.

"One of the Chrises," she said finally with a laugh. "I never liked that name."

"Good answer," Alex said, visibly in duress.

But before long, Alex and Valerie were gazing up at a little black screen.

It was their little baby, fluttering.

"Everything looks great," the tech said.

Valerie hiccuped, then snapped her hand over her mouth with surprise. "I'm sorry," she said.

"Don't worry about it!" the tech said.

"It's just that we've lost a baby before," Valerie said before she could stop herself.

"Miscarriages are so, so common," the tech said. "I can put you in touch with a few online resources and communities that help women with miscarriage-recovery?"

Valerie pressed her lips together. "Maybe. It's just that I want to make sure that I'm doing everything in my power to keep this baby safe. Like I've been avoiding sugar,

and I haven't really been exercising, and I'm worried about taking new jobs because I don't want to be too stressed."

"Have you talked to your doctor about this?" the tech asked. She didn't sound worried in the slightest.

"A bit," Valerie admitted.

"And what did they say?"

"He said to keep living," Valerie said. "But I'm a little too, you know, frightened."

The tech tilted her head. She seemed unsurprised that Valerie had come to her with the same question she'd already asked her doctor.

She knows I need as much support as I can get, Valerie thought.

"I would listen to your body," the tech continued. "Every step of the way. Monitor your stress. Monitor your pain. Monitor, monitor. But don't give in to the fear, okay? Let yourself eat sugar sometimes. Let yourself go for long walks and make plans. Let yourself live."

"Okay," Valerie whispered.

Alex squeezed her hand.

Valerie thought she was going to faint. Now that she knew everything was okay—for now—it was like the adrenaline in her was crashing, and she needed to sleep.

Valerie and Alex left the clinic and walked through the Nantucket Historic District with their hands clasped. They made silly jokes to one another and frequently burst

into laughter that had nothing to do with anything else. When they decided to get an ice cream—the first real sugar Valerie had had in a while—they remembered how the women in the waiting room had latched onto his question about celebrity names and laughed even harder.

“That woman hates Kristen Bell!” Valerie said.

“What did Kristen Bell ever do to anyone?” Alex asked.

Valerie opted for cherry chocolate at the ice cream place, and Alex got pistachio. They walked along the boardwalk, eating with spoons as the October sunlight spilled over the harbor. Valerie felt floaty.

“So...” Alex glanced her way. “How are you feeling about writing that book with your dad?”

Valerie sensed he’d been wanting to ask her that for a while.

“I feel good about it,” Valerie lied.

“You sure?”

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“Yeah. I mean, it’s such a crazy story, isn’t it?” Valerie said, remembering that a publishing house had wanted to publish Victor’s story about the Sutton family alongside Valerie’s takedown of Victor. They’d wanted to pit the two against one another for corporate gains.

But Valerie and Victor had stopped that plan in its tracks and decided to spin a story all their own—one that was nuanced and built on the multifaceted stories within the Sutton family. One that didn’t neglect the variability of the Suttons’ emotions.

Valerie had never written a book before. She’d certainly never worked so closely with her father on anything, either. But she’d heard the tech. Don’t give in to fear.

It was three o’clock when they returned to the one-bedroom cabin tucked in the trees they would soon have to vacate. Alex had been living there since he’d left San Francisco. Valerie had allowed herself to fully fall back in love with him there, sprawled out on the sands by the water, their hands locked as they listened to the twittering birds and watched the wind sweep sweetly through the trees. It was hard to believe they’d truly shared that San Francisco past, that their mornings had once been so hectic and loud, that they’d struggled to find parking and fought about it and never had enough money.

San Francisco was also where Alex’s alcoholism had taken on its monstrous form.

But Alex was fully sober now. He was healthy, or mostly healthy, if he didn’t always opt for a burger and fries and went for a few runs a week. These days, he hardly worked at his parents’ inn and instead worked on a proposal for a brand-new documentary. For now, Valerie’s event planning jobs were more than enough to

sustain them, and Valerie needed Alex to leap back into a career that had previously been his very reason for being. She needed him to feel overjoyed. She needed him to perpetually look around them and think, I am so glad to be living this life.

But once they were back in the cabin, ready to sprawl in front of the television and let the rest of the day melt away, Valerie's older sister Bethany called.

Valerie answered, "Hello?"

"There she is!" Bethany cried. Her overly enthusiastic voice was proof that Valerie's entire family was nervous about Valerie's appointment at the clinic.

"It went great." Valerie got straight to the point.

Bethany exhaled deeply. "Oh, honey. We're so glad to hear that."

Valerie shifted around on the sofa, watching Alex pour himself a glass of lemonade and drink it while standing at the kitchen counter in the next room.

"Listen," Bethany continued, "I know you're probably busy, but we're thinking about having a spontaneous family barbecue. A classic Sutton affair. What do you think?"

A classic Sutton affair? There was nothing classic about it, not anymore.

But Bethany was devoting time and energy to building new rituals. Valerie had to hand it to her. Now that they were all back on the island, some of it was bound to stick.

Valerie put the phone against her chest and asked Alex what he thought.

"Burgers? Steaks?" he asked, brightening.

They'd been planning on salads for dinner at home.

"I think we're in," Valerie said to Bethany, laughing. "What should we bring?"

"Just yourselves," Bethany assured her. "We're taking care of everything else."

It was Alex's idea to sail over to the Sutton house. It was in the upper fifties and sunny in a way that reminded you probably wouldn't see much of that for the next five months. Valerie bundled up and got on board, watching as Alex whipped around the boat to fill the sails with wind. Before long, they were breezing through the Nantucket Sound, the water on either side of those jewel-colored and glowing. When he could, Alex abandoned his duties to kiss Valerie on both cheeks and say, "I can't wait to teach Francis Ford Coppola how to sail!"

"What if she's a she?" Valerie asked.

"Francis is a girl's name too!"

They reached the Sutton house and tied the boat to the dock near her father's—Esmewas what it was still called despite Esme and Victor having been divorced for decades and Victor being married to someone else.

Valerie was pretty sure that Victor hadn't used that boat during his marriage to Bree.

But now, a bonfire was licking the autumn air, and the barbecue near the porch was all lit up and ready to go. The Suttons poured from the house to hug Valerie and Alex hello. Bethany and Rebecca trailed their children, wearing matching autumn boots that made Valerie say, "Why did you leave me out on the matchy-matchy?"

Bethany and Rebecca apparently hadn't noticed that they'd bought the same pair of boots. They shrieked about it and said, "Oh, you saw they were on sale, too? Great

minds think alike!”

Valerie rolled her eyes and hugged her sisters—women who were so different from her, women she was still getting to know after so many years apart. Bethany was a renowned surgeon who’d just moved her practice to Nantucket Hospital after many years in Georgia. Her ex-husband was also a surgeon, but because he was a man and from a prestigious family in Savannah, Georgia, Bethany had often been overlooked when it came to promotions. She was much happier in Nantucket, a smaller but thankful district.

Rebecca was a chef who operated a beautiful restaurant on the second floor of the library that housed the Sutton Book Club. The restaurant wasn’t open every day, and their menu was ever-rotating, allowing Rebecca to listen to her heart and the seasons to be especially creative. Prior to her return to Nantucket, Rebecca had owned a restaurant up in Maine, but after the death of her husband, Victor Sutton himself had gone to “fetch” her, telling her that he’d needed her help to find Esme.

For the rest of the Suttons, Esme had been missing. But the truth was, Esme had been out in San Francisco with Valerie, nursing a broken heart in the wake of her second husband’s death.

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Valerie looked fondly on those days of being single and brokenhearted with her mother in the big city. They'd been all the other had.

At the time, Valerie had wondered if they'd ever see the rest of the Suttons again.

At the time, she'd thought, Maybe we don't need them anymore. Perhaps we never did.

Victor was behind the grill, flipping chicken burgers with a subtle shake to his wrist. He handed Alex a Diet Coke and asked Valerie how she was feeling.

"Great, Dad," Valerie answered honestly, surprised at how open she felt with him.

"Brilliant. Because we have quite a task to do." Victor furrowed his brow. "I told you we might have an in with a great publisher? Julia Copperfield's publishing house?"

Valerie nodded, remembering Julia Copperfield, one of the literary members of the elite and artistic Nantucket family—a family with struggles similar to their own.

"She wants us." Victor snapped his fingers. "Can you believe it?"

Valerie laughed and high-fived her father. "I guess that means we'll have to really write the thing."

"No question about it. You can't get out of it," Victor said.

"I wouldn't dare."

Esme was on the porch with her ankles crossed. When Valerie approached, Esme drew her into an embrace and filled her a glass with homemade apple cider. Valerie wrapped a blanket around her shoulders and let herself fall into the sounds of her family, her mother's laughter, and the children screaming and playing near the sand. The sensational smells of barbecue, the salty air, and the apple cider filled the air.

Valerie observed her mother, who was watching Victor with a soft expression.

"You're really in love with him again, Mom?" Valerie breathed, not wanting anyone else to hear.

Esme took a sip of apple cider and nodded. "That road trip changed my life, honey. It forced me to learn and grow in ways I thought I was too old to."

Valerie touched her mother's hand. She wanted to tell her not to rush into anything, to listen to her heart and mind as she entered this new phase. Esme's second husband had died in the spring, and it was only autumn now.

But maybe Esme's feelings for Victor had always been with her. Perhaps they'd lay dormant, waiting for Victor to prove himself to her.

"You deserve happiness, Mom," Valerie whispered.

"I'm only happy if my children are happy." Esme eyed her. "You'll understand that well soon."

Valerie bit her lip to keep from saying, I hope you're right.

She didn't want to jinx anything. But she didn't want to show how fearful she was.

The fear, ironically, could become the very thing that ruined her. She couldn't have

that.

“Oh!” Esme surprised her, clapping her hands together. “But your father has agreed to go to couples counseling. Can you believe that?”

Valerie’s eyes widened with shock. “You’re kidding.”

Esme nodded. “I told him it was important. That I wouldn’t get back together without it. Of course, getting him to listen to reason is almost impossible. It’s like pulling teeth. He’s been taking patients, helping them, and validating their problems all these years. But it’s so hard to get him to validate his own.”

Valerie watched her father flip burgers, chatting with Alex, waving his free hand around as he said something about the Red Sox, his favorite team. Alex was an active listener, eager to please Victor and chat about sports, which was nothing Valerie ever wanted to do. It was hard to imagine her father in a room with a therapist, playing the role of the patient. But if he was willing to do that for her mother, perhaps his “growth” would really stick. Maybe they could really trust him.

She hoped so. She really did.

Chapter Three

It was late when the barbecue finished. A full yellow moon lurked in the October sky, illuminating the faces of Victor’s grandchildren as they tried to squeeze every last drop of beauty from the day. Victor sort of remembered that from his youth at the enormous Sutton House—gorgeous star-filled nights with fireworks and bonfires and melted marshmallows and his mother saying, All right, just one more song. They’d always sung around the bonfire, their voices carrying over the island in a way that made Victor think of magic.

Soon, Rebecca and Bethany called his grandchildren in, telling them it was time to take showers and get ready to sleep. Now that it was clear the girls weren't headed back to where they'd previously built their lives, Bethany and Rebecca had bought homes of their own on Nantucket. But Victor liked that they stayed over often and didn't mind lingering until morning so they could have breakfast together.

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It was Victor's job to make pancakes. He liked that.

Bree probably couldn't imagine Victor as a grandfather—a cozy grandfather with a big laugh and “favorite” recipes. It didn't suit the man she'd known for years.

People could change, Victor knew. He'd seen it countless times in his practice. But he'd never really seen it within himself.

Valerie and Alex, too, were still there, nursing glasses of hot apple cider and listening to Esme tell a story about their recent road trip from San Francisco to Nantucket.

Of course, Victor and Esme hadn't quite made it all the way across the continent, not together, anyway. Esme had disappeared, taking off for Wisconsin to visit her long-lost half sister and her cruel ex-stepmother, leaving Victor to pang with loss.

He'd thought the two of them were falling back in love.

He'd been right. But it had been far more complicated than either of them could grasp.

After Esme left, he'd visited his ex-wife Bree, who'd told him she was suffering from multiple sclerosis. A part of him had wondered if he'd made this happen. Did he create this pain?

But Bree didn't want him back. She'd simply wanted to tell him what was happening. She'd thought, after everything, she owed him that.

Bree had always done the right thing, except for that time he'd asked her to run away with him, away from his three living children and his son's grave and his grieving wife.

Of course, that hadn't really been Bree's fault. Victor had convinced her it was the right thing, that they'd always been meant to be, that theirs was the love story he wanted to build.

Were these things Victor could ever forgive himself for?

Would he ever tire of asking himself that?

After all the kids were tucked away in bed, Alex suggested to Valerie that they sail back home. Victor wouldn't hear of it.

"You'll stay along with everyone else. I won't have you sailing around the island at this late hour," he said.

Valerie gave him a face that was like, Dad, come on. But it was filled with love, too.

Eventually, Bethany fetched some extra sheets for Valerie and Alex and helped them make up a bed in one of the spare bedrooms. Sometimes Victor couldn't fathom how big this house was—a house where he'd raised all four of his children. It seemed filled to the brim with new generations. With love.

After the chaos of the end of the party, Esme and Victor sat alone on the back porch, listening to the dramatic October winds and watching the last of the fire's embers fade. They were bundled under blankets, huddled close together, finishing their hot apple cider. Through the window, they could just barely make out a conversation between Rebecca and Bethany, who were talking about something Rebecca's daughter had done—a mistake, but one she felt guilty about.

“I don’t want her to beat herself up,” Rebecca said to Bethany. “It can be so hard to be that age.”

Victor reached over to take Esme’s hand. Esme sighed.

“We have a beautiful family,” he told her.

“We do.”

He let the silence fill the space between them before he asked, “What are you thinking about?”

Esme arched her eyebrow. “I’m frightened everything will be ruined.”

Victor’s heart pumped. “What do you mean?”

“Tomorrow’s our first couples therapy session,” she said. “I’m frightened you won’t play along.”

Victor’s anxiety spiked. “I can’t tell you how much...” He slid his tongue across his teeth. “I mean, I can’t tell you how much I want this to work.”

Esme nodded. She was so beautiful in the yellow moonlight.

“Thank you for trying,” she whispered. “It means the world.”

But Victor was apprehensive about couples therapy. There was no way around it. He couldn’t trust anyone. He barely trusted himself. This, he knew, was his problem.

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That night, Victor struggled to sleep. To avoid tossing and turning, he got up and wandered down to the kitchen, where he listened to music on his headphones and tried to blot out his anxiety. Right before he knew Esme would wake up, he snuck back in bed and waited for the alarm clock to blare.

Esme rolled over and burrowed her face in his armpit. Victor's heart swelled.

"How did you sleep?" she said dreamily.

"Great," he said.

Esme's eyes snapped open. "You're a liar."

Victor's heart pumped. How did she know everything?

"I promise. I slept wonderfully. I was up for a little while, sure, but I came back to bed and fell right back to sleep."

Esme seemed to weigh up whether she wanted to press the issue, then decided against it. She kissed him, first on the cheek and then on the lips, then slipped out of bed.

"Let the games begin," she said.

After that, it was off to the races. Victor was at the griddle, flipping pancakes, asking grandchildren their flavor preferences, stirring up batter with blueberries, and turning the radio up. The joy in the kitchen, dining room, and out on the back porch was glorious. At ten in the morning, it was sunny and bright and fifty-eight degrees, and

once the grandkids were done with their pancakes, they were running around like crazy again. It took a lot of effort from Bethany and Rebecca to wrangle them into their vehicles and take them away.

When they left, Valerie and Alex helped with the dishes, then took their boat back to their little cabin. Esme made sure to nag them briefly about finding a new place to live, to which Valerie said, “We know, Mom. We’re on it.”

“The baby will be here before you know it,” Esme said.

Valerie kissed her mother on the cheek and hugged Victor goodbye.

After that, all they could do was get ready for therapy.

Victor thought he was going to throw up.

But, as was customary when it came to Victor, he knew that his fear would be displaced, and he would become annoyingly confrontational, a know-it-all of the highest order. He knew he would demand the therapist’s credentials. He would probably tell the therapist how much experience he had, and the therapist would probably just say, I know that you’re famous, and jot something down in her notebook.

Victor was terrified—not only of what the therapist would say about him but also of what he would think of himself after the session.

Esme drove them to the couples therapist. On the radio was a song Victor had loved in the eighties, something by Hall & Oates he couldn’t place right now.

“You used to hate this song,” Esme said.

“What? I loved it,” Victor said, surprised.

Esme laughed. “Is that our first topic in therapy? I think you hate this song, and you think you love it?”

Victor’s heartbeat intensified. He wasn’t going to waste money or time on something so silly. But it was a funny situation. If Esme and Victor remembered this song so differently, then what else did they remember differently? What else would they disagree on?

Esme and Victor waited in the lobby next to a teenager with a big pair of headphones and across from a couple in their twenties. They have enough time to save themselves, Victor thought. They can fix things. Maybe Esme and I are too old.

Privately, he felt that Esme would get bored of therapy soon and quit.

He hoped she would, at least.

But Victor was surprised at how professional she seemed when the therapist—a licensed psychiatrist named Hannah Benson—called them into her office. Sitting on the leather sofa, he eyed her Harvard degree on the wall and the angled photograph of her and her husband on her desk.

“To start,” Hannah said, folding her hands on her lap, “I want to say that every couple should go to couples therapy at one point or another. My husband and I went before we got married, and we’ve touched base with other sessions over the years. It is completely normal and valid. But it’s also a brave first step forward.”

Hannah gave Victor a look that seemed to mean I see right through you, Victor Sutton.

Victor resented that. But it was also almost exactly what he'd needed to hear.

Hannah leaned forward. Esme wore a soft smile as though she were really enjoying this.

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“Can I just say how happy I am that we’re doing this?” Esme began.

Hannah smiled. “Can you elaborate on that? Why do you feel that way?”

“I just never imagined that Victor and I would, you know, ever get back together,” Esme said. “I never imagined he would want to work on himself like this. I know he’s a renowned therapist and people turn to him for help. But he’s always been so guarded.” Esme wet her lips and added, “I don’t know if I’m supposed to talk about Victor like he’s not here?”

Hannah laughed gently. “You can address Victor however he feels comfortable. What do you think, Victor?”

Victor wanted to remind Hannah that he had many decades of experience, experience that she couldn’t fathom. What was she, thirty-two?

He took a breath. “I’m just here to listen and learn.”

Esme put her hand on his knee. Her smile reminded Victor of what she’d looked like when they’d first met—decades and decades ago, at Esme’s engagement party. Obviously, she hadn’t married the other guy.

“We’ve been through a lot,” Esme continued. “Should I, um, tell you everything?”

“You can tell me whatever you think is appropriate,” Hannah offered.

“Well, we lost our son. It’s been some years ago now,” Esme said, her legs shaking

slightly. “He died of cancer when he was just a boy. It obviously destroyed us both.”

Esme glanced at Victor for confirmation, but Victor kept his eyes forward. He was suddenly frightened that he was going to burst into tears in front of Hannah the therapist. He didn’t want to show weakness. He knew what he, as a therapist, would make of that.

“We got divorced shortly thereafter,” Esme continued. “Victor moved to Rhode Island and remarried while I raised our girls here in Nantucket.”

“How many children do you have?” Hannah asked.

“Four, including Joel,” Esme said.

Victor bit his tongue and told himself to keep it together. But when he looked at the clock, he realized only four minutes had elapsed. He still had another fifty-six to get through.

Esme turned her head. She gave him a look like isn’t it your turn to talk?

Victor sputtered to life and said, “Bree and I got divorced.”

Hannah nodded.

“But that marriage doesn’t matter,” Victor hurried to say. “What matters is Esme and me. What matters is how we can fix this.”

“But I think both of our second marriages do matter,” Esme said. “I think we have to learn how to accept all the different parts of each other, all the stories we’ve had since we were last married, and learn how to love the brand-new versions of each other. I’m terrified that we’re falling in love with a fantasy.”

“I don’t feel like it’s a fantasy,” Victor was quick to say, although the minute he said it, he wasn’t sure he believed himself.

Hannah shifted back in her chair and crossed her ankles beneath her. Victor tried to read her body language, to guess what she wrote in that little book. But her expression was passive and difficult to gauge. It infuriated him.

“Esme, why don’t you talk a little bit about your second marriage?” Hannah suggested. “If you feel comfortable.”

Esme swallowed. “I do feel comfortable. I do. But I’m worried that Victor won’t contribute.”

Victor’s stomach sloshed.

“Why don’t you think Victor wants to contribute?” Hannah asked.

“Because he feels guilty for leaving me,” Esme said.

Victor flared his nostrils and stared at the clock, willing the minute hand to move faster.

“He was cheating on me,” Esme continued.

Victor wasn’t sure why that was relevant.

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“I was married to Bree for many years,” he said, his voice sharper than he’d planned for.

“And now Bree’s sick,” Esme pushed it. “And Victor doesn’t want to talk about that, either. I just lost Larry, and I’m heartbroken about it. I imagine Victor’s struggling. I wish he would talk about it.”

Victor’s neck and chest were steaming. He tugged at his collar, wishing he’d worn something lighter in weight. The October winds swirled outside, tossing red and orange leaves from the trees. He couldn’t fathom how the next fifty-three minutes would go.

Not well, he imagined. And he was right.

When it was over, Hannah suggested that Victor and Esme go to therapy on their own, as well as together. Esme already was, and she hoped Victor would find someone.

“I think it’s important to think of all these different sessions as building blocks to a better life,” Hannah said, speaking to Victor as though he were a child.

“I don’t see that happening,” Victor said.

Hannah didn’t seem surprised. She stood and extended her hand. “If you’d like, I’ll send out a few recommendations for therapists.”

“Send the email.” Victor shook her hand. “Appreciate it, Doctor.”

He snapped out the door, telling himself he didn't have to take her recommendations if he didn't want to. He'd agreed to couples therapy. But he hadn't agreed to sit in a room with a therapist alone, poring over every intricacy of his thoughts. He hadn't agreed to be cracked open.

But on the way home, Esme was quiet, sliding lotion through her hands and staring out the window as Victor drove. Victor sniffed and rolled his shoulders back, trying to find something to distract her from the therapy session.

Finally he landed on, "I don't really think she's qualified to help us. What do you think?"

And Esme said, "I don't think anyone can help us if you don't open yourself up."

"Is it my fault the psychiatrist is bad at her job?" Victor asked.

Esme was quiet. She reached for the radio knob and turned it all the way up.

It was Hall & Oates again. It was the same song as before.

This time, Victor decided he really did hate it. Esme was right.

Chapter Four

The Siasconset mansion was like something from the 1920s Jazz Age. Valerie parked in the driveway and got out, putting her hand over her eyes to shield herself from the sparkling October sunshine, waiting for the go-ahead. Was it possible to just walk up and knock on the door?

That was when Catherine appeared.

Catherine Marrow was a thirty-nine-year-old socialite who spent half the year in Nantucket and the other half in Manhattan, specifically Greenwich Village. Now, as she glided from her mansion in an ocher dress and a long dark green velvet coat, she echoed quiet power and beauty. Her baby bump—five months along, now—was prominent and adorable, and Valerie sensed that Catherine was flaunting it.

“Valerie!” Catherine called. “Welcome!”

Valerie hurried to greet Catherine with a hug. Not often did she feel so close and comfortable with new clients, but Catherine’s excitement about her pregnancy was infectious. She’d sent Valerie an enormous bouquet upon learning that Valerie, too, was expecting. The card had read: There was always time for us to have every happiness.

Valerie wondered if they would have bonded half this much if they weren’t “older” moms who’d assumed motherhood couldn’t happen for them. But she was also so grateful for Catherine. She imagined them years from now, their children playing on the sand as they watched from a distance, laughing and recounting difficulties as they taught their children how to share, brush their teeth, be silly, and sit still.

Catherine led Valerie into the mansion, through long and wide halls filled with sunshine, all the way to the back sunroom where awaiting them was a teapot and two little teacups like something out of England. There were fresh strawberries and fresh scones with cream that Catherine explained was low-fat.

“But my doctor is telling me I need to eat normal-fat everything!” Catherine said with a small laugh, sitting down and gesturing for Valerie to follow suit. “It’s a hard habit to break.”

“I know what you mean.” Valerie recounted how her doctor told her she could eat sugar, exercise, and live far more than she was allowing herself now. “It’s like I want

to walk around on eggshells, you know?”

“But it’s no way to live,” Catherine declared.

They held the silence for a second, then burst into smiles. Catherine reached over to take Valerie’s hand and squeeze it. “I’m so happy for you, Val. Nobody deserves it more than you.”

Valerie and Catherine got started on baby shower preparations. Catherine showed a list of potential guests—nearly sixty women, most of whom were prominent members of some Manhattan “scene” that Valerie only vaguely knew existed. They spoke about potential menus, cakes, how much should be vegan and how much should be meat-based, plus how Catherine wanted the party to be decorated.

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They also spoke about venues. Catherine was going back and forth, wondering if she should opt for a gorgeous Manhattan venue or her multimillion-dollar brownstone.

“Officially, my mother and mother-in-law are throwing me the party,” Catherine explained, throwing up air quotes. “But with something so important to me, I want it to be perfect.”

“I totally get that,” Valerie assured her.

They’d already been talking for two and a half hours, and Valerie’s head was swimming in recipes, party games, party favors, and names like Tiffany and Mallory. They’d long since eaten their scones and low-fat cream, but Catherine left Valerie with her notes for a second to refill the tea with hot water.

Valerie took a breath and touched her abdomen, wondering if she’d get the chance to have a baby shower, too. She knew she wouldn’t want to go all out like Catherine did. But she knew the emotion behind it would be the same. She’d want everything to be special.

Suddenly, there was a crash in the next room. Valerie rushed to her feet, hurrying down the hall to find Catherine hovering over the smashed teapot. Her eyes were glassy.

“Catherine! Are you all right?” Valerie hurried to draw Catherine away from the wreckage, noting that a bit of the kettle had lodged into Catherine’s lower thigh. Blood oozed down her pants.

“I’m sorry,” Catherine said, fixing her smile. She sat at the kitchen table and put her head in her hands.

“Are you dizzy?” Valerie asked, ready to run back to her phone to call the ambulance.

“Nothing like that,” Catherine said to the tabletop.

The emotion from their exciting baby shower planning had fallen away as though it had never been. Valerie struggled to know what to do first. Eventually, she went into the bathroom to find a bandage for Catherine’s cut. She helped her clean it up, watching Catherine’s face and waiting for an explanation. Maybe she hadn’t been sleeping well? Perhaps the pregnancy made her lightheaded? Maybe she hadn’t been sleeping enough?

When Catherine’s bandage was secure, Valerie swept up the shards and threw them away. It was then she saw that sunlight filled the back porch, beckoning.

“Why don’t we go outside for a second?” she asked Catherine, her voice soft.

Catherine blinked at her as though she hadn’t heard. “Oh? Um, sure.”

Valerie grabbed their coats and helped Catherine bundle up. She wanted to ask if she should call her mother or husband. Did this happen a lot? She wondered if mental health was at play here and worried deeply about Catherine’s approaching postpartum. Depression was a very real and present danger for many new moms. Valerie herself was frightened of it.

But as soon as Catherine and Valerie were comfortable in the sunlight on the back porch, Catherine fixed her smile. “I’m sorry. I get that way sometimes.”

Valerie's heart sped up. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Catherine clicked her head to the left and the right. "It's just that, you know, Max was supposed to be home this afternoon, and he just wrote to say he couldn't make it."

Max was Catherine's husband, who was in Manhattan finishing up a few contracts before he planned to join Catherine for their final week or so in Nantucket.

"I asked him if he wanted me to come back to the city this week already," Catherine said, her voice wavering. "But he said he wanted to come back to the island as soon as he could. He said he wanted to soak up every last bit of the island life until winter. What do I make of that?"

Valerie didn't know what to say.

She thought he was probably just trying to get as much done before the baby as he could, but she didn't want to overstep. She didn't really know Catherine. She didn't want to risk losing her baby shower gig.

But before Valerie could come up with some response that would somehow, somehow mend the clear ache in Catherine's heart, Catherine's smile brightened.

"Look at me! Blubbering on when, really, I should be grateful. I should be happy at every moment!" She reached over and took Valerie's hand again. "I'm pregnant, Valerie. I never thought that would happen. I thought Max would leave me before we managed it. It's the most wonderful time of my life. And Max will join me when he can. He always does."

Valerie sensed that pointing out the inconsistencies in what Catherine said would only work against them both, so she did her best to match Catherine's smile and bided her time till she could get out of there.

As she drove away from the mansion, her heart shuddered with dread.

But she reminded herself, Don't let yourself feel this way. Remember to be happy all the time—for the baby's sake.

It was five thirty when Valerie pulled up to her mother's place. She checked her phone to find ten messages from Alex, most of which involved his research for his documentary and links to new homes they could maybe, maybe buy if they got their act together. Valerie called him immediately, wanting to be comforted by his voice. He answered, and it was like being brought back to earth.

"It was a weird time with Catherine," Valerie admitted, dropping her head against the headrest and gazing up at the home where she'd been raised. She explained what had happened, including the tea kettle and the fact that Catherine's husband wasn't coming home.

"He sounds like a bad guy," Alex said thoughtfully.

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“I know. But it’s not like I can tell her that,” Valerie offered.

“Do you like Catherine?”

Valerie pondered this for a moment. “I don’t know if we’d be friends outside of this arrangement, I guess. But it’s more because Catherine is only friends with the elite.”

“Ugh. Remember how we used to avoid these kinds of people back in the city?”

“Of course.” Valerie sighed. “But those kinds of people pay big money for baby showers. And they tell their friends about you if you do a good job.”

“You’re brilliant, you know that?” Alex said with a laugh. “Why don’t you come home and help me get funding for my documentary? It’s clear you’re the brains in the family.”

“I can’t. I have to go help the top brains in the Sutton family write a book,” Valerie said.

But she felt staggered with a profound sense of fatigue, one she knew was related to pregnancy.

“Get home as soon as you can,” Alex said. “I’m going to order pizza.”

“We can’t order pizza,” Valerie reminded him. “We have to save money for a house!”

“It’s just a little pizza,” Alex teased, then offered, “I’ll make the dough myself.”

“There’s an idea.”

They said they loved one another and got off the phone.

Inside, Valerie found her mother doing an exercise video in front of the television. Esme was bending and bouncing, her socked feet flying, and she didn’t notice Valerie till Valerie had nearly given up getting her attention. Esme paused the video and smiled.

“He’s in his study,” Esme explained. “And he’s in a terrible mood.”

Valerie wrinkled her nose. “Oh no.”

“But I’m sure you’ll help him through,” Esme said.

“I don’t know about that.” Valerie hesitated. “Is it because of couples counseling?”

“He’s been in his study since then.” Esme nodded. “I don’t want to see him!”

Valerie crossed and uncrossed her arms. She wanted to ask her mother why she was doing this to herself. But she also wanted to ask herself that question.

Was this book a bad idea?

“Before you ask,” Esme said, interrupting Valerie’s thoughts, “yes, I still want to get back together with your father. But he needs to do better.”

Valerie nodded.

“And I need to be patient,” Esme said. She turned her exercise video back on.

Upstairs, Valerie knocked on the door to her father’s study and entered when he said she could. She found Victor Sutton at the big mahogany desk he’d once used thirty years ago, a desk that, Valerie guessed, her mother’s second husband had also used frequently during his life here. Victor looked dominant and incredibly serious, hovering over books and notepads, trying, it seemed, to create a timeline or chapter outline for the book.

He didn’t smile when Valerie walked in.

Great, Valerie thought.

“How’s it going?” Valerie asked, sitting in the chair beside him.

She thought about the notes she had for their project on her phone, notes she’d been excited to share with him.

“It’s going. Or it’s not going.” Victor shrugged. “I don’t know. To be honest, I’ve never written a book with someone before. I’m wondering how best to translate my thoughts to you and yours to me.”

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Valerie opened her phone to her Notes app and showed him her highly organized writing: the memories from each era of her life going back as far as she could remember. Her father hardly glanced at her notes, and Valerie felt slapped.

Victor rubbed his stubble and gazed out the window, tapping his pencil on the desk.

Valerie thought about Alex back at home, kneading dough for the pizza, and felt a swell of love. That was where she belonged. Not here.

“Can I ask you something?” Victor asked.

“Of course.”

“Do you think it’s possible to be forgiven?”

Valerie hadn’t anticipated such a heavy question on their first day of writing.

“I mean, do you forgive Alex? For everything?” Victor asked.

Valerie took a breath. She realized she wasn’t sure if she felt safe enough with her father to reveal her innermost opinions. Especially her reunion with her husband.

Her love for Alex was private.

And did she know her father enough to trust him?

“Forget about it.” Victor waved his hand. But he still looked disgruntled and unsure.

Valerie filled her lungs. What a day. She hoped the baby hadn't felt a lick of the stress and anxiety she now carried.

Suddenly, her phone was ringing. It was Alex.

"I have to get this," she told her father, pressing it to her ear. "Hello?"

"Hey, I have a question about pizza toppings," Alex said. "Are you cool with black olives? I'm nervous about what the baby's letting you eat and so on."

"What? I mean, I guess I can come home," Valerie said.

"You don't need to come home!" Alex cried. "Take as much time as you need. I'm just at the store and don't want to make any stupid purchases. You know how I am."

"No, if you need me, it's really okay," Valerie said, getting up and striding for the door. "I can be there in ten minutes."

It took Alex another second to catch on. "Ah. You want to get out of writing with your dad."

"Do you need me to pick up anything?" Valerie asked.

"I'll see you at home. Love you," Alex said.

"Love you, too."

Valerie pressed her phone to her chest and turned to find her father gazing out the window, studying the sailboats in the pink sunset and cruising through the chill. Had he heard anything she'd just said? Or was he so immersed in his own chaos that nothing else existed?

“Dad? Can we pick this up later this week?” Valerie asked.

“What? Oh, yeah. I mean, sure.” Victor got up and gave her a side hug.

His distraction dropped him back in his office chair. By the time she was in the hallway, Valerie had the impression he’d forgotten she’d been there at all.

Chapter Five

Two days after the disastrous meeting with the couples therapist, Victor was out for a walk with his brother, Aaron Sutton, a relationship much like with other family members in that they hadn’t spoken for years and were trying to forge a new relationship. Unlike when he was with Esme and his children, Victor wasn’t overwhelmed with guilt with his brother, and they were able to exchange funny stories and talk about the future in ways he wasn’t sure he could with the others.

Most importantly, Victor could talk about the couples therapist, Hannah.

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“She’s this thirty-two-year-old professional,” Victor said. “I respect her credentials, and I respect her on paper, and I respect her in theory, but I can’t help but think, you know...” He put his hands on his hips. He knew if Esme heard him right now, she would not be happy.

“You can’t help but think you’re Victor Sutton and you’ve been there, done that?” his brother teased.

“I wouldn’t put it like that,” Victor said.

“But I’m close,” his brother said.

“Yes. Okay. You’re close. I know that makes me an arrogant son of a gun.”

They were on a beautiful walk along the southernmost tip of the island. A morning of rainfall had left a bright and blue-skied afternoon, and they were telling themselves they would walk for at least a few hours to “earn” a meal at Rebecca’s restaurant and a glass of wine at the reading afterward. Julia, Victor and Valerie’s supposed new “editor,” was going to be there because the writer performing the reading was one of her clients. It was a schmoozing event more than anything. But it was also a night out with his family.

Victor needed to remember to appreciate every minute. He needed to stop being so upset all the time, both with himself and those around him. (Mostly with himself, he knew.)

“If you were the couples therapist, what would you tell yourself?” Victor’s brother

asked him, tilting his head in a way that made Victor feel decades younger.

Like they were playing a game.

“You mean if I was my own patient?”

“Exactly,” his brother said.

Victor rolled his eyes and then closed them. His head throbbed.

“I guess I’d tell myself to give it more time. I’d tell myself that therapy requires patience.”

His brother snapped his fingers. “There you have it.”

“But what if it doesn’t work?” Victor asked.

“Something always works,” his brother said. “It’s all about finding a new way through.”

After that, his brother confessed that his dogs were barking and that he was ready for the glass of wine Victor had promised him. Victor laughed and headed back toward the car, wondering about the night ahead, hoping that he and Valerie would impress Julia enough to seal the deal on the publishing contract. Julia had said she “adored” the proposal but wanted to meet Valerie before everything went forward. Victor might have told Julia that she would adore Valerie just as much or even more than the proposal. Everyone did.

Victor’s stomach churned with sorrow at how the other night had gone. Valerie had come over to start writing the novel, and when she’d tried to show him her notes, his eyes had blurred with annoyance. He’d thought, She’s never written a book before.

What does she know?

He decided not to tell his brother about that just yet.

Victor drove them back to the Sutton Book Club and parked around the corner, closer than he'd been able to during tourist season. They underwent a big trade-off year after year: colder weather and an emptier island or warmer weather and a population explosion. Victor had sort of forgotten about it. He'd sort of forgotten how magical autumn could be.

Victor and Aaron entered the Sutton Book Club to air spiced with basil, oregano, and thyme. They mounted the stairs to the second-floor restaurant, where they found Esme and Bethany bent over what looked like a list of today's reservations. Rebecca and her boyfriend were in the kitchen, dancing around with wooden spoons and singing an ABBA song.

"What's happening in here?" Aaron asked joyfully. "Who told you all you could be so happy?"

Bethany snapped to her feet, hurrying to hug her uncle.

"Welcome! Welcome!" Esme waved him over. "Let me get you something to drink?"

Her eyes danced over to Victor and promptly dimmed. Victor couldn't help but think, Oh, she's still angry with me.

It was true she'd been rather cold since the therapy session, and when he turned over in bed to say hello to her, she only murmured hello back.

He couldn't let that get to him. He had to take responsibility for his actions. Victor pushed himself to approach her. He kissed her on the cheek and said, "You look

stunning, my dear.”

Esme melted just the slightest bit. “You’re glowing, Victor Sutton. Where have you been?”

Victor said that he and Aaron had been out for a beach hike. Esme’s lips flickered into a smile. “You worked up an appetite, I hope?”

“When have I not had an appetite?” Victor asked.

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Rebecca hurried out of the kitchen to kiss her father and tell a long and arduous story about her time at the fish market and her fear that what she'd wanted to cook today was long gone. Esme and Bethany had heard the story at least once, but they followed along with Rebecca's retelling in a way that spoke of their love for her.

Bethany showed Victor and Aaron to a corner table, where they sat with glasses of light white wine and watched the sunlight dim over the main street. Their dinners arrived: pasta with capers and olives and anchovies, which was to die for. By Victor's second bite, the restaurant was full, with Esme and Bethany racing around to get everyone's orders and say hello. This being a small town, it was difficult to get from place to place without having a full-scale conversation, and Victor and Aaron amused themselves in watching them, wondering how they got everything done.

Valerie and Alex arrived a few minutes later. Victor's heart started beating in overtime. But to Valerie's credit, she waved and immediately approached them, gesturing to the two remaining seats at their table and asking if they could join.

"We're actually saving them," Aaron said.

"For who?" Valerie asked.

"You said Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman were coming?" Aaron said to Victor.

"They're running late." Victor erupted with laughter. "I think they're like thirty years late."

"Oh, that's right," Aaron said. "You can sit till they get here."

Valerie and Alex were both glowing with the kind of joy that came from a first pregnancy. Victor remembered it well from those long-ago months with Esme, Rebecca growing in her womb like a promise. At the time, he and Esme had thought they'd been through all their hardships and come out the other side.

He wondered what was waiting for Valerie and Alex after this, then cursed the thought.

Maybe they'd be happy and only happy from here on out.

"That looks amazing," Valerie said. "But I don't think I can have anchovies?"

Quickly, Alex looked it up on his phone. "Anchovies are okay!"

They high-fived, and Victor and Aaron laughed.

"That's a team effort," Aaron said.

Valerie beamed and ordered a glass of nonalcoholic wine from Bethany, who'd had it delivered to the Sutton Book Club especially for Valerie and Alex. It had already turned into a boon for business. Surprisingly, some Nantucketers were moving further and further away from alcohol these days, pursuing cleaner lifestyles and thinner waistlines. Victor couldn't imagine that he'd forever abandon his glass of wine with dinner or his whiskey at night. But who knew what would happen next?

Maybe he'd change. Perhaps that couples therapist would help him.

When Victor took his final bite of pasta, he blinked up to see—to his tremendous surprise—Hannah, the couples therapist. There she was, walking through the restaurant (his daughter's restaurant!) with the air of someone who'd been here many times. Esme got up to greet her and shake her husband's hand. Victor was suddenly

petrified.

What was she doing here? This thirty-two-year-old who knew too much about him? She couldn't dine at the restaurant he dined at. She couldn't meet any of his peers.

His palms were clammy.

"Dad, are you okay?" Valerie asked under her breath.

"Sure. I just need some water." Victor got up to take his bowl to the kitchen and somehow got his toe caught on the leg of the table. He nearly fell flat on his face but managed to catch himself at the last minute. Mortified, he knew his cheeks were red hot.

"You good?" his brother asked, trying to laugh it off.

And then his brother said, "Oh! It's Hannah."

If Victor was ashamed before, now he was mortified. His brother knew his couples therapist? It felt too cruel.

"Hi, Mr. Sutton! And other Mr. Sutton!" Hannah said, approaching the table.

Aaron smiled broadly and asked questions that made Victor understand that Victor's niece and Hannah were friendly if not full-blown friends. Victor's breathing was weak.

Why had Esme gotten them a couples therapist who was so firmly ingrained in the Nantucket scene? Didn't she know that Hannah had the capacity to ruin him?

"I'll be right back," he said to Hannah and his brother, speeding off for the kitchen.

Little did he know, Valerie was hot on his heels. When he paused at the kitchen counter, both hands flat on the cold slab and his heart pounding, Valerie whipped through the double-wide doors and asked, “What is going on, Dad?”

Victor's heart seized. "I told you. I just need some water."

The kitchen was a flurry of activity, which made it difficult to reach the glasses and faucet. Victor waited stupidly, feeling his daughter's eyes on him. He wasn't going to tell her that that kid back there was his couples therapist. He wasn't going to tell her that supposedly Hannah was going to "save" his relationship with Esme, the only woman he loved.

"Dad, I wanted to talk about the other night," Valerie said now, her voice low.

Victor wasn't sure how much more of this he could take.

"I just really need us to be receptive to one another," Valerie said. "I really need us to be able to think together and bounce ideas off one another. Otherwise, I don't see how this is going to work."

Victor took a breath. Should he tell her he didn't know how this was going to work, either? Or should he just try—for the first time in his life—to go with the flow?

But that was when Esme entered the kitchen to announce, "Julia's here with the writer! I think the reading will get started downstairs soon!" She furrowed her brow, looking at Valerie to add, "Can you help me with the microphone, honey? I still can't figure out where to plug it in."

Feeling uneven, Victor followed Valerie and Esme into the restaurant to say hello to Julia and the writer giving the reading, a forty-ish guy with horn-rimmed glasses and high-waisted pants. He reminded Victor of numerous patients of his over the years,

patients who'd come to him with an array of disorders that Victor and Victor alone had been able to mend.

Victor shook the writer's hand and introduced himself.

"I'm Marvin," the writer said. "Marvin Sharp."

"Marvin's a sensational new talent at the publishing house," Julia said.

"On the way over here, Julia was telling me about your new book," Marvin said to Valerie and Victor, his eyes shifting from daughter to father and back again. "That's a crazy-sounding project. I can't imagine my father would ever listen to what I have to say."

Beside him, Valerie bristled slightly. Victor swallowed.

He knew he needed to listen. He knew he needed to open himself up.

I can't do it on command! I'm not built like that!

"We're excited about it," Valerie said, smiling.

Marvin disappeared with Esme to set up at the mic downstairs, leaving Julia with Victor and Valerie.

"I'm so happy I finally get to talk to you," Julia said, sipping a glass of white wine that Bethany had just set down in front of her. "When Victor told me about the project, I couldn't believe it. Obviously, the project was previously associated with a much, much larger publishing house, and it's rare that we get handed something as enormous as this."

Victor knew she meant “enormous” because of Victor Sutton’s celebrity name. He also knew that Valerie resented this fact.

“Well, you know that publisher was trying to manipulate Dad and me,” Valerie said. “I’m not so keen on bigger publishers if they act like that.”

“I understand. And I can assure you that we have no interest in doing anything like that. We’re a really small publishing house, originally based in Chicago before my move back to Nantucket in 2022.”

“Just a couple of years before we did,” Valerie said with a soft smile.

“It’s the magic of the island,” Julia said. “It draws you back.”

“I’m so glad for that,” Valerie agreed.

Victor’s heart pumped. He could sense how much Julia liked Valerie and knew that this would mean a publishing contract on his desk before the week was through.

It meant they’d actually have to write the thing.

Downstairs, they sat in metal chairs set up in front of Marvin Sharp’s microphone and drank wine and chatted quietly. Marvin was supposed to start reading any second, but right now, he was in a heavy conversation with Julia’s mother, Greta Copperfield, who seemingly couldn’t stop peppering the man with questions about his novel. When Victor didn’t know what else to say to Valerie or Julia, he snuck his way to the side table to read the back of Marvin’s book, which described his work as a poetic achievement, a strange and exhilarating work that echoed his childhood back in Asheville, North Carolina.

“Have you read it?”

Victor nearly jumped out of his skin. Standing beside him was Hannah, the therapist, drinking a glass of wine and reading the back of another of Marvin's books. Had she been up here the whole time? Had Victor missed her?

"No, I haven't," Victor said, his voice calm. "You?"

“Not yet, but I have it at home,” Hannah said.

Victor didn't know what to say. He put the book back and tried to return to Valerie and Julia. But too many people had filled the pathway, which meant he needed to go around Hannah and back around the side.

Hannah looked at him with a soft and kind expression. Victor hated it.

“I imagine you're not very comfortable with me being here,” Hannah said now, so quietly that Victor knew nobody else could hear. “I promise you that I'm a professional.”

Victor wanted to say, If you were really professional, you wouldn't be talking to me like this.

“I understand. We're all professionals here,” he said instead.

“I wondered if you'd given any thought to finding a therapist of your own?” Hannah asked now, still quiet as a mouse. “I think it could help us all move in the right direction.”

Victor sniffed. He remembered the past forty-eight hours of frantic thoughts and sweaty palms. He remembered Esme, turning away from him.

“I don't know about that,” Victor said.

Hannah looked disappointed. She placed her hand on her chest. “I can recommend

Dr. Frank Gallagher with my whole heart,” she said. “Reach out to him. Let him talk.”

Suddenly, the microphone squeaked and sent everyone scurrying to their chairs. Victor gave Hannah a slight nod and maneuvered back toward his seat, where he collapsed just as Valerie and Julia burst into giggles. Victor bent his head.

As Marvin charged into the reading, Victor hid his cell phone from the crowd and googled Dr. Frank Gallagher, telling himself it was just for kicks. What he saw surprised him. Dr. Frank Gallagher was a year or two older than Victor, and what was more, he’d once written a few psychiatric papers that cited Victor’s research and findings after years of working with clients and patients of his own. It meant that Frank got him, at least in some respects. It meant that, in her own way, Hannah got him too. She knew he needed someone like that.

Maybe this meant he was being too harsh on the girl.

Maybe this meant he needed to remember that, at her core, she was a professional—and she wanted to help.

Chapter Six

June 2025

The drive to the hospital was frantic. Victor, being Victor, refused to let Esme take over, but his eyes were blurry with tears, and his fingers smelled of fire, and his thoughts whirled. It’s all my fault. It’s all my fault. Victor nearly blasted through the red at a stoplight, but he smashed the brakes just in time. Frustrated, he cried out, “What is happening?”

Esme looked small and panicked. Her eyes were glassy and reflected the light. All

she'd said was Alex called. There'd been an accident. Everyone was in the hospital, and they didn't know what was going to happen.

She'd said, There's something wrong with the baby.

Now, as Victor stared into the inky black June night, he demanded, "What kind of accident?"

"Car," Esme said.

"Who was driving?" Victor rasped. If Alex had been driving his perfect pregnant daughter around... if it was Alex's fault that something awful was happening, what would Victor do?

Would Victor make Alex pay for what he'd done?

What was he even thinking?!

The light changed to green, and Victor drove the speed limit the rest of the way to the hospital and parked in the emergency parking lot. He suddenly couldn't fathom why he'd wanted to burn all the pages of the manuscript he'd been writing with Valerie. Why had he been so sure that he wanted to scrub all their work from the face of the planet? As he leaped from the car, he imagined Valerie coming out of the hospital and saying something like, You thought you could delete the manuscript from the cloud, Dad? Everything is backed up these days. It's almost impossible. Maybe they'd laugh about it and go grab burgers.

But no. They found their entire Sutton family waiting for them when they entered the emergency room. Victor cursed himself for being the last one here. He was their father. He was supposed to be the first. Bethany was dressed in her hospital gear, presumably because she'd already been here for one surgery or another, and Rebecca

was in a pair of house shorts and a sweatshirt, scrunched in a ball on a chair in the corner. Their children were spaced out, their faces drawn. What time was it? Victor checked the clock on the wall to see it was just after nine thirty. He knew they'd be there all night.

He had a sudden flashback of being with Joel at the hospital all those years ago. How many nights had he and Esme slept at the hospital?

How many nights did I let Esme sleep at the hospital by herself, telling her I needed some time to myself, telling her that I needed to hang onto my career?

And then the worst memory of all: when he'd snuck off with Bree instead of tending to his family.

His head throbbed with terror at what he'd done.

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Had he brought on Valerie's accident? Was this all his fault?

Bethany hurried over to Victor and Esme. She wore a look of authority on her face. She knew accidents, she knew human bodies, and she understood what was possible and what was not. It had to be Bethany who took control.

"How much do you know?" Bethany asked.

"Just that there was a car accident," Esme said. Her face was as pale as paper.

Bethany nodded. "Valerie was driving back from the grocery store. Someone sideswiped her, and her car went off the road."

Victor rubbed his chest as hard as he could with his fist. He wanted to wake up from this nightmare.

"What's happening now?" Esme demanded.

Victor wanted to scream, Who sideswiped her? Who did it?

He knew almost everyone on this island. He had the sense that he knew whoever it was intimately and could make them pay if he wanted to.

Calm down, Victor Sutton, he told himself. Keep your wits about you.

"She was unconscious when they brought her in," Bethany continued. Her voice wavered. "But because the doctors aren't sure of her mental state and can't be sure of

how drastic the brain injury is, they want to deliver the baby as soon as possible.”

Esme smacked both hands over her mouth.

It was a total nightmare.

Bethany explained why it was the way it was. If something was really wrong with Valerie’s brain—something they couldn’t yet know—it was essential that they protect the baby. After that, they could give Valerie all kinds of medication they wouldn’t have been able to while she was pregnant.

“It was supposed to be a beautiful day,” Esme whispered. “It was supposed to be the best day of her life.”

Soon, a doctor came into the waiting room to usher Bethany back down the hall. Victor and Esme sat in stunned silence, their arms wrapped around each other, watching the secondhand tick around the clock. Time was of the essence. But all they could do was wait for it to pass.

She’s going to be all right, Victor told himself. She has to be.

Chapter Seven

November 2024

Seven Months Before The Accident

It was mid-November and negative ten degrees Fahrenheit, which was ridiculous for this time of year. Bone-chilling. In the parking lot of the grocery store, Valerie made a small deal with God, then stepped out into the blistering cold air and hurried into the store. As soon as the doors clipped closed behind her, she gasped. She hadn’t

realized she'd been holding her breath.

At the fruit stand, Margie, the grocery clerk, stacked apples and pears and shook her head. "I haven't gotten warm all morning," she said. "And given the produce, we have the heat on as much as we can."

"I don't know what this means for the winter ahead!" Valerie said.

"It's just a fluke." Margie waved her hand. "But I remember a Thanksgiving when it was fifteen below. The oven broke, and we didn't eat anything but what we could heat in the microwave. We couldn't go out, either. Everything was closed. It was terrible."

Deeper in the grocery store, Valerie wheeled her cart through the aisles, honoring her grocery list and her sudden pregnancy desires for prunes, marshmallows, and Cheez-Its. Now that she was nearly done with her first trimester, her morning sickness had calmed down, and she felt like the baby was growing like a beanstalk.

At the checkout counter, she texted her father.

ME: Are you sure you don't want anything?

Victor called immediately. Valerie laughed and answered. "What's up?"

"Sorry. We realized we don't have half of what we thought we did," Victor said. "And we really don't want to go out. Not in this cold."

Valerie smiled into the receiver and slowly backed her cart into the aisles again. "Text me everything you need. Plus, writing snacks. We have a big chunk to get through today."

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Victor laughed. “You’d better believe it. You have your thinking cap on?”

“I left it at home,” Valerie said. “Should I go back and get it?”

“You can borrow one of your mother’s,” Victor teased. “She has buckets of them.”

After Valerie finished shopping for her parents, she was pleased when a grocery clerk offered to take her bags out to her trunk for her. This left her shivering and running after him all the way back to her car, where she immediately turned on the heat and blew on her hands. She tipped the grocery employee, hollering a thank-you through the inch of the open window as he ran back to the comfort of the store.

It was her first real winter in Nantucket in years. And she was doing it pregnant.

It would be a doozy.

Things with her father had more or less resolved since that first writing session, which Valerie often struggled to believe. They were already about a quarter of the way through with a stiff chapter outline and plenty of plans ahead. It felt sure to both of them that they’d have the thing finished by the time the baby came, which was a relief. Valerie wouldn’t have time to work on it and didn’t want to leave her father in the lurch.

Just last week, Victor had said, “I was terrified to work on a project with someone else, but you’ve opened my mind to new possibilities and new ways of being creative. I have to hand it to you.”

Valerie had practically floated home.

Now, as Valerie pulled into the driveway, the garage door burst open—not a frequent thing but proof that her parents were watching out for her and eager to help her inside. Just then, a bundled-up Esme and Victor appeared in the shadows, hurrying to help Valerie bring in all the groceries before she froze to death. Once inside, the kettle roared.

“Great idea, Mom,” Valerie said, taking the kettle off the heat and running her hands above the hot burner. “We’re going to need tea and lots of it.”

“Actually, it was your father’s idea to put the kettle on,” Esme said with a smile, leafing through the bags to take out what needed refrigeration.

Victor offered a sheepish smile. “I have some good news.”

It seemed like he didn’t want to linger on anything he’d done “right.” He didn’t want that kind of attention.

“What’s up?” Valerie opened a bag of vegetable chips and crunched.

“Julia called today,” Victor said. “She says she has a potential interview set up for us.”

“An interview? Before the book’s even written?” Valerie’s ears rang.

Victor looked nervous. “Apparently, some journalist has followed my career or something. And he wants to know where we’re headed as a team.”

Valerie was conscious of how careful her father was not to brag about his past. It was something she’d noticed lately—a tightening around his previous ego.

It made her happy. It made her understand that he was healing.

Was it all because of the couples therapy? Her mother refused to talk about it, and Valerie was too frightened to ask Victor himself. It was a net positive, though. Valerie hoped he kept it up.

“That will be fantastic for pre-orders. When is it?” Valerie asked.

“They’re asking for the Monday between Christmas and New Year’s,” Victor said, furrowing his brow. “But if it doesn’t work, he said we can reschedule any time in February.”

Valerie took another vegetable chip. Her cravings were roaring. As she crunched, she remembered that she’d already be in Manhattan because Catherine’s baby shower was the Saturday following Christmas. Valerie planned to spend the entire week in the city—to soak up the sights after the stress of such a big job.

“It’s great timing,” Valerie told her father, beaming.

She told him why, and Victor asked, “Think I can get an invite to that baby shower? They always have the best snacks at those things.”

Valerie laughed. “I’ll try to steal you a slice of cake when I go.”

She knew that wouldn’t be a problem. Baby showers, weddings, and birthday parties always had too much food. It meant everyone was eating turkey sandwiches for over a week after and freezing slices of cake.

They took the snacks and tea upstairs to Victor’s office, where they got to work, reading and editing each other’s notes and discussing the best strategies for the next chapter. What had been happening was that Valerie would sometimes write a chapter,

and Victor would give his notes, and then they'd swap places, adding and deleting where they thought necessary. In that way the book was transforming into a sort of collage.

Valerie thought she'd never loved working on anything more.

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Not even as an event planner. Not even on a private piece of writing.

She couldn't wait to tell her baby someday—that she'd been working on that novel with his or her grandfather during her pregnancy. She hoped her baby would know their grandfather as the sort of person who would do anything for them.

“You're making me eat more than I should,” Victor joked, reaching for a packaged brownie and eyeing the door mischievously. “Esme has us on a diet these days.”

“What? November is not for dieting,” Valerie said. “It's for hunkering down and getting that nice layer of warm winter fat.”

“That's what I said! But she's all about heart health and ‘happy fats,’” Victor said with air quotes.

“Ugh. Must be terrible to have someone care about you and love you so much,” Valerie teased.

Victor cackled, throwing his head back.

Around this time, they reached a part of the book that Valerie knew little to nothing about. In it, Victor was writing about his early experiences working as a family therapist after graduating from medical school, a necessary era for what came next in his career and his family life. “That first year or two did not go well,” Victor said, his eyes shining with the memory.

“What happened?” Valerie crossed her legs underneath her on the chair and then

immediately regretted it. Certain things didn't work anymore now that she was pregnant.

"Let's see. I was arrogant, but you already know that."

Valerie chuckled.

"I wanted to use everything I'd learned in the textbook. Everything I'd learned from a scientific perspective. But there are so many things you can't science yourself through," Victor said, dropping his chin. "I found myself ill-equipped and lacking in the empathy required. All my life, I'd thought I was empathetic, but it turns out, I just always thought I was the smartest guy in the room. News flash, I was never the smartest or the kindest guy in the room. Maybe I was one of the dumbest."

Valerie's heart opened. She'd never heard her father talk about himself like this.

She felt she was meeting a new version of him. Or maybe it was someone he'd hidden behind this hard exterior all along.

But Victor's honesty broke new ground for them. Soon enough, Valerie started telling her father how fearful she was about being a new mother and how terrified she felt each time she walked through the doctor's office doors. "I'm so sure they're going to tell me something I don't want to hear," Valerie said softly. "It almost makes me want to hide myself away."

Victor nodded. His eyes echoed that empathy he'd been talking about—an empathy he'd had to figure out how to grow.

Had that empathy died out briefly after Joel died?

Valerie dismissed that thought. Maybe he'd acknowledge it later when he felt the

time was right.

It was an hour or so later and just after five when Alex called Valerie with news. “Can you meet me?”

Valerie was still in her father’s office, her phone pressed against her ear, considering eating another fudge brownie. “Meet you? At home? I was going to get out of here soon.” She paused. “Should I pick up dinner? What do you think?”

“No, not at home,” Alex said. Something shivery about his voice gave Valerie pause.

Her first thought was about the baby. But the baby was in her. Alex didn’t know something she didn’t know. She swallowed.

“Where are you?” Valerie asked.

“I’ll send you the address,” Alex said. “It’s about ten minutes from your parents’ place.”

“Everything in Nantucket is about ten minutes from my parents’ place,” she said. “Okay. I’ll be there soon.”

“Make sure to bundle up,” Alex said.

Valerie rolled her eyes into a smile. “I always do.”

Her mother and father doted on her before she left.

“He didn’t say what was going on?” Esme asked, throwing a scarf around Valerie’s neck and wrapping it around and around.

“No. But I’m sure it’s not a big deal,” Valerie said. “Or he’s throwing me some kind of impromptu party. Are you all hiding something from me?”

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Esme and Victor looked at one another with confusion before realizing she was making a joke.

“Well, if he is throwing you a party, he didn’t invite us,” Victor said with a laugh.

“Shoot,” Esme said. “Just when I thought I was getting on Alex’s good side.”

Esme and Victor waved from the garage, watching as Valerie hurried back to her car. It had only gotten colder since the afternoon, and she thought of the vegetables and fruits in the trunk, maybe on the verge of freezing. She hadn’t considered them.

Alex had sent her a Siasconset address, one on the outer edge of Surfside Beach, far away from where the tourists usually swarmed in the summertime. Valerie could picture that stretch of beach in her mind’s eye, but she couldn’t fully fathom why Alex wanted her out there.

But when she pulled up at the house—a soft gray colonial with slate siding and an enormous wraparound porch, everything clicked.

Alex wanted to look at this house. It was for sale.

Why hadn’t she thought about it, to begin with?

Just as her parents had, Alex hurried outside to help her into the foyer. Valerie threw herself into his arms, shivering and laughing. She confessed, “I had no idea what you were getting me into! I was terrified it was a dinner party or something.”

Alex laughed and helped her take her coat off. The heat had been turned on, and a fire flickered in the fireplace.

“Is that a real fire?” she asked, drawing closer and sitting down on the rug in front of it. But this close-up, she saw it for what it was—thick and all-real logs, crumbling under a very real flame.

Alex sat down beside her and traced her head with his hand. “It just went on the market,” he said.

Valerie realized she’d let her guard down. “Is Kathy here?” Kathy was their real estate agent, a woman neither of them really liked who seemed to hold their future in her manicured hands.

“She isn’t,” Alex said. “I know the owners. They just put the sign up, and I called them right away.”

Valerie’s heartbeat quickened as Alex explained more. The owners were older, friends of his parents, and they were heading to Florida full-time after a gorgeous life of raising their children in this colonial. “They want to give us a discount,” Alex said.

It was the golden word: discount.

Valerie could hardly believe it.

Without realizing it, she was back on her feet. Alex joined her, and Valerie threw her arms around him, squealing. “How much?” she asked.

Alex told her the number. It was well within their decided price range—and a complete steal, given the square footage, location, and beautiful view. Tears filled Valerie’s eyes.

“Remember that closet we used to share back in San Francisco?” Valerie whispered.

“I remember we talked about storing our jeans in the oven,” Alex joked.

Valerie was fully weeping now. “Tell them we’ll take it. Tell them as soon as you can!”

Alex laughed. “I was going to put an offer on it, but I wanted you to see it first.”

Valerie pressed her forehead against his chest. She was so grateful he was the sort of man to check on her opinion first. She was so grateful he was the kind of man who didn’t leap without her and recognized that her feelings mattered, too.

“It’ll be so close to your sisters, too,” Alex reminded her.

The house was indeed just down the beach from where both Bethany and Rebecca had recently bought houses. It meant they could easily share coffee together in the mornings or a small glass of white wine at night (when and if Valerie wanted to drink). It meant, too, that they would know Valerie’s baby, beinvolved and compassionate aunts, inspire and offer a helping hand, and love Valerie’s new family with everything they had.

It felt too good to be true.

“Where are the owners tonight?” Valerie asked.

“They had to go to Boston tonight,” Alex said. “But they told us we can have a trial run.”

Valerie’s jaw dropped. “We can stay here tonight?”

“It’s like an Airbnb,” Alex joked.

Valerie shrieked and collapsed on the sofa. Alex covered her with kisses until she remembered the groceries. They got up and made a big show of getting all the bags out of the trunk and into the mostly empty fridge in the house. Alex had packed Valerie a bag of essentials, and he’d remembered everything, even her toothbrush, which Valerie often forgot when she was traveling.

What’s more, Alex had decided to cook an immaculate dinner. It was pasta with chicken and a homemade sauce, plus an appetizer of cheese and a dessert of dark chocolate lava cake. They sat at the dining room table, listened to music, and talked about their potential future here, imagining their baby sleeping in the next room, taking their first steps, or screaming from upstairs, needing one of them. Valerie cried twice throughout dinner and once when she set out to do the dishes. But Alex wouldn’t let her do that either.

They finished the night on the sofa, watching a soft snowfall across the beach and the frothing water. Alex’s hand was on her stomach, and their three-month mark was just a couple of days away.

It was the kind of love and life they’d both been waiting for.

Valerie said softly, “So when do we move?”

Chapter Eight

The following week in November, right before Thanksgiving, Victor had his first

meeting with Dr. Frank Gallagher, the psychiatrist Dr. Hannah had recommended. Dr. Gallagher was approximately his age, and he'd referenced Victor's work several times over the years. Victor found he was slightly nervous, driving through the thawing and gray afternoon to Dr. Frank's office. Was he really going through with this? Was he really going to sit there and talk about his feelings and let someone analyze him?

Then again, Victor felt as though he had to try. Otherwise, his children wouldn't speak to him. Otherwise, Esme wouldn't be with him.

He had tried so many other options, so many other paths to happiness. This seemed like the brightest option. This seemed like the only way.

But the minute Victor walked into Dr. Gallagher's office, Victor felt off. Or no. What was the word he was looking for, exactly? He felt territorial, as though he immediately needed to show Dr. Gallagher that he knew better than he did, that he was a more renowned psychiatrist and was several moves ahead already. He resented, too, that it seemed Dr. Gallagher could already smell that on Victor.

Victor's head throbbed with thoughts. Why can't I calm myself down?

Why am I so competitive?

He couldn't show Dr. Gallagher any of that.

They sat down and assessed one another. Dr. Gallagher was slightly older than he was in the photos off the internet, with graying black hair and a flat forehead that spoke of Botox and a tan from a recent vacation. In fact, that was why Dr. Frank hadn't been able to see Victor till now. He'd been in the Caribbean with his wife.

"Twentieth anniversary," Dr. Frank said.

“Congratulations,” Victor said, suddenly feeling like a fool for never having gotten that far with either of his wives. But he didn’t want Dr. Frank to see that he felt foolish.

Ugh, this was miserable.

“I’m sure you looked me up,” Dr. Frank said, sounding friendly and easy. “I’m sure you know I referenced you a few times in my research.”

Victor wondered why Frank wanted to come out and say that. Was it because he wanted to get in front of it, to make sure that Victor didn’t throw it in his face?

“I thought you used my research well,” Victor said. “I was happy to see it.”

Frank didn’t look happy or embarrassed. He didn’t look like anything at all.

He’s difficult to read, Victor thought.

“I understand you’ve been working with Hannah,” Dr. Frank said. “She’s a sensational couples therapist. How are you finding the work?”

“Honestly?”

Dr. Frank laughed. “Sure. As honest as you want.”

“I find it pretty miserable,” Victor said. “I hate having someone poke and prod at my romantic relationship—especially a romantic relationship I don’t fully understand myself yet.”

“Don’t you think it’s the therapist’s job to help you understand it?”

Victor shrugged. “I’d rather know my way around something before I bring it to somebody else. I’d rather really know where the faults are and the problems arise. It feels more practical that way.”

“Do you think your patients know their way around their mental illnesses or disorders before they come to you?”

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Victor stalled. “I don’t have a mental illness. I got divorced. Years ago.”

“But the reason for your divorce isn’t exactly standard,” Dr. Frank said.

Victor flared his nostrils. “You and I haven’t talked about that.”

Dr. Frank looked as though he were trying to play chess with Victor and anticipate Victor’s next move. Victor resented this and looked out the window. He missed the snow from the other day. He missed the coziness of his afternoon with Valerie, wherein they’d made enormous headway on the book.

He decided to talk about that, if only because he thought it made him look like a good father, a good person.

“I’m working on a book with my daughter. I think it’s going really great. She’s a better writer than I thought she’d be. I mean, she doesn’t have a ton of experience. She works in events.”

Dr. Frank was still difficult to read and didn’t look impressed with Victor. Victor started to resent him.

“You had reservations about writing the book?” he asked.

Victor wondered if his brother had somehow gotten this news back to Dr. Frank.

“No. I mean, sort of. I mean, usually, I work by myself.”

“And this is probably another reason you don’t want to go to couples therapy,” Dr. Frank said.

Victor wondered if there was a way to get out of this. He’d begun to sweat profusely. Maybe he could feign a heart attack. Maybe he could say he needed to pick up a package at the post office.

Or maybe he could sit the full hour and never come back.

That was the ticket. That was what he’d do.

It was perfect. Maybe he wouldn’t even have to tell Esme he quit. Or he’d tell her, but he’d tell her it was because Dr. Frank had told him he was perfect. He’d needed just the one session, and now he needed no more help.

Would she believe it?

Over the following fifty minutes, Dr. Frank got nothing out of Victor or of value for his “analysis.” They spoke about their times in medical school, mutual friends, and what they felt about living in Nantucket. Victor vaguely mentioned his opinions about returning to Nantucket after so many years away, and he immediately regretted this because it meant he was revealing pieces of his soul when he didn’t really want to.

And then, toward the end of the session, Victor made a mistake.

“How long do you think these couples therapy sessions should go? In your professional opinion.” There was a hint of sarcasm in his voice, and Victor regretted it immediately.

Dr. Frank shifted back in his chair, regarding Victor far differently than he had the

past sixty minutes. “I think you owe it to your partner to get to the bottom of it all,” he said. “I don’t think you should put a time limit on something like this.”

Victor scrambled to get out of there. “Of course.” He extended his hand to shake Dr. Frank’s, getting up and eyeing the door.

“Dr. Sutton, I truly believe we can get somewhere together. That we can make real progress,” Dr. Frank continued. “But I need more from you. Do you understand?”

Victor said he did. Then he ran out of there.

Before he knew it, he was over at his brother’s place, cracking a beer and watching the sun set over the water. It was suddenly fifty degrees, a bizarre opposite snap from last week’s freeze, and they sat outside, talking about their days. Victor felt comfort with his brother and a sense of calm that negated the chaos back at Dr. Frank’s office.

Victor didn’t want to tell his brother about the therapist.

But his brother wanted to talk about Esme, about Valerie, about the book.

“How are you holding up?” he asked.

Victor shrugged and said the best version of the truth he could find. “I think the girls are happy with me right now. I think I’m trying as best as I can to be who they need me to be.”

But I don’t know how much longer I can keep this up, he thought.

He felt like he was always on an emotional roller coaster. He felt like he was always about to make a mistake.

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Worst of all, he hated how often he thought of his ex-wife, Bree. Not in a romantic sense, no. But he worried about her. He worried about her health. He hated that Bree didn't want his help now that she was so ill. It was bizarre to be there for someone for so many years and then let them go.

It was hard to fathom that Esme's husband had only recently passed away and that this would be her first holiday season without him. Sometimes Victor wondered if Esme wished it was Larry she was talking to rather than Victor.

Were these the kinds of things he needed to bring up in therapy?

He didn't know.

When he returned home that evening, Esme was wide-eyed and excited about his meeting with Dr. Frank Gallagher.

"How did it go?" she asked, as though finally, someone had "gotten through" to Victor and understood him.

Victor slightly resented this. But he didn't want to let it show.

"He's a good guy," he said. "We had a good conversation."

Esme clapped her hands. "Amazing. When's the next session?"

When Victor hesitated, Esme caught on right away.

“Oh, Victor,” she said, clearly nervous. She folded up her napkin and sat on the kitchen chair. Their dinner of Thai curry bubbled on the stove. These days, Esme was so creative in the kitchen. Victor was learning to love that about her since she’d added it to her life after Victor had left it.

Were they too far apart emotionally? Was that something Frank Gallagher might have said if Victor would have let him in?

“Say you’ll go again,” Esme said quietly.

Victor wasn’t sure what to do. “I’ll consider it.”

Esme was quiet. She turned off the burner and filled their plates with curry and rice. But she couldn’t look at him throughout dinner and hardly spoke.

Victor felt like crap. But what could he do? He wasn’t sure if he could respect any therapist, even Frank Gallagher. (And he’d thought if there was any therapist he could trust, it would be Frank.) Did Esme want him to fake it? Did she want him to waste his time?

The next time they saw Dr. Hannah, it came up. Of course it did.

It was as though Esme had been biding her time, waiting for this moment.

“I’m worried that Victor isn’t taking any of this seriously. I’m worried he thinks he’s too good for it because he comes from this world of psychiatry and mental health,” Esme said, sounding both nervous but tired of him.

Victor sighed and looked at his shoes.

“Did you have a session with Dr. Gallagher?” Hannah asked, her voice neutral.

“I did.”

“And how did that go?”

“He doesn’t want to go again!” Esme cried.

Victor fought to keep from rolling his eyes. “It’s not that I don’t think he’s a fine man. I just don’t think it’s doing either of us any favors to sit in a room and talk. I want to work on my relationship with Esme. I want to be with Esme. All this feels like a waste of time.”

Dr. Hannah tilted her head. She looked mystified. “But it’s been your career, hasn’t it?”

Victor wasn’t sure how to respond to that.

“Are you still meeting with patients?” Dr. Hannah asked.

Victor could hardly look at her. “I have a few here and there.”

Dr. Hannah leaned back. Thoughts played out across her face, but it seemed she decided not to reveal them. They had only a few more minutes of the session left, and Hannah likely didn’t want to dig too deep into anything like that so soon before Thanksgiving.

“Tell me,” she said. “What are you doing for the holiday?”

Esme couldn't help but show a gorgeous smile. “We're having everyone over to the house. Valerie and Bethany and Rebecca and all the grandkids, plus their new partners, of course.” Esme's face was glowing. “I'm going to make the turkey, but the girls have volunteered to make just about everything else. It's night and day to previous years. Larry and I usually did something small or went over to a friend's place.”

Dr. Hannah smiled. “How wonderful to have your family back together. But it must feel complicated without Larry. He's been a part of your family, too.”

Esme bowed her head in a way that showed just how complicated that emotion was for her.

Victor felt a stab of sorrow.

“I hope on Thanksgiving you can find a way to honor the people who are no longer with you,” Dr. Hannah said. “I think it would be a good exercise for the two of you. Take a moment to yourselves, away from the girls and the grandkids, and honor Larry, Joel, and even your ex-wife, Victor. Remind yourselves of the love you've given and the love you've had. And remind yourselves of the love you've decided to give one another. It's a time of Thanksgiving, and conversations like these are important.”

Esme said they would. Victor was already dreading it.

Chapter Nine

But Victor found himself in a very similar situation the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, save for one thing—he was sitting in the correct chair this time.

Victor had agreed to take on a new patient.

At first, when the topic of adding another patient to his roster had come up, Victor thought, I need to stay away from this kid. But the more he'd thought about the boy's experiences, the more he'd considered the boy's mental state and realized he needed to help the boy. He wasn't sure he trusted anyone else to do it.

The fact that I don't trust anyone else is probably something Frank would want to cover in therapy, Victor thought before shaking it out. He didn't have time for that.

Kade was eleven years old and incredibly skinny, probably because of everything that had happened to him. Nutrition and stress didn't often go together. He was dressed in many layers and had his eyes on the window as though he were waiting for someone to come get him and take him out of this miserable environment. But as far as Victor knew, every environment for Kade was currently miserable.

Victor wore a dark orange sweater and a pair of slacks. He sat across from Kade with his hands on his lap, and his shoulders relaxed. He wanted Kade to feel he could trust him. He wanted to be open and honest and sincere in ways he didn't think Frank Gallagher had been.

Stop thinking about Frank! Stop thinking about yourself!

He couldn't think about anyone's life but Kade's.

“How are you doing today, Kade?” Victor asked.

Kade still didn't look at him. "Fine."

Victor had never heard a bigger lie in his life. "How are you finding life on the island?"

Kade raised his shoulders. Again, he said, "Fine."

Victor had been up against difficult patients before. He'd helped a young woman whose father had killed her mother. He'd helped a girl who'd lost a hand in a horrible accident. He'd been there—emotionally and mentally—for so many.

He had to find a way to get through to Kade.

Kade's situation was difficult; there was no getting around that. Ever since he was a toddler, Kade had lived on the open seas with his parents, going from place to place on a forty-foot sailboat and living everywhere from the Caribbean to the South of France to New Zealand. The kid probably struggled to walk around on land just as much as some people struggled to walk on a sea vessel. But six months ago, tragedy struck. During a horrible storm, both of Kade's parents had been thrown off the ship, and Kade had had to hunker down and keep himself alive until the storm passed and he could sail himself—all alone—to safety. He'd been on the news, of course, and the newspapers even had a number of nicknames for him. Everyone was impressed with him. But nobody could fathom his emotional state.

Having grown up an only child on a boat that took him all over the world, Kade had lost the two people who'd made up his entire world.

"How is living with your uncle going?" Victor asked, trying a new tactic.

Kade still couldn't look at him. "He's my great-uncle, actually."

“Right. Your great-uncle Jack,” Victor said, remembering Jack Landan, a guy he used to see down at the sailing club every now and again. “He’s a fantastic guy.”

Kade shrugged again. “He’s nice.”

Victor crossed his ankles. He knew he needed to at least befriend Kade before the session was through. That way, they could dig deeper next week and really start talking.

“What are your plans for Thanksgiving?” The minute he said it, Victor cringed. Hadn’t Dr. Hannah used that exact tactic on him and Esme the other day?

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Was he copying his couples therapist? Ugh. He'd thought he was better than that.

"We're going to get takeout and watch football," Kade said.

"That sounds cozy," Victor said. He guessed Great-uncle Jack couldn't cook that well.

"It's okay. I don't really like football, but Uncle Jack does."

"What don't you like about it?" Victor asked.

"The games are so long," Kade said. "I'm not used to watching television. We didn't have one on the boat."

This was a different sort of kid, a kid who'd grown up expecting far different things from the world. He'd probably seen all kinds of whales and dolphins and seabirds. It probably could never compare to what you could find on television.

Victor tried a few more tactics. He asked Kade about school and whether he'd made any friends.

"I guess this guy Chris is okay," Kade said.

"What do you guys do together?"

Kade explained that sometimes they played video games at each other's houses and usually paired up at school when they needed to have a partner. But it didn't sound

like the most profound of friendships. It didn't sound like there was a lot of emotional love in Kade's life.

But toward the end of the hour, Kade said something that nearly bowled Victor over.

He said, "I just wish things could be different, I guess."

It struck him—not because of its honesty—but because he remembered someone else saying it a long time ago.

It was Joel, his son.

He'd said it after a baseball game when Joel had struck out for the first time. It was around when Joel's athleticism had been failing him, but before Victor and Esme had caught on that anything was physically wrong with him. Before the c-word was tossed around. He'd always been fantastic at baseball, but they'd thought that maybe he was growing, that he wasn't paying as close attention, and his hormones were out of whack. They hadn't thought cancer was to blame.

I just wish things could be different, I guess.

And what had Victor said in response to Joel? He'd said, "You'll get 'em next time. You won't make the same mistake. I know it."

But there hadn't really been a next time for Joel. He'd died nearly thirty years ago. He hadn't played many baseball games after that. He'd hardly gotten out of bed.

Victor's palms were sweaty, and he wiped them on his lap and tried to rebound. But Kade, being a kid with great perception, had noticed something wrong with Victor.

"Do you need a glass of water?" Kade asked. He got to his feet.

Victor swallowed twice and told himself to concentrate. He'd never felt this way with a patient before.

"I'm just fine, Kade," Victor said, his heart still thudding.

He hated how Kade was looking at him now. Like he was an old man. Like he, Victor, was someone Kade needed to protect.

Was this what getting older would be like? For the rest of Victor's life?

Was this how his children would soon look at him?

Somehow, Victor found his way through the rest of the session. He didn't get anything else of worth out of Kade. But a part of him hoped that Kade was more comfortable with him. A part of him hoped that next time, things would go better.

When Victor returned home that evening, his house was full of pre-Thanksgiving revelers. Valerie, Bethany, and Rebecca were all in the kitchen, toasting with alcoholic and nonalcoholic glasses of wine, and they had a massive platter of cheese, crackers, and other little snacks between them. They greeted him happily, and Victor nearly burst into tears.

It felt like he was just with Joel, Victor realized, hugging them all and grabbing a beer from the fridge. It felt like he just saw his son.

Victor excused himself to his study upstairs, assuring Esme and his daughters that he would "only be a minute." When his door was shut, he squeezed his eyes shut and focused on his breathing.

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But a second later, his phone dinged with a message from Dr. Frank Gallagher.

Victor couldn't believe it.

Did Frank sense that something was off with Victor? Did he sense that he was emotionally fraught?

He doesn't know anything, Victor reasoned. He just wants access to my head. He wants my money, too. I know how these things go.

Victor forced himself to listen to Frank's message, biting his tongue the entire time.

"Hey, Victor! Happy Thanksgiving. I wanted to reach out to you and say that I know how complicated it can be to ask for help, especially when you have been giving that help to so many patients throughout your career. I myself find it difficult, and I'm sure I can only fathom half of what you're experiencing. Let me know if you want to talk—as friends or as colleagues or as anything at all—and figure out how we might approach this. I know it's important to you. Talk to you soon."

Victor's heart thudded.

He hated to admit it—but he might actually need help.

But just because things weren't easy, mentally or emotionally, didn't mean Victor couldn't throw himself completely into Thanksgiving. It was the most perfect of all distractions. It was the first he'd be spending with his family, and it allowed hours of gorgeous conversation, eating sensational foods, and playing board games with his

grandkids. Often, he caught himself thinking that his eldest grandchild—Rebecca’s daughter, Shelby—was something of a genius, and he even heard himself mention to her, “You know, you would be a brilliant doctor, if you wanted to get into that field.”

What was he saying? Did he really think anyone should get into this field? Did he really think anyone—including himself—was qualified?

A few hours after their first meal, Esme announced it was time for pie. Victor went into the kitchen to help slice and even smeared bits of his apple and pumpkin pies with whipped cream. Valerie was smiling at him from across the kitchen, eating her pumpkin pie, looking incredibly beautiful and young.

Suddenly, only Victor and Valerie were in the kitchen. Victor felt immediately calmer with his youngest. He almost caught himself telling her about Kade, about how he’d had a flashback to Joel’s baseball game, and it had felt like being run over.

“We haven’t told everyone the best news yet,” Valerie said suddenly.

Victor realized he couldn’t tell her. He couldn’t tell anyone. Not today.

“What is it, sweetheart?” Victor asked.

Valerie put her half-eaten pie to the side and clasped her hands together. “We’re buying a house!”

After that, Valerie threw her arms around her father and burst into tears.

Victor knew what these big decisions felt like. He understood they were enormous rocks on your chest, filled with questions. Is this the right thing? Is this really my future?

“That’s fantastic, honey,” he said.

Valerie went on to explain where it was, just a few minutes’ walk from Bethany’s and Rebecca’s, and that they could already move in the week before Christmas.

“I’m worried,” Valerie confessed. “I’m worried what all the stress will do to me. Maybe it’s too much?”

She meant too much for the baby.

Victor touched her shoulder. “We’re going to help you every step of the way, honey. We’ll make sure you and the baby and even Alex are cool, calm, and collected. Heck, we’ll even set up the Christmas tree in your new house the minute you move in.”

Valerie’s eyes glinted with happy tears.

Soon after, Esme, Bethany, and Rebecca returned to the kitchen to get more plates of pie for partners and children, and Valerie announced the house news to them, too. The kitchen was in an uproar. More alcohol-free wine was poured, and more celebrating ensued. Bethany and Rebecca were excited about the house’s location, talking about how they’d come over for coffee whenever they wanted.

“We can even borrow cups of sugar from each other!” Rebecca cried.

“I think it’ll be me borrowing cups of sugar from you.” Valerie laughed. “You’re both the responsible older sisters.”

Rebecca and Bethany laughed in agreement.

“All right. But we can be there every step of the way with the baby!” Bethany assured her. “We can babysit!”

Victor's eyes filled with tears. No matter how beautiful this moment was or how gorgeous it was to imagine his daughters' lives together after this, he still struggled from last night's meeting with Kade. He just wished things could be different.

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I just wish Joel could be here. I wish Bree wasn't sick. I wish. I wish so many things.

Esme suggested they watch a film together in the living room that night. All the Suttons piled in, agreeing to Esme's suggestion of *Remember the Titans*, which had come out so long ago that it was possible that the Suttons had all watched that together as a family back in the old days. Victor settled on the sofa next to Esme with a bowl of popcorn on their lap and his arm around her shoulders. Throughout the first few scenes, he couldn't fully focus on the movie. Instead, he observed his grandchildren watching it, viewed the light play out across their faces, and felt their anticipation as the story unfolded.

Realizing this was the happiest and most comfortable he'd felt all day, Victor tried to freeze the moment, to hold it longer than time allowed. But soon, the scene ended. Esme got up to make more popcorn for the kids, and Victor's arm chilled across the top of the sofa.

Time was going to have its way with them, no matter what.

Chapter Ten

December 2024

Six Months Before The Accident

It was December 18th, just a week from Christmas Day, and Valerie was on the phone with Catherine, discussing the upcoming baby shower and assuring her that everything was all set. All the way in Manhattan, Catherine's voice sounded small

and tinny, and Valerie found herself overcompensating, sounding like someone between a cheerleader and a pregnancy podcaster. “All you have to do, Mama, is sit back and relax and let the days unfold till then,” Valerie told her, pacing in an empty room of the new house. It was a room she’d more or less decided to make her office. This was her first “business” call in said office.

When there was a moment of long silence, Valerie asked, “How are you feeling, by the way?”

Catherine’s voice sounded stiff. “What do you mean?”

Valerie felt as though she’d asked the wrong question. How did she not understand what I mean? She stuttered, “I mean, with the baby?”

Catherine sounded surprised. “Oh. The baby’s fine. I’m fine. I’m fatter than I’ve ever been, but it’s a gift, right?” Her voice was laced with sarcasm.

Valerie felt as though she’d been smacked. Never had she and Catherine spoken to one another like this—as though their pregnancies weren’t the greatest gifts. Valerie considered reminding Catherine of how beautiful this time was; she considered telling her that soon, when the baby came, nothing would be calm again. But she couldn’t guess Catherine’s mood, and she wanted to get off the phone as soon as she could.

Catherine did not ask Valerie how her pregnancy was going.

After that strange call, Valerie padded downstairs to find Alex in the living room, measuring the wall. All day, it had been like this. Alex measured areas of their new and empty house, wondering where to put the few possessions they brought from the cabin. There was a light behind his eyes, an excitement that made Valerie forget about Catherine immediately and fall into his arms.

They decided to go to their favorite Mexican restaurant for lunch. Over enchiladas and tortilla chips, they talked about how best to decorate their massive new house, about paint colors and what kind of furniture they would eventually purchase when Alex's film sold to a major production company and Valerie brought in another few wedding jobs.

They were always talking about the future as though everything would go perfectly.

"And don't forget book sales," Alex reminded her.

"Right!" Valerie laughed. Sometimes she considered the book more of a therapy experiment rather than a viable way of making money.

But even she had to admit, the book writing was going better than she'd ever dreamed of.

Back at the cabin, Valerie and Alex continued to pack up their belongings. Now that the new house was empty and clean, they'd decided to move their basics over today and have their bigger things, like furniture and appliances, moved via a truck later that week. Alex refused to let Valerie carry anything heavier than four or five pounds, which left Valerie standing around, feeling silly, watching Alex carry suitcases and boxes out to their cars.

The cars were stuffed to the gills, and the cabin looked vacuous, expectant. Alex had already had an offer from a buyer, a guy going through a divorce who nevertheless wanted to live close to his children and help them grow up. It broke Valerie's heart to know that he'd be going through such a dark time in a home that, for her, had brought such happiness and the best reunion of her life. But she supposed that homes were there for different seasons of life; they offered soft comfort in the darkest of times. She was glad Alex could give him that.

When Alex and Valerie returned to the house that night, Valerie wasn't surprised to find Rebecca and Bethany waiting on the back porch. Bundled up in coats and carrying tote bags of nonalcoholic wine and plenty of apple cider, they poured into the house excitedly, throwing their arms around Valerie and Alex, and saying they wanted to throw them an impromptu "housewarming." Apparently, Rebecca's daughter Shelby was back from college for winter break, and she was watching the younger children for "a startling rate."

"I never dared to ask for that much for babysitting when I was younger," Rebecca said with a laugh. "But she lives in New York! I guess she needs the cash."

"She's a businesswoman," Valerie said, smiling.

It was in the upper twenties, and snow swirled over the Nantucket Sound. The sky was a dark bruise and headed toward the murky gray of a cloudy night. They poured hot apple cider and sat in the sunroom, watching the snow and the water and talking. The three sisters—Rebecca, Bethany, and Valerie—could hear Alex upstairs, unzipping suitcases and putting clothes away. Valerie took a breath and thought, This is my life. It's really happening.

"Has Mom mentioned anything about couples therapy with Dad?" Rebecca asked a little while later.

"Nothing! It's driving me insane," Bethany said. "I've asked her myself, and her eyes get all weird. She's like, that's private. I get that. But I'm so worried about her. I'm worried she's having second thoughts about taking Dad back."

"They seem happy, mostly?" Rebecca said, then directed her eyes to Valerie. "What does he say to you? Since you're writing that book, you spend the most time with him."

Valerie thought back to her countless hours with her father, during which they'd spoken intently about how best to tell the story of their family's life.

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There had been difficult moments, especially at the beginning. But now that they were headed for that Manhattan interview, Valerie had the sense that everything was clicking into place.

“He mentioned something strange the other day,” Valerie confessed. She wasn’t sure if she was betraying her father by saying this.

Rebecca and Bethany hunkered over the table in the sunroom, putting their elbows up.

“He mentioned that he’s never been able to trust another therapist,” she said. “He mentioned that he’s never been able to be fully honest with them because he doesn’t know if they’re going to manipulate him or push him in a direction he doesn’t want to go. He said it within the context of talking about Esme going to therapy after Joel’s death.”

Rebecca’s eyes echoed her alarm. “Oh.”

“Yeah.” Valerie sipped her apple cider. “When he said it, I tried to show as much empathy as I could, you know, and I talked him through it. But I don’t think it bodes well for their couple’s therapy.”

“And he was supposed to be going to therapy on his own, too,” Bethany remembered.

“Yeah. I don’t think that’s going well, either,” Valerie said.

The three Sutton girls were quiet. Snow was beginning to stack up on the

windowpane.

“Let’s keep our eye on him,” Bethany said. “It’s all we can do.”

Chapter Eleven

On the eve of Christmas Eve—December 23rd—Victor found himself back in his office to meet Kade. Since last week, there had been nonstop snowfall, blanketing the island and making everything bright with winter cheer. Kade’s Great-uncle Jack brought Kade into the waiting room with snow fluttering through his white hair and a resounding laugh as he said, “We nearly slid off the road!” He clapped Kade on the shoulder and asked Victor if they could have a moment to talk alone. Victor asked Kade to wait in his office for a little while, and even gave him a little chocolate bar from the drawer of his desk. When the door was shut between the office and the waiting room, Jack and Victor went to the opposite corner to speak in soft tones.

“He hasn’t been able to sleep,” Jack said, his eyes furtive. “I wonder if you could prescribe him something? I think the nightmares are getting worse, and I think he’s doing everything he can to keep himself up. He’s too scared to sleep. But that’s just my theory.”

Victor nodded. Impossibly, the boy was even more gray-faced and thinner than he’d been the last time he’d seen him. “How did the end of school go?”

“He got passing grades,” Jack said. “But his teachers say he barely responds in class. I think he had a falling-out with that friend of his, too. I don’t know what to do, Victor. I’m at my wits’ end.”

Victor’s heart broke for the man and the boy. Kade’s Great-uncle Jack was too old to father a little boy, and Kade was too old to fold easily into a new schedule, a new life. He was born for the open seas. He was born for a life of adventure.

He was only eleven years old. It meant he had seven years left before he could get back out there—if he was ever strong enough to build his own life.

Jack left to grab a cup of coffee down the road. Victor entered the office to find that Kade hadn't touched his chocolate bar.

Victor kept his tone light. "Do you not like chocolate?"

Kade shrugged. "It's fine."

"That's wild. I have yet to meet anyone who doesn't like chocolate," Victor said, sitting across from Kade and taking another chocolate bar from the drawer. Suddenly, his mission was to make Kade take a bite and enjoy something for a change. He opened the top of his. "I still remember the first chocolate bar I bought with my own money when I was a boy. I was a lot younger than you, maybe six or seven, when I did a ton of yard work for my mother. She gave me fifty cents, and I went to the dime store to buy as much chocolate as I could. But when I got there, I had to choose between the good chocolate for fifty cents, and the not-so-good chocolate, which was a lot cheaper, meaning I could buy a lot more of it if I wanted to. I remember agonizing over that decision."

Victor laughed to himself, hoping to get a smile out of Kade. But it didn't come.

"Do you know what I went with?" Victor asked.

Kade thought for a moment. "I bet you got the good chocolate. The more expensive chocolate."

Victor snapped his fingers. "That's what I would do now. But back then, all I thought about was extending the life of my fifty cents. I wanted as much chocolate as I could for as long as I could make it last. I bought ten little crappy chocolate bars, and I ate

them all at once and got a stomachache.” Victor laughed at the memory.

At this, incredibly, Kade chuckled, too. Victor took a bite of the chocolate bar in his hand and felt it melt across his tongue. Kade’s laughter was somber, almost like sad music.

“I did something like that once,” Kade said, his voice soft.

Victor’s heart rang. He tried not to show how surprised he was. “Did you?”

“It was in Japan,” Kade said. “We were tied up for a few weeks because I was learning Japanese, and my parents wanted me to immerse myself in life there. I started doing a bit of work for a fisherman who lived on a boat a few docks from ours, and he gave me a few coins. I bought as much candy as I could and...” A smile fluttered over Kade’s lips and faded. “Yeah. I couldn’t sleep on the boat that night. I was too sick. My mom had to take me to a little hotel down the road. I thought she was mad, and that made me even sicker. But the following morning, she said she was so well-rested. I think she was getting tired of sleeping on a boat all the time.”

Kade dropped his chin at the memory, but he didn’t break down.

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In fact, if Victor wasn't mistaken, Kade had rather liked recounting that memory. He'd liked living in that long-ago time, if only for a little while.

Suddenly, Kade picked up the chocolate bar, ripped open the top, and took a bite. His face lit up. Victor felt like he was watching something magical unfold.

"How is it?" Victor asked.

Kade looked at him, and at this moment, Victor felt as though Joel was looking at him instead.

I need to get Joel out of my head, Victor thought.

But Kade said, "It's not bad," and took another bite. He finished the candy bar in two minutes and had a little melted chocolate on his chin. It was probably more food than the kid had eaten all day. Victor leafed through the desk drawer to find another and tossed it over to him.

"My parents never let me have this much candy," Kade said, sounding suspicious but eager.

"It's Christmas," Victor said. "We all break our diet rules around Christmas. It's the only way to really celebrate."

Kade opened his second bar and took a bite.

This was their fourth session together, and it was the closest Victor had gotten to

breaking through to Kade. But he knew better than to leap too quickly. He knew better than to say something like tell me more about your parents, or can you tell me how your other Christmases out at sea were? He knew that to build Kade's trust, he had to wait for him to guide the conversation. He had to wait for Kade to draw closer.

On Christmas Eve, Esme dragged them all to church.

Victor was dressed in a big fuzzy sweater and a pair of slacks, sitting in the fourth row of a church he hadn't entered in thirty-plus years. Esme was beside him, wearing a perfume that made him woozy with love, and in the row behind them was their entire family—Rebecca, Bethany, Valerie, and their children and partners. When Victor glanced back, he saw that Valerie had a hand on her pregnant stomach, and her face was aglow in the candlelight.

Victor caught her eye and winked, and Valerie smiled back.

"Weird to be here," she whispered.

"You're telling me," Victor said.

Esme shushed them but smiled, letting them know it was all right.

The pastor got up to welcome them with an opening prayer. Victor kept his eyes open, studying the Christmas trees and the angel statues and the glinting lights. He studied the faces of his family as they prayed. Right before the prayer was over, he closed his eyes and said his own prayer to the Lord, thanking him for all he'd brought back into his life and promising that he'd be better, that he'd try harder. But the moment he thought that, he remembered that he wasn't giving his all in couples therapy. He was hiding from his own emotions and hadn't been back to see Dr. Frank Gallagher.

It's Christmas, he reminded himself. Live in the good.

It was about time he took his own advice.

After church, they gathered at the house for drinks and Christmas cookies. Victor poured himself a glass of whiskey and settled in with his grandchildren, who wanted to play cards. Shelby had learned a card game called euchre at university, and she was trying to teach it to them but kept forgetting the rules.

"I swear, it's like this," Shelby said, furrowing her brow as she regathered the cards and explained another rule she'd forgotten previously.

Victor laughed heartily and elbowed his grandson Chad, who threw his head back and yelled at his sister. "You're torturing us! Why can't we just play a game we already know?"

"Where's the fun in that?" Shelby asked.

When they finally abandoned the game, Victor went into the living room to find Valerie, Rebecca, Bethany, and Esme in cahoots. It was almost like they were plotting something, speaking so closely and whispering.

"What's gotten into you four? Should I be worried?" Victor asked.

They drew back with alarm and blinked at him before bursting into laughter.

"We were just talking about your trip to Manhattan," Rebecca said finally. "We all want to come with!"

Victor's heart opened. "Really?"

“Why not?” Bethany chimed in. “I don’t have another surgery lined up till the first week of January, and the city is gorgeous this time of year.”

“All those decorations!” Esme cried. “Plus, there are so many sales, Victor. We can’t afford not to go shopping in Manhattan this time of year!”

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Victor bubbled with their laughter. “I can adjust the hotel reservations. I’ll call and see if they have a few more rooms.”

“We’ll have to bring all the kids, obviously,” Bethany said. “But there are a few museums I’m dying to take them to.”

Again, they fell back into conversation, planning the upcoming weekend’s wild Sutton family trip to the big city. Victor watched them for a moment, delighting in the Christmas lights that reflected in their hair and eyes. For a split second, he could imagine that his girls were younger, teenagers or even before that. But that forced him to consider Joel, how maybe he was just down the hall, playing with his cars out of sight. His heart darkened, and he escaped into his study upstairs to pour another glass of whiskey. It was only when Esme crept upstairs and knocked on the door that Victor forced himself to smile.

“You okay, honey?” Esme asked, kissing his forehead, then his cheek.

“I’m fine. I really am,” he said tenderly. He brought his arms around Esme and held her.

From downstairs came the sound of a Christmas movie. Victor couldn’t figure out which one.

“Join us?” Esme asked, leaning back so that she could see his entire face.

Victor said he would.

But before Esme turned around, she cupped his face with her hands. “Thank you for all the effort you’ve been putting into us. Thank you for going to couples therapy. Thank you for... trying to see me.” She swallowed. “Do you think it’s getting better?”

Victor bit his tongue to keep from saying, Sometimes I think I’m getting worse.

There was so much left to uncover.

But instead, he said, “I think we’re getting better. I think we’re going to be okay.”

He hoped and prayed this was true.

Esme said, “I love you, Victor. I can’t believe we get to spend Christmas together as a family.”

“I can’t believe I’m so lucky,” Victor said. He meant it.

He had the sudden sense it would all be ripped out from under him. It terrified him.

Chapter Twelve

Two days after Christmas, Valerie and Alex left the island at six in the morning and started their five-hour trek to New York City. The trunk and back seat were filled with baby shower decorations, little games and adorable frills, and prepackaged chocolates and other sweets. However, there were still loads of things to pick up or have delivered, including the three cakes from the Manhattan bakery, the china and glassware Catherine had wanted to serve the desserts, and alcoholic and nonalcoholic cocktails and champagne. It was Valerie’s most prestigious baby shower to date—and she’d priced her rate nearly as high as a wedding. Everything had to go perfectly or else.

The worst of it was Catherine's mood. Ever since last week on the phone, it had felt as though Catherine had gotten angrier and more volatile. Twice, she'd both insulted and vaguely threatened Valerie, suggesting that everything had to go perfectly or else she'd destroy Valerie's reputation among her elite Manhattan and Nantucket friends.

Valerie hadn't really talked to Alex about that. It terrified her too much to say aloud.

Besides, she knew what Alex would say. How dare she speak to you like that? We don't need her. You should quit.

But Valerie couldn't quit. They'd just bought a house, for crying out loud. They were about to have a baby.

On the drive to Manhattan, Alex and Valerie discussed baby names again.

"Are you saying we shouldn't go for Francis Ford Coppola?" he asked, feigning surprise, adjusting his hands over the steering wheel.

Valerie giggled. "I'm saying that it's quite a big name for a little baby."

"But what if our little baby becomes the kind of film director to change the art form as we know it?"

"If our baby is that brilliant..."

"He or she will be that brilliant!" Alex cried.

"Okay. When our baby is that brilliant, he or she won't need Francis Ford Coppola's name," Valerie pointed out. "He or she will be completely unique. He or she will be his or her self. You know what I mean?"

Alex pretended to ponder this fact as though it were an enormous idea he couldn't fully fathom. "I think I know what you mean."

Valerie swatted him and laughed.

“So you think we should name the baby Alfred Hitchcock?” Alex teased.

Valerie groaned.

Halfway to Manhattan, they stopped for a big brunch. Valerie was almost always starving, which meant that her appetite finally matched Alex’s. Alex was pleased with this factor. At the little brunch spot off the highway, they ordered two three-egg omelets and a stack of blueberry pancakes to share. Valerie had never eaten so much, and she laughed at herself as she poured the syrup.

“I’ll miss living like this after the baby comes,” she said.

“Breastfeeding!” Alex reminded her. “You’ll have to eat like this for a while, I think.”

Valerie smiled, imagining herself with her baby in her arms, breastfeeding, her hair curly and wild, her face without makeup, the house more or less a mess. It was a version of happiness she’d never known.

Live in the here and now, she reminded herself. Appreciate every step.

When they first saw the city skyline, Valerie’s heartbeat quickened, and she reached for Alex’s hand. “I’m nervous,” she confessed. “I don’t know why.”

“You’re going to do great,” Alex said.

Valerie squeezed his hand. “So are you.”

Valerie wasn’t the only person going to Manhattan for work. Alex had a number of meetings lined up with potential investors, and he planned to spend all afternoon today and tomorrow pitching, schmoozing, and pitching some more.

“Imagine if I actually get funding?” Alex said breathlessly as they entered the city. “Imagine how that would change my career?”

“It would be incredible,” Valerie said.

Their first stop was Catherine’s Greenwich Village brownstone—a place that Valerie knew had cost Catherine and her husband upward of four million dollars. It was an unfathomable amount of money, even to Alex and Valerie, who’d lived in one of the wealthiest cities in the world. When they reached the brownstone, Alex grabbed a parking spot out front, and the two of them spent a good three minutes gazing up at the beautiful building and marveling at what kind of life Catherine and Max lived.

“Imagine having both this and the place in Nantucket,” Valerie whispered.

“I can’t,” Alex said with a laugh. “If I was like them, I’d be able to fund my own movie.”

Valerie got out and went to the door to ring the bell. Alex waited behind her, ready to haul up the baby shower decor at a moment’s notice. But Catherine didn’t come to the door.

“I told her we’d be here at this time,” Valerie muttered, checking her messages again to make sure Catherine had confirmed. She’d texted: see you then! But she wasn’t coming to the door.

“Weird,” Alex said. “Should we go check into the hotel and come back?”

“I don’t want to have to drive all over the city,” Valerie said. Annoyance—and fear—welled in her stomach.

The Catherine she’d met a few months ago never would have done something like this to her. The Catherine she’d met a few months ago was organized and personable and eager to work with Valerie. It didn’t make sense.

But after the fourth ring of the bell, it was clear that Catherine wasn’t coming.

Valerie was stricken with anguish. What if they’d driven all this way only for Catherine to cancel the baby shower? What if Catherine was ghosting her? Catherine hadn’t paid Valerie the full amount yet, and Valerie had been banking on that money.

She and the baby and Alex needed it.

And what if Valerie had already done something “wrong” in Catherine’s eyes, something that would ruin Valerie’s reputation with Catherine’s friends?

Valerie’s palms were itchy. She balked.

But just as Alex was going to suggest they go to the hotel to calm down a little bit before they figured out the rest, someone called from the corner, “Oh, Valerie! You’re early.” Valerie turned to see a very pregnant Catherine waddling toward them, dressed in a big winter coat and a knitted hat and a pair of gloves. There was a light dusting of snow on her shoulders, and she smiled beautifully, her lips aglow with red.

Immediately, Valerie calmed down. But internally, she thought, I’m not early. How did she already forget what time we agreed on?

Catherine and Alex had met briefly before but shook hands again.

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“Welcome to Greenwich Village!” Catherine said.

Valerie’s smile was so big that it hurt her face. The emotional contrast was insane. Suddenly, they were following Catherine into the brownstone, laden with bags and boxes of decorations. They talked about everything from Christmas to the snow to the upcoming year. Catherine seemed as jovial as ever. It was as though her bad moods of the past week hadn’t ever happened.

Valerie thought, She must have been nervous about the shower. But now it’s here.

Everything would be all right.

As they’d discussed on the phone, Catherine wanted the baby shower in her beautiful living room, a space off to the right of the foyer with a bay window and bookshelves lining the walls. Valerie took a moment to look at the book collection and was surprised to see Dostoyevsky and Kafka and Proust. Was Catherine a big reader? Or did the books belong to Max?

After all the boxes and suitcases were brought inside, it was time for Alex to go.

Valerie walked him to the front door and kissed him deeply. “Good luck, baby,” she murmured.

“Good luck to you,” he whispered in her ear. “Call me if you need anything at all.”

After Alex disappeared behind the door, Valerie turned to find Catherine hunched over on the sofa, deeply breathing, both hands on her belly. Valerie was immediately

stricken.

“Are you all right?” she cried, hurrying over to sit beside her.

Catherine’s brow was furrowed. It was difficult to gauge what she was thinking about.

Finally, she gasped, “Where is he going?”

It took Valerie a second to realize Catherine meant Alex.

“He’s off for a few meetings,” Valerie explained. “He needs funding for his film.”

Catherine’s eyes widened for a split second. “Just wait till he gets that funding. Just wait and see what will happen to you both.”

Valerie gaped at her with surprise. “I’m sorry?”

But Catherine winced with pain and hunched her shoulders. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry,” she cried. “I’m just always so sick. I don’t know what I’m saying.”

Valerie hurried to the kitchen to make a mug of tea and pour a glass of water. Momentarily alone, she realized that Catherine was weeping in the next room.

Something was happening. But Valerie had no idea how to get to the bottom of it. And when she returned to the living room, she found Catherine’s mood had shifted all over again. She smiled brightly and talked about the baby shower tomorrow as though it would be the happiest day of her life. “I can’t wait for you to meet the girls,” she said of her best friends and cousins and sisters and former colleagues. “They’ll just love you. And you know, they’re always throwing parties of their own. I’m sure they’ll be dying to work with you.”

But a twinkle in her eye reminded Valerie of all the power Catherine had over her.

Valerie took a breath. “I just want to thank you for this opportunity.”

She hated groveling like this. But Catherine gave her no choice.

At seven thirty, Valerie finished setup for the baby shower and went upstairs to say goodbye to Catherine, who’d told her to knock on her bedroom door when she wanted to go. But when she finally did knock, Catherine called, “Just let yourself out!”

Valerie was surprised. She shifted her weight. “Okay?” She swallowed and then added, “I’m going to pick up the cake at ten o’clock tomorrow morning, and I’m having the china and glassware delivered at eleven. I’ll be here by then.” She wet her lips. “When does Max get home from work?”

Catherine was quiet for a long time. All Valerie could hear was the thudding of her own heart.

Finally, Catherine called, “He’s on his way back now.”

Valerie breathed a sigh of relief. “That’s wonderful. Okay. I’ll see you tomorrow around ten thirty. Can’t wait for the big day!”

Catherine didn’t respond.

What could Valerie do but let herself out? Alex was already waiting for her, hovering on the front stoop, all dressed in a thick wool coat and a big black hat. When she walked outside, she found him grinning madly in a way that told her he’d gotten at least some of the funding he was after. She threw her arms around him and said in his ear, “We have to celebrate!”

And celebrate they did.

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Within the hour, they found themselves in a fun little bar in Greenwich, where they got nonalcoholic cocktails and played songs on the jukebox. There, Alex told her everything that had happened to him during his pitching meetings, parroting what they'd said to him.

Valerie knew they'd seen Alex the way she saw him. They saw him for the brilliant artist he was. Finally, he was getting what he deserved.

"And how did it go with Catherine?" Alex asked.

Valerie took a breath. "I wish I could say it was simple. But there's something off about her. I don't know what's happening. And to be honest, it terrifies me. Maybe it's pregnancy hormones? Perhaps I'll act like that in a few months?"

Alex touched her shoulder. "You can act as weird as you want to. I'll be there through all the ups and downs."

Valerie kissed Alex on the lips. Their final jukebox pick played—"Somebody to Love" by Queen—and they burst into laughter, then kissed some more.

After that, they floated through Greenwich Village like the happiest people in the city and eventually ended up at a high-end Chinese restaurant where Alex had gotten reservations. For the next two hours, they ate to their hearts' content, celebrating Alex's wins and Valerie's tomorrow. When they finished, they got a call from Rebecca, and she said, "Get back to the hotel! We all made it in one piece!"

"All the Suttons in Manhattan," Valerie said, whistling as they left the restaurant.

“What kind of madness will we get up to?”

Alex laughed and kissed her forehead. “I’ll keep them at bay till after the shower.”

When they returned to the hotel, they found all of them in the hotel bar, celebrating and drinking alcoholic and nonalcoholic beverages and singing songs and causing chaos. Victor looked as happy as a clam, sharing his love for various bands with Shelby and Chad, and playing a card game with Bethany’s daughter Phoebe. Valerie swung by to say good night but didn’t stay for long.

“Good luck tomorrow, darling,” Esme said, squeezing her tight.

“I hope I don’t need too much luck,” Valerie joked. “I’ve been planning this for months.”

Valerie told Alex he could hang out for longer if he wanted, but he admitted he was beat.

They said good night, waving from the elevator as the doors clipped closed.

Back in the hotel room, Alex and Valerie cozied up and watched twenty minutes of a film before Valerie fell into the most decadent and dreamless sleep of her life.

She would need the rest. Tomorrow would be a doozy.

Chapter Thirteen

But everything Saturday morning started out right as rain. Valerie woke up at seven and went downstairs to have a cup of decaf and the hotel breakfast of eggs and toast and potatoes and fruit. She left Alex in bed because he liked to sleep in, and she knew he hadn’t been resting well due to the film pitches. Soon, neither of us will be able to

sleep well, she thought.

In the breakfast hall sat Victor and Esme, nestled close together, drinking coffee and eating scones. Valerie's heart leaped at the sight of her mother and father. Esme was doing a crossword puzzle, and Victor wrote notes in his notepad. Valerie surprised them when she approached, but it was a good surprise, and they begged her to sit with them, throwing their activities to the side.

"Today's the big day!" Esme cried.

"Until tomorrow," Victor reminded her. "I was just writing out my talking points here." He spun the notepad around to show the issues he wanted to touch on during the interview, which included the act of storytelling with a family member, finding renewed strength in the father-daughter relationship, and organizing our memories in a way that aligns them.

It brought tears to Valerie's eyes. She hoped what he wrote wasn't the idealized version. She hoped it was the truth.

Soon, the rest of the Suttons brought their chaos to the dining hall, and Valerie excused herself upstairs to shower and get dressed for the party. Alex was awake, drinking coffee from the little in-room machine and reading news on his phone. She told him that all the Suttons were downstairs, and he grimaced and laughed. "I'm not ready for them yet!"

Valerie fell into his arms and kissed him.

For the shower, Valerie wore a navy blue dress with a turtleneck and a pair of boots. Her lipstick was a cinnamon color, but other than that, she opted for very little makeup, choosing to slide into the background.

That morning, Alex drove her to the bakery to pick up the beautiful baby shower cakes—three with raspberries and cream and decadent chocolates, gorgeous and a far cry from many Manhattan women’s diets. Valerie couldn’t wait to get her hands on a slice. Maybe after the party was over. Alex said, “I have never wanted dessert more than I do right now.”

Alex helped Valerie carry the cakes into the completely decorated and beautiful living room of Catherine’s brownstone apartment. “WELCOME, BABY” hung in ornate letters over the top of the fireplace, and everything else was delicate and stylish and not overdone. To Valerie, upon entering, she thought her work was similar to something she’d seen in a high-end magazine, a feature for a celebrity’s baby shower.

Catherine was pleased. She looked youthful and bright-eyed, dressed in a gorgeous cream-colored maternity dress with her hair styled in blond ringlets. She hugged Alex hello as though they were old friends, then threw her arms around Valerie. “I can’t thank you enough for all you’ve done,” she said.

Valerie thought for the first time that something was really, really wrong with Catherine—that maybe she needed psychiatric help. But now wasn’t the time to bring that up.

“You look beautiful, Catherine,” Valerie said.

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“Thank you,” Catherine beamed. “I can’t wait for all my friends to see what you’ve done.”

Alex helped remove the cakes from their boxes and stayed until the glassware and china arrived, which Valerie dutifully cleaned, dried, and set out. The effect was stunning. Catherine sat on the sofa throughout this process, talking a mile a minute about anything that came to her mind. At some point, Valerie forgot to listen and made vague noises, suggesting she was listening. But her mind was fully focused on the party.

After Alex left, the cakes were out, the glassware was set, and the pillows were fluffed. Valerie sat beside Catherine on the sofa and tuned in to what she was saying.

“And that’s why I told Melissa, like, of course she can bring her little girl. I just don’t want her to do all that screaming that she normally does at other parties.” Catherine pressed her hands together so hard that her forearms looked like ropes.

“Kids are kids,” Valerie said. “They scream sometimes! I guess we have to prepare ourselves for that.”

Catherine looked at her with surprise, as though she’d forgotten Valerie was there. But before she could respond, the doorbell rang.

It was the first guest.

Valerie hurried to the foyer to open the door for Catherine’s college roommate Joy, who brought with her a massive present and a blond dye job that made Valerie’s eyes

sting. It was just so blond! Joy followed Valerie into the living room, where she put her present on the gift table and turned to look at Catherine.

“Both of you are pregnant!” she said by way of greeting her friend. “What are the chances?”

Valerie laughed nervously. There was a strange air in the room, as though Joy and Catherine were fighting and pretending they weren’t. Catherine got up slowly and looked at Joy.

“Thank you for coming,” she said seriously.

“Of course.” Joy tilted her head. “You look good, Catherine.”

Catherine flared her nostrils. Why did what Joy said feel like an insult? Valerie wondered.

But there wasn’t time to consider it much. Another guest arrived, and then another. Valerie found herself going from foyer to living room and back again, saying hello, introducing herself, and asking everyone to help themselves to drinks and appetizers.

Catherine’s mother arrived and then her mother-in-law. They set to work filling glasses with champagne and nonalcoholic drinks, pretending to be the ones who threw the party. Valerie wondered what their dynamics with Catherine were really like. Why did Catherine feel she needed to be in control all the time? Did she want to impress all these people?

Soon, Catherine stopped getting up to say hello, presumably because she was too pregnant, but her friends bent down to kiss her on the cheek and give her little side hugs from the sofa. Laughter bubbled, and conversation flitted.

Valerie could pretend it was a normal baby shower for a little while.

But in the middle of one of the baby games—Baby-Themed Pictionary—Valerie first realized something was very wrong. Gail, one of Catherine’s Nantucket-Manhattan friends, stood up with a glass of champagne, saying, “Let’s all hope it’s a girl! We all know what Catherine’s like when she doesn’t get her way!”

Everyone tittered with knowing laughter. Catherine’s smile widened as though she were really trying to keep it together.

“Oh yes. A girl would be nice. But honestly, a boy would be fine, too,” Catherine said, her voice wavering. “Really, girls. I’m easy. I’m just so happy to be having a baby. We’re just so happy.” Her voice sounded far away.

“Don’t joke with us, Catherine. We all know what happens when we tell jokes,” Joy said.

“Right?” another said. “Just tell us what to say and when to say it, Catherine.”

Catherine’s smile was stiff and strained. Valerie’s heart ached. She’d never seen friends at a baby shower act like this before. She looked at Catherine’s mother and mother-in-law, but they busied themselves with slicing the cake.

Catherine suddenly got to her feet. “I’ll be right back. My bladder just won’t quit!” She didn’t look at Valerie as she passed by and went upstairs.

There was the sound of the door opening and closing behind her.

Valerie turned to look at the baby shower with renewed interest. It felt as though everyone knew something she didn’t.

Joy bent over to whisper to Catherine's mother and mother-in-law. "How is she holding up?"

Catherine's mother-in-law furrowed her brow. "I don't know what you mean. I'm sure you don't mean to talk about things you can't possibly understand."

But Catherine's mother clasped her hands together, looking nervous. "Is he on his way, Marge?"

The mother-in-law cocked her head and excused herself to a room at the back of the brownstone. The air intensified. Valerie's feet were aching beneath her, but she was afraid if she went over and sat with the guests, they would notice her and sense themselves.

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“I just can’t believe it, Stacy,” Joy whispered.

Stacy, Catherine’s mother, went pale. “We don’t know anything for sure, now, do we?”

“I mean, when was the last time he came home?” a girl named Brittany asked.

“When did you last see him, Stacy?” another asked.

Stacy perched at the edge of the chair near the cake table and bent her head. “Marge was saying he went on a spontaneous business trip. That’s why he’s not here.”

They were clearly talking about Max, Catherine’s husband.

Obviously, some of the friends didn’t think he’d be coming home any time soon.

“That’s not what I heard,” Joy continued.

Stacy snapped her eyes to Joy. She looked annoyed but curious. “What did you hear?”

“You remember Mandy?” Brittany asked.

“Of course. They just went to Italy together last summer,” Stacy said, her face filled with surprise. “Mandy’s husband and Max were as thick as thieves, and Mandy and Catherine posted all those beautiful pictures of each other. They went sailing, and—”

Joy interrupted. "Max and Mandy are a thing."

Stacy looked doubtful. "I don't think Max would do that."

"People have seen them out," Joy said. "They're shameless. They go to all the restaurants, all the bars, all the clubs."

"But Mandy has a husband." Stacy waved her hand.

"That doesn't stop people," Brittany said.

"But they're best friends!" Stacy cried.

"I doubt that," Joy said. "I would never do that to my best friend."

Valerie suddenly remembered the guest list for the baby shower. There had been a Mandy on the list. When had Catherine found out about Mandy and her husband?

Was that why Catherine had been acting so strangely?

Of course it was.

Valerie felt brokenhearted and helpless. All she wanted was to go upstairs and throw her arms around Catherine and tell her it would be all right. But when your life partner cheated on you, embarrassed you, and destroyed your trust in the world, how could you think anything would be all right again?

On the wall next to the fireplace was a framed photograph of Max and Catherine on their wedding day. Their smiles were electric. Max was handsome and dark-eyed and dark-haired and so in love with Catherine. Where had that love gone?

Valerie knew she had to end this baby shower immediately. She had to find a way to help Catherine. But she was inexperienced.

Suddenly, it occurred to her that she needed to call her father.

Victor Sutton was maybe the only person in the world who could help.

Chapter Fourteen

Victor Sutton was in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, standing in front of a painting he didn't fully understand. Beside him stood Esme, who looked at the same painting quizzically. What did that weird red squiggle mean? What did the artist want to say with that big black dot? Was Esme thinking the same thing he was thinking? Or was she thinking her own set of thoughts, her own feelings that had nothing to do with his? Victor took a moment to look at the other couples in the room, most of whom looked like him and Esme, quietly walking, observing, and moving through the galleries. It felt suddenly surreal. It was impossible to know anyone's mind. Why had he, as a psychiatrist, ever thought he could try? And why couldn't he—a renowned psychiatrist—really understand his family, his wives, or his own mind?

Suddenly, Esme turned to look at him and say, "I can really feel how depressed he was during this era of his work."

Victor was rattled. Depressed? He hadn't thought that at all. He'd thought "anger" or "aggression," but not depression.

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“Totally. Me too,” he lied.

Esme couldn't tell he was lying. She moved on to the next painting, leaving Victor feeling bereft. Whose idea had it been to come to the art museum in the first place? Had it really been his? The girls were off shopping, and the older kids were hanging with the younger kids at an arcade with a bowling alley and skating rink. Everyone was accounted for and presumably happy. But Victor? Did Victor even know how to be happy?

His phone rang, and everyone yanked around to glare at him. What kind of person didn't turn off their phone? What kind of person entered an art gallery only to interrupt everyone's intense introspection?

It was Valerie calling. Victor answered it without thinking and hurried out of the gallery and down the hall. He felt Esme hot on his heels. He felt her worry.

“Val, hey,” he said. “What's up?”

Valerie sounded tentative and very quiet. “Dad, I know this is crazy. But I was wondering if you could come to Greenwich Village?”

Victor's ears rang.

Valerie said, “I need you.”

Victor said he'd be there right away.

Victor waited to explain to Esme what he knew during the cab ride over. Esme looked breathless and beautiful, her cheeks red from the bright cold outside.

“She said something is going on with the pregnant mother,” Victor said. “She didn’t explain anything else.”

“Wow.” Esme furrowed her brow. “She called you.”

Victor’s heart hammered with the realization that his daughter trusted him.

It felt like the sun coming up and warming his shoulders.

The stop-and-start traffic of a Saturday in Manhattan made both Esme and Victor wish they’d taken the subway. They were nervous and agitated when they pulled up to the Greenwich Village brownstone. Victor took a deep breath at the door, and Esme followed his lead.

He thought, Right now, Esme and I are a team.

It was a beautiful realization.

It took three seconds for someone to open the door after he knocked. Standing before him was a woman he’d never seen before, a woman in her sixties or seventies, maybe, with very good skin and hair to her shoulders. Her eyes were rimmed red with tears. “Who are you?” she demanded.

“We’re Valerie’s parents,” Victor said.

“Who?”

Victor and Esme glanced at one another nervously.

“She’s the event planner for the baby shower,” Esme explained.

“Oh.” The woman took a step back, her face still marred with confusion.

Victor realized Esme’s instincts had been correct. The people at the party didn’t know the event planner’s name. She was hired help. She was supposed to blend into her surroundings.

Victor and Esme entered a baby shower unlike any they’d ever seen. In the living room were fifteen women between the ages of thirty and seventy, arguing about something they couldn’t understand. From upstairs came the sounds of a woman saying, “Honey, you need to come out of there! You’re making a fool of yourself!”

Victor’s senses spiked. If he had to guess, he’d say the woman upstairs was the pregnant woman’s mother. She was trying to reason with her daughter—but she was doing it in the cruelest way possible. She did it in a way that suggested her daughter was only worth something if she behaved correctly.

Victor and Esme exchanged another glance that seemed to translate a million paragraphs to one another in a language uniquely their own.

“I’m going upstairs,” Victor said.

“I’m staying down here,” Esme muttered. “I’m going to kick these women into shape.”

Privately, they low-fived and separated.

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When Victor was halfway up the stairs, he heard Esme interrupt a woman's diatribe, saying, "Excuse me, could you tell me what's going on?" She was feigning confusion, pretending to be older and less right than she was. In that way, she could get information and maybe halt the growing fire and animosity.

Victor was grateful to find Valerie upstairs. She was far down the hallway, on the other side of the pregnant woman's mother, with her arms crossed. Valerie's eyes found his, and Victor was suddenly dropped back into a beautiful memory from long ago, wherein Valerie had had a panic attack at a birthday party, and Victor had had to go pick her up. He'd found her so lost, so sad, so alone, sitting in the corner of a children's birthday party. Nobody had been paying attention to her.

In many respects, it was remarkable to see that his forty-two-year-old daughter was just the same as she'd been at eight. It was remarkable to know that he could still help her.

The mother of the pregnant woman was harshly whispering, "You and Max can get through this, honey. Plenty of men cheat. It's who they are."

Victor felt this like a knife through his gut. He stalled.

Plenty of men cheat. But why did they? Was it because they were weak? Was it because they were bad people? Was it because they didn't know how to find happiness in the people who accepted them for who they were?

Victor stepped around the mother to reach Valerie, who pulled him into a side room and closed the door. The room seemed to be the future nursery, and it was decorated

like a sad, beige Scandinavian nightmare. Victor guessed this was the trend these days. He picked up a beige blanket and wrinkled his nose.

“Dad,” Valerie said, her voice wavering, “thank you for coming. I didn’t know what to do.”

Victor put the blanket back down and looked at his daughter. “Tell me what happened.”

Valerie explained what she knew—Max had cheated on Catherine with a friend of hers and the wife of his friend. He wasn’t bothering to hide it and hadn’t been seen for a while.

“He abandoned her before Christmas, a couple of months before the baby’s due,” Valerie breathed. “I can’t imagine something more evil.”

What about abandoning your wife and family after the death of your son?

Victor shook the thought out.

“I thought maybe you could talk to her,” Valerie continued. “I thought maybe you could talk her down? I don’t know. I’m worried about her, Dad. And this is sort of your thing. I thought of you immediately. Here in Manhattan. I figured it was a sign.”

Victor looked at her with curiosity and realized he was a sort of superhero to some people. He saved people.

Why had he forgotten that?

Then again, was he still capable of it?

Victor steeled himself and went back into the hallway. When the mother of the pregnant woman raised her hand to slam against the door again, he got closer to her and said, “Excuse me, ma’am. My name is Dr. Victor Sutton. I’m a licensed psychiatrist and—”

But she interrupted him immediately. “I know you! I have three of your books at home!”

Her eyes glinted, and she stepped back to let him pass.

Victor thought, Oh great. But if it worked, it worked. Suddenly, he was at the door, his forehead on the wood, trying to reason with the pregnant woman.

Catherine was her name. He wanted to remember that.

“Catherine? My name is Victor,” he said. “I’m Valerie’s father.”

There was quiet on the other side of the door. No sobbing, at least. Victor took this as a cue to keep going.

“Maybe you heard me already. I’m a licensed psychiatrist and, yeah...” Victor stalled, feeling suddenly nervous. He didn’t want to put on airs in front of this woman, even if he couldn’t see her. “But mostly, I’m here to check on you. I know how hard it is to lose people you love. I know how hard it is to fathom what comes next or who you are within this new context. I know, too, how hard it is to try to continue to ‘be’ someone for your friends and your family.” He glanced back at the mother, who seemed unable to fathom she’d done anything wrong.

“I wonder if you’d let me in?” Victor asked after a long moment of silence.

It took a little while for Catherine to open the door. When she did, Victor found her

tear-soaked; eyeliner and mascara streaked down her cheeks. She kept the door open long enough for Victor to enter, then closed it again. She didn't want her mother anywhere near her.

Despite the beautiful things in her bedroom—the expensive desk and the gorgeous wardrobe—Catherine didn't currently look like she came from money. She looked tired, bloated, and annoyed. She sat at the edge of her bed and put her hands around her stomach.

Victor knew he needed to calm her down.

But before he could say anything, she spoke to the floor. “My husband left me. He left me, and I've spent the past two weeks pretending nothing is wrong.”

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Victor's eyes filled with tears that he quickly blinked away. She doesn't deserve this, he thought. Nobody does.

"I can't help but feel like this 'pretending' is going to last the rest of my life," Catherine continued. "I'll have the baby and pretend to be happy. I'll pretend to be a good mother. I'll pretend to be a good friend. But on the inside, I'll be screaming. I know it."

Victor felt her words like a gong.

They echoed every sentiment he'd had since he'd returned to Nantucket.

He was faking it. But how many other people were faking it right now? How many other people pretended to be a good wife, husband, mother, father, brother, sister, friend?

Catherine hiccuped. Victor searched his mind for the right thing to say.

Finally, he said, "How do you know you're faking it? You're doing it. That's more than half the battle, isn't it?"

Catherine blinked through her blurry mascara at him.

"Do you always feel things 100 percent? Even before this?" Victor asked. "Did you 100 percent love your husband?"

Catherine thought for a moment. "I think I did at the beginning. Maybe. Oh, but I

could never trust him. If I'm honest, he always flirted with my friends. But I wanted the life we built. I thought it meant something."

"It still means something," Victor told her. "Look at this gorgeous brownstone. Look at you! You're pregnant! You're having a wonderful baby!"

Victor wasn't sure how old the woman was. Maybe late thirties? Like Valerie, she'd waited to be a mother, and he was sure that would make her capable and kind, even if (or especially because) the husband wasn't around.

"You have to trust yourself," Victor said softly. "You have to trust the love you feel—both for that baby and yourself."

When Victor returned downstairs, he realized that somehow, some way, Esme had gotten rid of every baby shower attendee, including the mother. Esme and Valerie sat on the sofa, both with a plate of cake, watching the snow swirl outside. Victor stood at the base of the stairs for a second, listening to the ringing of the silence.

"Want a slice of cake, Dad?" Valerie asked.

Victor let out a soft laugh and went over to take a piece. "What happened?"

Esme shrugged. "I made them understand how oblivious and mean-spirited they were. It was pretty easy because they were being heinous."

Valerie nodded.

"Even the mom?" Victor asked.

"I told her she needed to go home and think about what she was doing and how she wanted to be remembered—both as a mother and a grandmother," Esme said.

Victor's eyes widened. He'd always known Esme was strong, but this was something else.

"Wow," he said.

"I'm so glad you brought Mom with you." Valerie dropped her head on Esme's shoulder. "I couldn't have done this without either of you."

They sat in comfortable silence. Victor took a bite of cake and nearly choked at how delicious it was. "How much did this cost?" he asked.

"You don't want to know." Valerie shook her head.

"I don't think I do."

A few minutes later, Catherine came downstairs. She'd removed her makeup and put on a long, thick robe. She looked prettier than she had in that elaborate baby shower dress.

"I want to apologize for my behavior earlier," she said tentatively.

Valerie hurried up to hug her. "You don't have to apologize for anything."

Catherine and Valerie disappeared into the kitchen to make tea. This left Victor and Esme alone in the living room, feeling whiplash from the day's craziness. Victor checked his phone to see it was a little past four in the afternoon. They'd planned to meet up with the rest of the family soon.

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“You were sensational today, Esme,” Victor said under his breath, taking her hand.

He wondered if she would bring this up in therapy next week. He wondered what Hannah would say.

“I don’t know what you said to that poor girl,” Esme said. “But she needed you so badly. So did Valerie.”

They turned to look at one another. Their eyes echoed with love.

Victor wanted desperately to make a joke. In a stupid, teenage voice, he said, “So can I buy you, like, a pizza later?”

Esme cackled, catching on right away. “You think you can get a date out of me that easily?”

Victor shrugged and pretend pouted. “I just thought maybe you had a crush on me.”

Esme rolled her eyes. “I’m pretty sure you have a crush on me, Victor Sutton.”

“Esme, I have a crush on you.” Victor’s heart filled.

There on Catherine’s sofa in the middle of Greenwich Village, as the snow swirled and blanketed the city outside, they kissed with their eyes closed. In his heart of hearts, Victor felt twenty-five years old. In his heart of hearts, he felt happier than he had in decades.

Chapter Fifteen

June 2025

It wasn't till midnight that Bethany returned to the emergency waiting room to update them on what was going on behind the scenes with Valerie. Victor and Esme were stricken, drinking bad black coffee in plastic chairs and not talking to one another. Sometimes they held hands, but sometimes even that felt too intimate. Victor had the sense that their thoughts were running wild, in circles and never able to come back together.

Rebecca had given the keys to her eldest daughter, who'd driven all the kids back to Rebecca's place, where they'd ordered pizza and were hanging around, nervously waiting for news. According to Rebecca, a few of them had fallen asleep, and her daughter had gently put them to bed upstairs, grateful they were able to get some rest.

But Victor, Esme, Rebecca, and Bethany stayed, of course. Alex was here somewhere, too. But they hadn't seen him yet.

Victor couldn't fathom what Alex was going through.

Haven't they already gone through enough? Victor thought, remembering their years in San Francisco, Alex's struggle to get sober, and their difficulties around getting pregnant.

They'd come to Nantucket to start over. How was it possible that this was waiting for them?

Bethany was pale and looked small in the hospital lights. She collapsed on the chair beside Victor and stared down at her feet.

“They’re going to perform a C-section in about thirty minutes,” she explained. “Valerie’s still, um... She still hasn’t woken up.”

Esme hissed and pressed her forehead against Victor’s shoulder. Victor’s heartbeat was slow.

“They think she might be in a coma for a while,” Bethany explained. It was like she was trying to sound matter-of-fact, but it wasn’t fully working. “But the baby seems okay right now. The baby seems stable. We’ll know more when he’s born.”

Born into tragedy, Victor thought.

When Bethany returned to the deep hallways of the hospital, Rebecca, Esme, and Victor gathered together in prayer for Valerie and the baby. Victor found himself taking over much of the prayer, saying things to the Lord he hadn’t thought to say in decades. His eyes were heavy.

A few minutes after that, Alex’s parents arrived, having only just been told what was happening and that the baby was coming tonight. Victor and Esme hugged them hello but couldn’t manage much else. They sat across from Victor and Esme and held hands, staring around the waiting room as though waiting to wake up from this dream.

Sometimes they got up to get more coffee or buy bottled water. Sometimes they got up to pace. When one of them mentioned eating food, it was immediately dismissed or forgotten about. What was food when your heart was breaking?

Another two hours later, Alex appeared. To Victor, he looked like something out of a horror movie, his cheeks hollow and his hair greasy and all over the place. He was wearing scrubs. Immediately, he hugged his mother and announced to everyone in the room, “My son was born. He’s stable and sleeping.” And then, he burst into tears.

Victor understood. There was no joy to be had without Valerie there.

All her life, she'd wanted a baby. Now that the baby was here, what now?

They would love her son, even if...

Don't think like that. Please.

Victor was beginning to pang with loss for the manuscript he'd burned. What if that was the last living record of his daughter's thoughts, opinions, and memories?

What if he'd burned them all up?

Another few hours later, Victor, Esme, Rebecca, Bethany, and Alex's parents were led into the labor and delivery ward to meet their grandson. Alex and the baby were in a room all to themselves. Alex had his shirt off, and the baby lay against his chest, sleeping soundly. Victor thought the baby looked like the tiniest baby he'd ever seen, even smaller than any of his own children had been at birth. The nurses had shown Alex how to feed him and how to care for him during the harrowing first hours of his life. Obviously, nursing was out of the question.

"They sleep like crazy when they're first born," Esme assured Alex softly, reaching out to take the baby in her arms.

With Esme holding their grandson like that, Victor thought he might break down.

He'd seen her holding a baby boy so much like that only when Joel was born. It ripped him back through time. But Esme gazed down at this new baby with so much heart and love. There was no denying it. No matter what happened, the Suttons would be there for this little boy.

They had to be strong.

Chapter Sixteen

December 2024

Six Months Before The Accident

It was the evening after Catherine's baby shower, and all of the Suttons were out on the town at a Broadway show. Valerie felt as though she floated, the weight of that afternoon off her shoulders, and a sudden and beautiful hope in her chest. Out of the kindness of her father's heart, he'd gone out of his way to help Catherine. Esme, too, had been there for the ride, shedding the horrible pretend friends from the baby shower and making Catherine eat a slice of cake.

Now, Valerie and Alex stood in line behind her parents, murmuring softly about what had transpired earlier that day. Esme and Victor were bubbly, having had a glass of champagne before they'd arrived, and Victor extended his hand so that Esme could twirl from his finger, giggling.

"Look at them," Valerie whispered to Alex. "They're so in love, aren't they?"

Alex nodded and pressed a kiss to her cheek.

They were cocooned in love.

Once inside the grand hall, the Suttons were shown seats halfway up the first balcony section, where they settled in and chatted happily, exchanging snacks before the lights dimmed. The Sutton children had a successful day at the arcade, bowling alley, and skating rink. Bethany's youngest, Phoebe, was showing off her little stuffed animal, grinning proudly and telling Victor that she'd won it herself. More than that, her brother hadn't been able to win the stuffed animal he'd wanted, which made her victory sweeter.

The Broadway show they'd selected was fun for the whole family. The Lion King had plenty of singing and dancing and costume changes. Sometimes Valerie caught herself looking at the faces of her nieces and nephews, wondering what they were thinking and trying to imagine her own child, years from now, taking in their first Broadway show. Would they think it was just as magical as they did?

When the show was over, Victor announced dinner at a restaurant not far from the hotel, and they got into cabs that took them straight to the door. Valerie and Alex shared a cab with Bethany, and they happily chatted, talking about the show and Valerie's "insane" afternoon.

"You should have seen Dad in action," Valerie said. "I always knew he was this 'world-renowned psychiatrist' or whatever, but I never really knew he could make something like that happen."

"Dad said something to me about it," Bethany offered, tilting her head. "He said something about wanting to keep helping her. But I imagine she has her own therapist? Maybe Dad could reach out to them and make sure they know what happened today?"

Valerie thought it stood to reason that her father would be frightened about what happened next in Catherine's story. It touched her to know he was thinking about the next steps.

"He's a doctor to the core," Valerie said. "I guess you know what that's like?"

Bethany grimaced. "Unfortunately, yes. But it's something I have to turn off. You know, after you finish a surgery, you can't think about them two weeks, four weeks, or ten weeks later, not unless something went wrong. You have to find a way to let go."

“I would have assumed Dad was good at letting go,” Valerie admitted.

They sat with that thought for a second, realizing they were both considering the same thing—that he’d let his family go.

The restaurant was a steakhouse with home-cut fries and gorgeous mounds of buttery mashed potatoes and brussels sprouts and desserts like lava cake and cheesecake and towering milkshakes. Victor sat a few seats away from Valerie, beaming at his family. Tomorrow, they’d be at the radio station, being interviewed about their nearly half-finished manuscript. Tomorrow, as father and daughter, they’d face the public and reckon with who they were now rather than who they’d always been.

But to Valerie’s surprise, Victor got up before he finished his lava cake and whispered something into Esme’s ear. Esme’s face fell with surprise. She got up and followed him.

Valerie’s heart began to pound. What was going on?

Alex was still eating dessert and hadn’t noticed.

“My dad just got up and left?” Valerie muttered.

Alex turned his head to trace Victor’s path to the front door. “Maybe he’s just going to the bathroom?”

But that’s when they saw him putting on his coat. Esme stood beside him, waving her arms around, trying to reason with him. Valerie’s mouth went dry.

“I don’t understand,” she said.

“What’s up?” Bethany asked, noticing Valerie’s duress.

“Dad’s leaving?” Valerie reported.

“What are you talking about?” Rebecca demanded.

But there was no way around it. By the time the three Sutton girls got to their feet and hurried over to the front door, their father was already in a cab and buzzing away. Esme stood at the glass door, her arms folded over her chest, watching him go. Her face was resigned.

“Mom? What was that?” Valerie demanded. “Where is he going?”

Esme looked surprised to see her daughters there at all. “He said he needed to help someone. A patient. He said something clicked, and he has to make a few calls.”

Valerie watched her mother’s face, wondering if she believed her father.

“Do you think it’s the truth?” Valerie asked.

Esme’s cheek flinched. “I have to believe he’s different than he used to be. I have to believe his heart is in the right place.”

Chapter Seventeen

December 2024

Meanwhile, Victor Sutton was in the back seat of a taxi cab, on the verge of a panic attack. All evening, he’d tried to keep it together. He’d focused on his breathing, laughed at his wife’s and daughters’ jokes, teased his grandchildren, and ate enough, or almost enough, picking at the last bites of food on his plate and only half remembering where he was. All the while, he hadn’t been able to escape the thoughts circling the back of his mind.

He couldn’t stop thinking about Catherine and her husband, Max.

He couldn’t fathom what kind of monster would do that to Catherine.

More than that, he needed to understand why Max had done it.

He knew all this wondering and needing to understand had something to do with himself, with his own story. A part of him wondered if, in tracking down Max, he could finally understand why he’d left his family and run off with Bree. His memories were so murky and heavy with grief. He needed somebody else to help him through. He needed somebody else to explain what it felt like in the moment to do something so cruel.

That somebody else, right now, was Max.

It wasn't so difficult to figure out who Max Marrow was. In the summertime, he frequented Nantucket's sailing club and therefore knew many of the same people Victor did, and because he was wealthy and well-connected in the Manhattan social sphere, Victor soon learned that he was probably spending this evening at one of four swanky night clubs: The Satellite, The Grand Jewel, Vixen, or Alabastor. Victor was prepared to dip in and out of those clubs all night, searching for him. But he didn't really want to waste that kind of time.

Ultimately, he called his brother for help.

Aaron was resting after a beautiful dinner with his wife and their extended family. Victor could picture him on the phone, cozied up in his easy chair, his eyes half open. But Aaron had a pretty wild Manhattan history and had partied with everyone from the Rockefellers to the Fitzgeralds to the Roosevelts to the Kennedys. It meant he could pinpoint exactly where Max Marrow was tonight if he made a few phone calls.

He had sway, whereas Victor did not.

Victor spent no more than two minutes explaining the situation. "Right now, I have the taxi headed for The Grand Jewel, but I'm prepared to reroute him at any time," he said.

"Does Esme know what you're up to?" Aaron asked.

"I couldn't tell her everything."

Aaron groaned. Victor could see him kneading his forehead, trying to come up with a reason to help his brother. Finally, he said, "You promise you aren't up to no good? You aren't trying to, I don't know, cheat on Esme or something? Because I will nothelp you destroy your relationship with her. I'm pulling for you. I'm pulling for all of you."

Victor promised that he was all-in on Esme.

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He didn't mention that he still hadn't been back to see Dr. Frank Gallagher. That was a conversation for another time.

It took Aaron about twenty minutes to figure out where Max Marrow was partying tonight. He called back to say, "He's at the Alabastor. He has bottle service, but he's at a table in the center with someone the bouncers don't recognize. Apparently, he's been mighty rude to his servers, and they aren't too pleased with him, but they can't kick him out because he's spending too much. You know how these guys are."

Victor's forehead was slick with sweat. Was he really going to go through with this?

"Just be careful, Victor," Aaron said sternly. "I don't know who this guy is, but he sounds like a hothead. If he starts causing trouble, get out of there. Promise?"

Victor said he would.

But the line outside the Alabastor looked as though it would take at least forty minutes, if not more. And then there was the issue of getting into the club itself, which was no easy feat when you were Victor's age—sixty-plus and decidedly not a beautiful woman. Victor hung around the back of the line with his arms crossed, feeling like a fool, until he went up to talk to the bouncer. He wanted to try his luck.

Of course, the bouncer wanted nothing to do with him. "You need to wait in line like everybody else."

Victor thought, Play smarter, Victor. Don't ask for rewards you haven't earned. Use the information you have.

Victor hovered at the door, watching as the bouncer either let people in or turned them away. The turning away was always with a snide look and a wave of his hand. Victor wondered why anybody wanted to club in the first place. Rejection seemed bound to happen, and that was only after you waited in the cold for nearly an hour.

What had happened to going to the movies? Going out to dinner? Was this really the height of culture?

When the bouncer took a moment's break from either rejecting or letting people in, Victor took his chance.

"Man, I'm really sorry to bother you," he said.

The bouncer gave him a look like he wanted to skin him alive.

"It's just that there's a guy in there named Max Marrow who's causing quite a stir," Victor continued. "He's being rude to staff, rude to his girlfriend. I'm guessing he was rude to you, too. The thing is, I'm his therapist. My name is Dr. Victor Sutton. I've published many books and been on everything from The Today Show to Jimmy Fallon. Maybe you recognize me?"

The bouncer's eyes glinted with what Victor hoped was curiosity.

Suddenly, the bouncer barked it out to a few people in line. "Does anyone recognize this big-time therapist over here? Dr. Victor something?"

There was a moment's hesitation. Victor scanned the crowd, realizing that almost everyone was in their twenties or thirties and probably didn't care so much about a semi-famous therapist.

He pleaded with them, “My patient is inside, and he needs help.”

It was a big fat lie. But he knew people in these more recent generations were more prone to asking for help. They believed in the power of therapy—even if Victor believed in it for everyone except himself.

But suddenly, a woman in her mid-thirties with blond hair piped up. “Wait! Yeah. You’re Victor Sutton? My dad was reading your books a few years ago.” When everyone looked at her, she shrugged. “We had a family crisis.”

“Yes. What book was it?” Victor asked, trying to exude warmth and intelligence.

“Something about Seeking Nuance?” the woman tried.

“Seeking Nuance in Family Relationships,” Victor said, snapping his fingers. “Yes. I wrote that about fifteen years ago.”

He looked at the bouncer like see?

The bouncer looked sick of him. Victor couldn’t blame him. He was sick of himself, too.

But to Victor’s surprise, the bouncer waved him in, saying, “Go on. Get in before I throw you on the street.”

Victor hurried inside, raising his arms to be patted down by other black-wearing bouncers who barely looked at his face. After he paid the entry fee, he found himself in a long, slender hallway, neon lights licking the otherwise dark shadows. It took a while to find the dance room, and in that time, it was as though the techno filled his chest and his heart and made it difficult for him to think thoughts of his own. Several times, he had to remind himself that he was here to find Max Marrow and ask him

why he did what he did. He was here for research. He was here to understand.

In Catherine's brownstone, Victor had seen several photographs of Max Marrow during happier and more wholesome times. He'd seen him on his wedding day, during pregnancy doctor visits, holding little sonograms of the baby he was, up until recently, quite excited to welcome. Had he forgotten how precious life was? Did he have a personality disorder? What?

Do I have a personality disorder? Victor wondered now, stalling in the dark and shivery hallway. Was that something Frank might diagnose me with?

But before Victor could consider that further, he spotted Max. Just as Aaron had said, he was partying at the middle table with a blond woman. Was that Catherine's dear friend, the one he'd cheated on her with? They were drinking clear cocktails and talking in a way that suggested they'd been drinking all day and into the night. Max's lips were shining, and his eyes were unfocused.

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Now that Victor was inside, he realized that to get an honest answer out of Max, he couldn't just storm up to him and ask him for the truth. Rather, he needed to bring Max closer emotionally, to befriend him in a way that made him an easy person to open up to. He went to the bar and ordered a whiskey, hoping it would loosen him up a little bit, then remembered, with a heavy jolt of guilt, that he needed to meet Valerie at the radio station tomorrow at noon.

What time was it now? It didn't matter, he guessed. He was already here.

He'd deal with the consequences when they came.

With his whiskey in hand, he walked through the tables, bobbing his head and trying to look like he was having a good time. Sometimes, he made eye contact with people or clinked his glass, but usually, they just danced around him, their hands raised. It was the worst music Victor had ever experienced in his life, and it gave him new meaning behind his belief that he'd been born at the perfect time for music. But maybe everyone felt that way.

At the table directly next to Max drank a man around Victor's age. Victor paused and clinked his glass with his and introduced himself. The other man said, "I'm Simon," and beckoned for Victor to come closer. "Do you also think this is the worst music you've ever heard?"

Victor laughed, throwing his head back. "We can't be alone in that, can we?"

"I don't know. They all look like they're having a great time," Simon said, gesturing to the younger people around them. "I can't remember why I came out here!"

“Are you here with someone?” Victor asked.

“Yeah. My girlfriend is in her forties,” Simon said, half begrudgingly, half proudly. “She always wants to chase the nights away like this. I’d rather be in bed with a crossword. But hey.” He raised his glass again. “To life, huh?”

“Do you know anyone else here?” Victor asked. He was hoping to get an introduction to Max, who bopped around with his date just two feet away.

“Just her, sadly,” Simon said, turning his head to search for her. “And I always have this horrible fear that she’ll meet someone else at one of these club nights and go home with him! How pathetic is that?”

Victor was surprised that Simon was revealing so much so quickly. But then again, Victor was a therapist and therefore had one of those faces that people opened up to, at least he hoped. And Victor was the only other person in his sixties who was standing here all by himself.

Victor let the guy talk a little bit more but was grateful when his girlfriend Caitlin came back. Caitlin was a barrel of laughs, cracking one joke after another and not bothering to care if anyone else liked them. After she talked to Victor for a little while, she reached over to poke Max’s date on the shoulder. Victor thought, Here we go!

But very soon, as Max and his date, Simon and his date, and Victor joined forces at a table, drinking cocktails and vaguely dancing, Victor realized that Max wasn’t there with the woman he’d been cheating on Catherine with. He was there with someone in her early twenties, someone far younger even than Catherine’s best friend. He looked proud of himself.

Victor wondered, Was I so proud of myself when I left Esme for Bree?

He hoped not.

But something that always brought people together was alcohol. Very soon, Simon's date and Max's date were dancing and shimmying, leaving Max, Simon, and Victor off to themselves with new cocktails and shoulder slaps, laughing like they were the luckiest men in the world. Sometimes Victor felt like a completely different person and had to remind himself that he'd come here on a mission and not to have a good time.

"I like you guys! We should go somewhere else!" Max said suddenly.

Victor was surprised. His initial plan was to dig deeper into Max's psyche after the next drink—not after going to the next bar. He checked the time and saw it was after midnight, nearing one in the morning. When was the last time he'd stayed out this late?

But suddenly, he was in the back of a large hired car with Max, Simon, and their dates. Max had hired the car for the night to celebrate something—a business venture that had gone his way—and he said he was staying in a penthouse apartment on the Upper West Side.

Victor checked his left hand and wasn't surprised to see no wedding ring.

"What kind of business are you in, Max?" Victor asked, putting on his "important" voice.

"He handles wealthy people's finances," Simon said, jabbing Max in the stomach with his elbow. "He rips money off people like us to line his own pocketbook."

"Don't say it like that, Simon. I like to think of it as making us all wealthier," Max said.

“Must be great, living in a penthouse apartment like that. Being single,” Victor said, finding himself fishing around for details about Max’s life.

“It’s fantastic,” Max said. “I don’t know why anyone gets married.”

Victor felt it like a smack. He wanted to say, You are married! But it wasn’t the time.

He thought about poor Catherine, all alone in that brownstone, seven months pregnant, with all her “best” friends talking terribly about her. His hands were in fists.

When they reached the next bar—a speakeasy with less dancing but more expensive drinks and a live jazz band that made Victor think, all right, I’m sort of into this—Victor made sure to sit next to Max with a full view of the quintet, the alto saxophonist and the trumpeter and the drummer, whose forehead glistened with sweat. It felt as though they were deep underground in a Manhattan that he’d never gotten to know.

Simon and Pia were kissing like there was no tomorrow.

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Natasha got up to use the bathroom, leaving Max and Victor alone.

Victor's breathing stalled. He thought, This is it.

"Do you come out to places like this often?" Victor asked.

Max nodded. "Yeah. You?"

"All the time," Victor said. "Now that I'm divorced. Twice divorced, in fact."

Max raised his palm to give Victor a high five. As Victor slapped his hand, he winced and thought, I don't mean it.

"Twice! Wow. I guess I'm working on my first," Max said. "Glad I got out of there when I could. She was the worst."

Victor sipped his drink and thought of poor Catherine.

When Catherine wanted to date again, she'd have to do it as a single mother. She'd have to get a babysitter and fight for a little bit of time just for herself.

"It's cool that you got out of it without any kids," Victor said, watching Max's face for clues. "That's what really drags you down."

Max didn't give anything away. "Totally," he said, then gestured to the drummer. "He's the best in the city, I swear."

It was true that the drummer was fantastic, taking a drum solo like he was battling the soul of the instrument. Victor took a moment to watch, trying to strategize. But he hadn't found a plan by the time Natasha got back.

Luckily, it was Natasha who soon helped him through.

“We were just celebrating our divorces,” he said with a laugh to Natasha, who couldn't have been more than twenty-four or twenty-five.

Natasha was more than slightly drunk. She turned her head from one side to the other and sighed. “I want to get married. I want it all. The kids. The house. The yard. The dog.” She listed out a “perfect” existence—and the same sort of thing Max had just abandoned.

“Babe, no, you don't,” Max said almost sternly. “Look around you. This is what you want. You already have it.”

Natasha sighed. “But it's so fleeting, Max. It's like, I'm young and pretty now, but I know that won't be forever. I know one day I want to do the whole parenting thing. I want to teach someone how to ride a bicycle, you know?”

She looked at Victor with big eyes, and Victor was reminded of Valerie again. Valerie when she first learned to ride her bike or first played with her dolls on the floor of his study. Natasha was like fifteen years younger than Valerie and with so much more time to make mistakes. Victor prayed she'd get away from Max as quickly as she could.

And it was then it flew out of his mouth. “Max is going to be a father, aren't you, Max?”

Max's jaw dropped with surprise.

Natasha shrieked and nearly dropped her glass. “Max?”

“I don’t know where you think you got that information. But you’re a stranger to me,” Max said, all walls up.

“I know your wife, Max,” Victor continued, performing for Natasha. “I attended her baby shower today. Your mother was there, too. Wow. Mandy? Was it worth it for Mandy? But I guess Mandy is in the past now.”

Victor turned to look straight in Natasha’s eyes. He wanted to tell her to run.

But Natasha could take care of herself. She glared at Max and asked, “Who is Mandy?”

Max’s face was pale. He looked like he was sobering up fast.

“Why did you do it, Max?” Here was the question Victor had come all this way to ask. “Why did you put Catherine through all this? Why did you leave your unborn child? You have all the wealth in the world. You fought hard to get pregnant. You have so much time. Why now? Tell me.”

But Max just shook his head. Victor had never seen anyone angrier. It looked like he was about to explode.

And then, Max got out of his chair, strode over to the bouncer, and, pointing at Victor, explained to the bouncer (and a friend, it seemed), that Victor needed to be “let go.” Before Victor knew what was happening, the bouncers grabbed him, carried him out of the speakeasy, and hurled him onto the street. He just barely caught himself before he fell to the pavement.

“Stay out of here!” the bouncer cried.

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Victor stumbled, his hands on his knees. Nobody passing by paid him any mind. To them, he probably looked like a drunk old man, somebody nobody had ever loved.

Why had he thought Max would give him answers?

Why had he thought—privately, in the back of his mind—that he could get Max on the right track?

When Victor reached the stop sign on the corner, he leafed through his pocket to find his phone. It read 2:42 a.m., long past his bedtime.

He felt bereft. He felt terrified.

Before he knew what he was doing, he dialed Dr. Frank Gallagher.

But as soon as Frank's name came up on the screen, Victor realized what he'd done and hung up. He gasped for breath, the freezing-cold air stabilizing him.

Everything came rushing back: Catherine's baby shower, Valerie's gratitude, followed by Victor's insane belief that meeting Max and talking to him would help Victor understand himself better.

He didn't think he needed a psychiatrist. He thought he could cure himself.

But as Victor walked the streets, vaguely searching for a cab, he was struck with a horrible thought. He needed help, and he wasn't sure if he would ever be strong enough to ask for it.

Chapter Eighteen

It was the morning after the night her father had spontaneously left the restaurant, telling nobody in the family where he was going nor when he'd be back. Everything felt off. Valerie and Alex were in the breakfast hall, eating sparingly, as Valerie went over the notes she wanted to cover in the interview she still assumed was going to happen. But Victor hadn't been in contact. Neither had Esme.

"I can't do the interview on my own," Valerie muttered under her breath, her eyes still on the doorway, waiting for her father and mother to appear for a late breakfast and an explanation. "They only booked us because he's Victor Sutton. They don't care about me."

"I'd argue that they only care about Victor Sutton again because of you," Alex said softly. "They want to know how he's grown and changed as a result of his children. You know, how his own teachings have worked within his own life."

Valerie groaned and took a bite of her croissant. "You know they'll send me away if I arrive by myself. There's no book without him."

Alex didn't seem to know what to say. He reached over and touched her hand.

It wasn't till ten minutes after the breakfast closed for the morning that Victor appeared. He looked withdrawn and vaguely ill, but he was in one piece, and he was already dressed in a suit jacket and a pair of slacks for the interview. Esme was nowhere to be found.

"She went to the workout room," Victor said. "She's upset with me and wants to sweat it out."

"Why would she be upset with you, Dad?" Valerie asked sarcastically. "Is it because

you went out on some wild goose chase without telling us where you were going?”

Victor closed his eyes and walked across the dining room to get the last cup of coffee on offer. He sipped and kept his eyes closed as though he were trying to prepare something to tell Valerie but came up dry. Valerie and Alex stood where they were, watching him as though he were a wild animal at the zoo.

Valerie told herself that nothing bad happened, so it was all okay.

When Victor did return, he said under his breath, “I’ll be fine. You ready to go?”

Victor, Alex, and Valerie shared a cab to the Brooklyn-based radio station and didn’t talk the entire way. Valerie felt consumed with anger. Why was he being so secretive again? She thought they were past that. Valerie wondered how they would manage to have an entire interview—which usually involved conversation—when they struggled to speak at all right now.

But when they entered the radio station and met the hosts, Victor turned on his charm. Valerie shouldn’t have been surprised. This was Victor Sutton’s way.

Was Victor’s entire life a performance?

How exhausting, Valerie thought.

But mostly, her anger mounted. How often was her father performing a version of himself that wasn’t true? How much of the book they’d written together had any bearing in fact?

With Valerie’s emotions all over the place, she began to think of the baby, how she’d read that the baby experienced every emotion she experienced and how she’d promised to try to avoid stress. She squinted at her father, wanting to yell at him for

putting them through this.

He was my dad! He should be thinking about all of us instead of himself! He should be thinking about all of us rather than some “patient” he had to run out and help!

Maybe Valerie’s anger wasn’t fully sensical. But it was rooted in the past, in her trauma, and had the effect of setting fire to every good emotion Valerie had had surrounding her father the past few months. She eyed the door and wondered if she should get up and go.

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At that moment, her father cracked a joke that had both radio hosts cackling. But there was a strange glint in Victor's eyes. What was going on?

The radio hosts were Brett Sullivan and Addison Peet, a married team wherein the woman had never changed her last name because they were so Brooklyn hip. Apparently, they'd been raised on Victor Sutton's psychiatric teachings and frequently looked at his book about marriage and romance for tips on how to deepen their own relationship. Valerie wanted to ask why. Didn't they know Victor's backstory?

But of course, they knew Victor's backstory. Or now they did. Everyone did.

On the radio, they brought it up rather early in the conversation. Everything was live and on the air, and a little counter to the right of the microphone said there were over one hundred thousand listeners right this moment. More, apparently, listened or even watched the YouTube videos of the recordings.

"Victor, as we were talking about before the show," Addison said, "Brett and I were raised on your books and often look at them for guidance and self-help. But of course, it recently surfaced that your life has been far from perfect. Why do you think that is? By that, I mean, why do you think you can talk the talk but not necessarily walk the walk?"

Valerie watched her father, seated where he was across from her, in a pair of headphones and a microphone in front of him. Say something honest for a change, she demanded of him internally.

But it would only be more performance. More fake Victor Sutton.

“That’s a great question,” Victor said. “But I have to say, I got into this business because I wanted to help people. Full stop. The fact that I can’t fully help myself is another equation. I don’t think any of us can see ourselves clearly. I don’t think any of us are perfect, nor should we expect ourselves to be.”

Addison asked, “Have you ever picked up one of your own books for guidance?”

Victor laughed, but his laugh felt like it was coming from underwater. “Maybe I should do it more often. Usually, when I pick one of them up, I feel embarrassed by the word choices or the tone or the general vibe of the book. I remember almost immediately who I was when I wrote a particular sentence, and it sends me on a wild journey through the past.”

“That sounds rough,” Brett agreed. “And Valerie, whose idea was it to write this book together? Your father obviously has the acclaim, and I understand you were never a writer before this, correct?”

Valerie’s brain felt hot. Slowly, and in pieces, she tried to describe what had happened a few months back, how the publisher had demanded a book from both her and from Victor, books that would go against one another and therefore make the publisher a lot of money.

Books that would rip them further apart. As though they wouldn’t do that themselves.

“We didn’t want them to capitalize on our pain,” she offered.

Addison nodded. “And how has the process been?”

For a little while, Victor and Valerie traded questions, going back and forth. For a

little while, Valerie was able to pretend that last night, Victor hadn't disappeared and left her family in a lurch. For a little while, she could pretend that her father really was in therapy, that he was trying to get better rather than just spouting advice to everyone else around him and hoping something stuck.

The world thought her father was a genius. But did she?

That was when things took a turn.

Valerie wasn't entirely sure which question hurt Victor, which one "set him off." But suddenly, Victor was ranting in a way Valerie hadn't seen in years.

"But the thing about making a mistake is, it feels like you really can't ever live it down, not even to yourself," Victor said. "It's like you have to wake up every day and love as best as you can and try to like yourself as well as you can, and it all feels so impossible, so improbable. It's like, I totally understand why people do insane, selfish things. They do them because they're afraid of unique and big emotions. They do them because they're afraid that people will hurt them first, and they want to be the ones to dish it out instead. They do them because they're afraid of death. I don't know. For years, I've been looking at myself, watching myself make decisions, watching myself hurt people, and I still can't fathom why. I just." Victor hung his head and shook it. "I just want to understand myself before I die. I think everyone wants that. But I'm getting older. I'm watching my children grow up. I'm trying to get to know them again as people—because we didn't know each other for years. They're adults now. They have memories and pasts I'll never fully know. Same for me. And sometimes it's too heavy. Sometimes I just know I'm going to destroy it all again."

Suddenly, Victor burst into tears.

Addison and Brett looked at each other, alarmed. At first, it was like they were

excited about the ratings Victor's tears would bring in. But then, it was clear that Victor wouldn't stop crying any time soon, and nobody knew what to do. They looked at Valerie, hoping for answers from her, but Valerie couldn't do anything to make her father stop.

She hadn't wanted a performance. She hadn't wanted this, either.

It's because he needs therapy, she wanted to tell the listeners at home. It's because he spouts advice and doesn't know how to take it. It's because he's weak in the ways we're all weak, but he's pretending not to be.

She couldn't take it anymore.

I have to protect myself and the baby from this man, she thought.

Eventually, Addison and Brett cut the interview short and put on music. Victor got up and staggered into the bathroom down the hall, leaving Valerie, Alex, Addison, and Brett in shock.

"I'm so sorry," Valerie breathed. "I've never seen him like that."

Addison and Brett said it was all right. But the glow in their eyes meant it would be really all right for them, and maybe not so okay for Victor and Valerie.

When Victor left the bathroom, Valerie and Alex were waiting for him in the hallway and eager to get in a cab and flee. Valerie knew that the entire family had been back at the hotel, listening to their interview. She knew that Victor didn't want to return to that lion's den or answer the questions they had for him. But where else could they go?

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“I just want to go to bed,” Victor said. “My head is killing me.”

“Dad, please. Tell me what’s going on?” Valerie rasped as they walked outside, looking for a car. She wanted to give him the chance to explain himself. Alex was hovering behind them, doing his best to pretend not to listen. “Dad, please, don’t do this to us. Don’t do this to me. We’re supposed to be partners.”

At this, Victor turned on his heel and glared at her. It was a look far darker than any he’d ever lent her and one that completely stopped her in her tracks.

“Don’t you understand? I can’t talk to you about any of that. I can’t do it, Valerie, okay? You wouldn’t understand. None of you would understand. So please. Drop it. Immediately.”

He spoke to her like she was a little girl.

Victor waved his arm almost violently, and finally, a cab yanked to the corner.

Valerie felt as though she’d been slapped. She watched as her father slid into the back seat of the cab, telling the driver where he was headed. When he looked over at Valerie, Valerie’s head swam with fear and resentment and anger. What makes him think he can talk to me like that? What makes him think that I’ll just forgive him over and over again? He can’t walk out on us and not explain himself. I’m not a child. I’m supposed to be welcoming a baby into a brand-new world, a world without this kind of behavior, a world of more love and compassion and understanding.

What was wrong with him?

Valerie closed the door behind her father, telling him, “We’ll get our own car.”

Once inside another cab by themselves, Valerie burst into tears. Alex did his best to calm her down, but all she could say, over and over, was that she didn’t know why she’d allowed herself to trust her father again. “I should have known,” she said. “He’s Victor Sutton forever. Victor Sutton always comes first.”

When they reached the hotel, they paid the driver and went to the elevator, grateful not to run into any Suttons on their way. Maybe they hadn’t listened to the interview on the radio after all. Maybe Esme, Bethany, Rebecca, and the rest of them had gone out shopping and left the literary mumbo-jumbo to the rest of them. Maybe that meant they could leave this in the past. But Valerie wouldn’t be able to.

Valerie half believed she would never see her father again. She half believed they’d go their separate ways after this.

Maybe we could stop the book in its tracks. Maybe we could take that horrible interview as a sign that we couldn’t recover from the past.

She needed to protect her baby. She needed to protect herself.

Valerie and Alex returned to their hotel room and got in their pajamas and lay in bed. Valerie’s heart was pounding really hard, so much so that she tried to focus on her breathing and still her mind. Nothing was working. Alex eventually turned on the television, and they watched a few reruns of *Friends* and tried to calm down a little bit.

Valerie thought, What a disastrous weekend.

Alex fell in and out of sleep and eventually convinced her to order room service, which they ate sitting against pillows in bed: a grilled cheese and a club sandwich and potato chips.

It was immediately after Valerie took a big, cheesy bite that she received a phone call from Julia Copperfield, the publisher.

“Hey!” Julia’s voice was brighter than Valerie had imagined. “I don’t know if you’re aware of what’s going on online?”

Valerie slid her hand over her baby bump. “What? What’s happening?”

Was everyone making fun of her father? Was everyone making fun of her?

“Well, obviously a lot of people heard Victor’s little speech,” Julia said, “and the thing is, it’s really resonating with people. Someone uploaded it to TikTok and then Instagram and other social media sites, and it’s going viral like crazy. We had thousands of pre-orders for the book in just the past hour. I don’t know. I’ve never seen anything like it before, not with one of my books, anyway.”

Valerie was out of bed and staring through space with surprise. “Really?”

“Yeah. They’re so impressed with how candid he was and how open he was to admit his faults,” Julia continued. “They’re grateful that he can grow and change, or admit that he hasn’t been able to grow and change as much as his books suggest he could have. Anyway, it’s all really good news.” Julia paused. “I hope you’re doing okay. That sounded really intense.”

Valerie walked to the window and looked out at a Manhattan blanketed with snow with a stone-gray clouded sky above it. “I don’t know. I don’t know what to think. My dad disappeared last night and showed up to give that speech.”

She was surprised that she was so forthcoming with Julia, but she didn’t know what else to say.

She didn't add, And he pushed me away. He's always pushing everyone away. He hasn't learned anything, and he maybe never will.

Julia was quiet for a moment. "Did anything happen yesterday? Anything that might have triggered something?"

Immediately, Valerie thought of the baby shower, of Catherine and Max and her father and mother saving the day. Although it didn't make full sense, she felt a piece of the puzzle click.

But to Julia, she said no, nothing, and tried to get off the phone as quickly as she could. Julia begged for new pages. She wanted to get the book out to the public as soon as possible. She even wanted the Valerie and Victor team to write a second one, maybe one more geared toward parent-children relationships rather than their family's history. Valerie said they'd think about it and hung up.

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From where he sat, Alex had overheard the whole thing. “Wow,” he said.

“I guess there’s no such thing as bad press?” Valerie shrugged. She felt raw and strange.

Alex got up and opened a bottle of water. “What are you going to do?”

“I need to call Catherine,” she said.

It wasn’t the answer to anything, she knew. But it was a distraction and an easy way to get through her day. She could focus on someone else’s problems and pretend they were her entire universe. She could stop thinking about her father.

Thank goodness.

Before the night was through, Valerie found herself back at Catherine’s brownstone, eating another slice of baby shower cake and watching the snow. Catherine looked as though she’d spent all night and day crying, but she had news.

“Max called today,” she said. “He wants to talk.”

Valerie’s ears rang with surprise. “Really? Talk about what?”

Catherine shrugged. Her eyes were filled with light. “Listen, I don’t necessarily want him back. But I don’t want this baby to go without a father, either. I want us to be able to co-parent, to love our baby, to give our baby all he needs.” Her voice broke.

Valerie touched her friend's hand. "It's the very least you deserve. What do you think changed his mind? Like, why do you think he called?"

"Honestly, I have no idea," Catherine said. "He said he had a really weird night. Who knows what that means? I don't even know where he's staying or who he's ever with or whatever. Maybe he's still with Mandy. I don't know. I'm pretty sure he's out at all hours of the night, living that wild and wealthy life he wasn't able to before we met. You know, because he was broke and I paid for everything until he got the job he has now?" Catherine blinked several times as though her heart broke again in reminding herself of this.

"Would you take him back?" Valerie asked.

Catherine hesitated again.

"You wouldn't take him back, right?" Valerie said.

Catherine looked down at the floor. "Honestly? I don't know. I hope I don't. But he's the only man I've ever loved. How can I fight against that?"

Valerie couldn't help but think that everyone was a victim of their own emotions, that love was impossible to hide from, and that if it didn't lift you up, it was bound to destroy you.

When Catherine went to the kitchen to call her mother and let her know she was all right, Valerie got online to check out her father's viral video, which Addison and Brett capitalized on like crazy. So many people had shared it with captions like: finally a boomer says something i can relate to, and preach! and i just love that he's being so honest, so much love for him and his family, i hope they can come together again.

Julia texted then as though she could sense Valerie was thinking about the book.

JULIA: You'll never believe the number of pre-orders we got just today! I'm floored. When you get back to Nantucket, we have to celebrate! If Victor is up for it, of course.

Chapter Nineteen

June 2025

It was two days after the car accident that Valerie and Alex's baby was cleared to go home without his mother. Esme and Victor were both there for discharge, inching behind Alex as he pushed the stroller out of the hospital and into the beautiful purple sunset, introducing his son to the glorious world. Victor's eyes were heavy with tears. He didn't even know his mother yet. He didn't even know what he was missing.

Because Valerie was still in a coma, Alex had decided not to name the baby yet. He wanted to wait till she woke up. "She'd kill me if I named him without her," Alex said now, trying to put a smile on his face, one that illustrated how hopeful he was for the future. "I mean, I was always joking with her about what I wanted to name him. I always said, like, Francis Ford Coppola or Alfred Hitchcock or Quentin Tarantino."

Esme tried to laugh, even though it was clear she didn't like the joke.

Victor didn't even bother to smile.

For a little while, they walked along the water, watching the sailboats as they whizzed toward the open Nantucket Sound. The baby was covered from sunlight and sleeping soundly. Every time Victor got a glimpse of his perfect face, he had to bite his tongue to keep from sobbing. He couldn't believe the baby had left the accident unscathed.

More than that, he still couldn't believe who'd caused the accident.

It felt like a nightmare.

They'd first learned of the person in the other vehicle the morning after the baby's birth. It was a horrible coincidence and not one Victor or Esme knew how to handle. They'd hardly talked about it. The other driver had also been to the hospital, albeit briefly, with a broken arm. The accident had been ruled just that: an accident, without fault. It turns out there had been something wrong with the stoplight, and based on evidence and people at the scene, both cars had been slightly speeding, their drivers hurrying home to the people they loved.

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Did that make it no-fault? Or did that make it both of their faults? Victor didn't know, nor did he care. It didn't change the result.

Now, Alex stopped the stroller on the boardwalk and bent down to adjust the baby's blankets. Esme and Victor stood off to the side, hands gently linked.

Alex raised his chin to look at them. "I think I need to eat something. I can't remember the last time I did."

Victor related to that. He remembered during Joel's illness, he'd dropped twenty pounds without trying.

Victor and Esme suggested the little burger place down the boardwalk, where they grabbed a table and ordered cheeseburgers, onion rings, and fries. Victor got a beer because he didn't want to feel the harsh grip of reality quite as much as he did right now. Esme got a white wine, and Alex got a Diet Coke. Victor panged with guilt. Momentarily, he'd forgotten Alex was sober. He guessed it wasn't so easy for him to remain sober right now.

While they waited for their burgers, Alex went to the bathroom, and Esme slid over to peer down at the baby. Her eyes glinted with tears. "Your mom is going to fall in love with you. She's already in love with you," Esme whispered.

Suddenly, someone else was at the table—Hayley Medler, an old neighbor of theirs who'd moved a year or so before Joel died. Seeing her here, with gray hair and wrinkles, older in all the ways they'd also gotten older, made Victor's mind melt. He suddenly imagined that he and Esme were at the burger restaurant with baby Joel

instead. He suddenly imagined he was in his late twenties, burdened with all the fears of a young father and a young psychiatrist.

“You poor things. Haven’t you Suttons already been through enough?” Hayley said now, crossing her arms over her chest and leaning down to look at the baby. “He’s a darling, isn’t he?”

Hayley had always been nosy and gossipy, and now was no different. Victor had his guard up, but Esme seemed too tired to care.

“How is she?” Hayley asked.

Victor’s ears rang. What were they supposed to say? That the doctors didn’t know when or even if Valerie would wake up? That he and Esme were mentally and emotionally preparing to help raise the baby—a baby without a name—because they were maybe going to lose their daughter?

“I just can’t believe who did this to you,” Hayley said, shaking her head. “Have you seen her?”

“No,” Esme said. “And if you know so much about the accident, then you know that it wasn’t anyone’s fault. It wasn’t Dr. Benson’s. It wasn’t Valerie’s. It just happened.”

“But she was your couples therapist, wasn’t she?” Hayley whispered, with her hand over her mouth.

Now this was juicy island gossip, Victor thought angrily.

Victor flared his nostrils and got to his feet. He remembered many years ago when he and Esme had gotten into a little argument in the backyard, and Hayley had

interjected her opinion, telling them which of them she thought was correct. He'd thought at the time, What kind of person would do this? And she was just the same as ever.

"I think you'd better move on, Hayley," he said.

Hayley stiffened and glared at him.

"We need some family time," Victor said.

"It doesn't mean you have to be so rude," Hayley shot. "You never changed, Victor Sutton. Everyone knows you never will."

With that, she was gone, leaving Esme, Victor, and the baby in a disastrous silence. Alex remained in the bathroom. Victor guessed he was taking a moment to himself, another attempt to keep it together.

All Victor could think about was Dr. Hannah Benson.

All he could think was, What are the chances?

"Do you think we should call her?" Victor said suddenly.

Esme blinked at him with surprise. "Hayley?"

"No. Dr. Benson."

Esme's shoulders drooped. "Oh." It was clear that even though the accident was no-fault, and it wasn't Hannah who put Valerie in a coma, Esme wasn't entirely on board with forgiving her fully yet.

“You know she must be miserable,” Victor said. “The guilt must be eating her alive.”

Esme didn't respond. Victor wasn't sure he'd ever seen her like this.

Their burgers arrived. Alex came back out and ate quietly in a way that suggested he was just trying to keep himself alive for the baby. Victor only drank half his beer and ate half his burger. Esme ate even less than that. Eventually, they went back to the car and said goodbye to Alex and the baby, who were heading back home. Alex didn't want any help from them right now, but he said he'd call them as soon as he wanted a break.

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“You aren’t alone in this,” Esme promised him, hugging him once more.

But Victor and Esme had to get home, too. They weren’t living alone any longer.

They had someone who relied on them for everything.

Chapter Twenty

January 2025

Five Months Before the Accident

It was the second week of the new year, and Victor was in his office with Kade, talking about what Kade got for Christmas. To his surprise, Kade was more than eager to discuss the intricacies of his Lego sets, a video game he was playing obsessively, and a book he was reading—something with dragons in it that wouldn’t have interested Victor at all, save for the fact that Kade was so fascinated in the story and explained it well.

It was remarkable. Kade wanted to bring Victor into his world.

“Does your uncle Jack ever play the game with you?” Victor asked a little while later, wanting to get a better portrait of the relationship between Jack and Kade.

Kade shrugged and looked at the ground. “He thinks it’s a waste of time.”

“And what do you think of that?”

“I think he’s too old to understand,” Kade said.

Victor laughed. “Do you think I’m too old to understand?”

“You’re not as old as Uncle Jack.”

Victor guessed he was maybe four or five years younger than Jack, if that. But he appreciated that the kid was beginning to trust him and open up to him.

He also hated that he still thought of the boy—sometimes—as a version of Joel. But it was something he couldn’t fight. It came upon him like the weather.

It was late, nearing the end of their session, when Jack called to say he was held up with something. “I’m sorry, Vic,” he said over the phone. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

Victor waved his hand, strangely glad to have a bit more time with Kade. “We’ll go grab something to eat and wait for you there. I’ll text you where we end up.”

“Fantastic,” Jack said. “I owe you one.”

It was a clear day of about forty degrees. Victor and Kade walked from his office down the road to a Mexican restaurant, where they ordered Dr Peppers and quesadillas and ate their way through a whole bowl of tortilla chips with salsa. They talked about easy things, like what Kade liked most about sailing and which languages he liked to speak most.

“I really like reading Greek, but I can’t speak it very well,” Kade said. “But we spent a lot of time in the Greek islands. My dad taught me how to ride a motorbike, but he made me promise not to tell my mom I learned.”

Victor laughed. “What was it like?”

“You’ve never ridden one?”

“No.”

Kade looked shocked. “It’s like, so fun. You can go really fast, and you feel like you’re flying. My dad told me not to go too fast because sometimes people get into accidents. Especially tourists.” Kade took another chip. “But my dad told me we were never tourists wherever we went. We were citizens of the world.”

“What a great way to think of it,” Victor said.

He wondered if it was getting easier for Kade to think of and talk about his parents. It was obviously still painful for him; it would be painful forever. But it was a good sign that he could readily turn to his memories and see them for what they were.

How often had Victor really talked about Joel in the past few decades?

Was Kade able to heal far more than Victor simply because he was opening his heart and his mind up to accepting his parents had died?

And is he only able to do it because I’m helping him? Victor wondered.

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Kade took a chip and asked, “How long have you been a psychiatrist?”

“About forty years,” Victor said.

Kade looked impressed. Victor knew he couldn’t fathom that amount of time.

“Have you talked to a lot of kids like me?” Kade asked. “Kids who lost their parents?”

Victor hesitated before he answered. He didn’t want to make Kade think he was extra weird. He also didn’t want to make Kade think he wasn’t unique.

“Every case is different,” Victor said. “The only thing that unites them is that I can’t talk about any of them. Have you heard of patient-doctor confidentiality?”

Kade nodded. “I think I heard about it in a movie.”

“Right. I can’t talk to anyone about you or anything you say,” Victor said. “What do you think of that?”

Kade stomped one of his feet under the table—not out of frustration, but because he was thinking so hard. “I think I like it. I think it makes me trust you more.”

Victor smiled. “I hope you know you can trust me.”

“You can trust me, too,” Kade told him as though he’d just decided on it.

Victor felt like it was the most beautiful gift he'd received in quite a while—the gift of trust, the gift of Kade being able to trust him.

He wasn't sure if his family trusted him. He wasn't sure he blamed them.

He really wasn't sure if he could trust himself. He never knew what he was going to do next.

After Jack picked up his great-nephew, Victor paid for the Mexican food and went for a long walk down the boardwalk, feeling the rush of the winter wind against his back. He knew he had people to answer to, and he needed to fix a few mistakes, but right now, he felt loose and happier than he had since the big trip to Manhattan.

That had been one disaster after another.

He still couldn't fathom what had happened to him at Catherine's brownstone. It was like something inside him had broken, something he'd fixated on throughout the Broadway show and dinner. Why had he thought talking to her husband would fix anything? Why had he thought he could talk to Max and better understand himself in some small way?

The breakdown he'd had at the radio show the next day had gone viral on the internet, whatever that meant. Strangely, it was an embarrassment that had launched his and Valerie's book into the stratosphere. Julie was terribly pleased, sending screenshots of pre-orders and telling him that she wanted them to write another book after this one. All she saw were dollar signs. He couldn't blame her, he guessed. It was a business.

But this was his emotional health they were talking about. This was his relationship both to himself and his entire family.

And the fact that he'd "opened up" to hundreds of thousands of followers rather than coming clean about his internal state to his family or Dr. Frank Gallagher spoke volumes.

It demonized him, at least in the eyes of Valerie.

After the trip to Manhattan, Victor had seen Valerie sparingly. Alex and Valerie had come over to the house for New Year's Eve, and Valerie had come over to have tea with her mother, but she hadn't once brought up the book. It was almost like Valerie wanted to smoke Victor out. She wanted him to come to her about what happened.

But how could Victor explain himself to her if he couldn't explain himself to himself?

Victor drove home and found Esme hard at work in the kitchen. "I'm trying a new recipe!" she called over the sound of sizzling onions. "It says it won't be ready for another four hours. I hope you'll be hungry by then?"

Victor smiled and walked over to kiss his ex-wife on the cheek. His heart swelled with love for her. To her credit, Esme had decided to trust that wherever he'd gone off to that night in Manhattan had been his business and his business alone.

That night, they cuddled and watched a movie and exchanged a few laughs. Victor searched Esme's face for reasons she was angry with him.

When they were getting ready for bed, he asked her, "Do you think Valerie will forgive me?"

And Esme said, "I'm not getting involved."

Victor wrapped his arms around her in bed and felt Esme drift off. He watched a big

yellow moon lift higher in the night sky. He knew sleep wouldn't come for him.

But the next late morning in couples therapy, Esme brought it up to Dr. Hannah Benson. Victor realized he should have seen this coming. He should have known she was biding her time.

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Dr. Benson kept her attention on Esme as Esme explained her side of things.

“He just got up and left,” Esme said, her voice even. “I was terrified. I had no idea what was going on. He didn’t return to the hotel till eight in the morning and looked terrible. And then the next day, well, I’m sure you’ve heard the radio interview?”

“I did.” Dr. Hannah nodded.

“I cried and cried when I heard it,” Esme said, still unable to look at Victor. “It was like he was finally saying so many of the things I’ve wanted him to say. Finally acknowledging so much!” Esme turned to look at Victor. “Why couldn’t you say any of that to me?”

Victor felt his heart shatter. Unable to stop himself, he reached over to take Esme’s hand. Such an act of tenderness in front of Dr. Hannah felt silly or too far.

“I didn’t plan on saying any of that,” Victor said finally.

Esme’s eyes glinted.

Dr. Hannah’s voice was overly formal. “Can you explain what was going on in your mind at the time?”

Be honest with her, Victor begged himself. Tell her about Max. Tell her about Catherine. Tell her about how you’re trying to “therapize” yourself.

But all Victor could say was, “I left that night because I wanted to try to fix myself.”

Esme shook her head delicately. “We need to fix this together. Not apart.”

Victor nodded. But he didn’t know how to believe her. Esme was perfect, or mostly perfect. Didn’t she see that?

When it was clear that Victor wasn’t going to divulge more details about his big night out in Manhattan, Dr. Hannah tried a different tactic. “How is it going with the book, Victor?”

Victor’s stomach bubbled with nerves. To his surprise, he was honest, saying, “Valerie isn’t so keen on seeing me right now.”

Just this morning, Valerie sent him an email that read: We need to keep working on the book as well as we can. Maybe it’s best if we write our memories and notes separately and email them to each other. I already talked to Julia, and she says that she can go over what we’ve written and decide how to bring everything together.

Victor wrote back, on the verge of sobbing: Why?

Valerie responded: You left and you refuse to tell us why. It made me understand that you might always be on the brink of leaving again. It opened up all these abandonment issues I’ve had. Maybe it’s better if we press pause on our relationship, at least until after the baby comes. I don’t want to stress myself out. I don’t want the baby to be unhealthy. I don’t want to bring our bad history into the next generation. I do love you, Dad. But I’m worried. I need to know things can be different.

Dr. Hannah asked, “Are you going to try to speak to her more about what happened? More about what’s going on in your head?”

Victor raised both of his hands. “She wants space from me. She doesn’t see me as a viable candidate to be anyone in her life right now. I have to respect her wishes.”

Esme, who hadn't known about the emails nor about Valerie's full decision, squeezed Victor's hand hard.

"My hope is that as we write the book, we'll get closer again," Victor continued, hearing how delusional he was. "My hope is she'll feel the love I have for her and come back to me."

Dr. Hannah—so much younger than even Valerie—looked at Victor with what Victor suspected was pity. She then said, "If you want to talk more about ways to get through this..."

Victor waved his hands. "I know. I know. I need to see Dr. Gallagher." He was on his feet, suddenly breathless with anger. The mess of his life felt like sailing ropes tied in so many impossible knots. "I need to get out of here. Esme, I'm sorry."

With that, he left.

Chapter Twenty-One

February

Four Months Before The Accident

Eleven inches of snow fell on Nantucket Island on the second day of February. Electricity was lost in 30 percent of the houses and businesses, and only a snow truck was out trying to clear the roads. Valerie was cozy at home with her husband, decorating the baby's room. Although they'd originally thought they didn't want to learn the baby's gender, they'd broken down at their last doctor's appointment and found out that—incredibly—they were going to have a boy. Alex had stopped all the jokes about naming the baby after a director and had begun to offer real, valid options: Henry, Xavier, Elijah. Valerie noted all the baby name ideas in an app on her

phone and tried them out, reciting them as they painted the walls a beautiful light green.

And then, she felt Alex's arms around her. She felt his kisses along her neck.

A part of her hoped the baby would get here already so they could finally, finally be a family of three. Another part of her wanted to enjoy every last minute of this gorgeous pregnancy era, a time of hunkering down and growing and nourishing. A time—as her mother called it—of nesting.

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When they finished another coat of paint, Valerie and Alex went to their separate offices to finish some work. Now that Alex had secured another chunk of funding, Alex was editing bits and pieces of his documentary, and Valerie was working on another chapter for the book she was writing with her father. Of course, it had been over a month since she and Victor sat in a room and worked “together.” But miraculously, they were further into the manuscript than she’d ever dreamed of. Maybe it was better that they’d decided to keep working apart.

Suddenly, Valerie’s phone rang. To her surprise, it was Catherine.

“Catherine!” She hadn’t heard from her since the first week of the year, when Catherine explained that she and Max were still “discussing” options about getting back together or co-parenting. Valerie had listened without giving her two cents, and she’d texted now and again after that, wanting to make herself available. She’d seen how awful Catherine’s “real” friends were. But Catherine had kept to herself.

“Valerie! I’m so sorry I’m just reaching out to you now,” Catherine said. Her voice was sweet and beautiful and so different from how it had been on that day in December. “I wanted to call and tell you! I had my baby yesterday!”

Valerie’s heart exploded with happiness. Next came a million questions. How was she, and how was the baby, and who was there, and what was the process like? Catherine answered everything in dramatic detail, even down to how painful it had all been, “like giving birth to an elephant, to be honest with you,” and then said, “Max came after it all happened to meet the baby. It’s a girl, thank goodness, and I told Max I wanted to name her myself.”

Valerie was so glad that her friend had decided to take a stand.

“What’s her name?” Valerie asked.

“It’s Esme!” Catherine cried. “I know, I know, I only met your mother that one time. But your parents were so helpful that day at the baby shower. I’ll never forget it, not as long as I live. I wanted to find a way to honor them. Plus, I mean, gosh. Esme is such a gorgeous name. Once I thought of it, I couldn’t get it out of my head. And what you told me about your parents’ story is so touching, Valerie. Getting back together after all those years takes real guts. And...” She hesitated. “Your father is someone special. He helped me a lot. I hope you’ll tell him thanks for me next time you see him.”

Valerie said she would. Her heart felt bruised.

She congratulated Catherine again, until Catherine admitted she had to get off the phone and tend to baby Esme. After they hung up, Catherine sent thirty-five photographs from Esme’s first hours, all of which Valerie perused with tears in her eyes. She sent along a photo to her mother, telling Esme #1 that there was a #2 in the mix.

MOM: She’s perfect! Tell Catherine I’m so honored!

MOM: Wow, wow, wow!

Valerie smiled and texted back.

VALERIE: Good thing my baby is a boy! Otherwise, I might have wanted to use Esme myself...

Her mother sent back ten red hearts.

Valerie spent the next few hours working hard on the manuscript, sending Victor notes, writing down her own memories, and trying to find the heart behind their story, even without talking to her father about it face-to-face—or even on the phone.

It was a bizarre way to work. But it felt easier this way. It was less stressful.

Valerie wasn't permanently waiting for her father to fail her.

She was grateful her mother hadn't brought it up. She was grateful her mother knew that Valerie needed to take some time.

She guessed that her mother, too, was trying to wage her own war with her feelings for Victor. Valerie wouldn't be surprised if Esme decided to end their relationship soon—and move on with her life.

Maybe the Victor experience was just a blip.

March 2025: Three Months Before The Accident

But during the first week of March, Valerie met with Julia Copperfield at a little coffee shop in the Nantucket Historic District to go over the recent chapters that Victor and Valerie had both “okayed” for publication. When Valerie came in, Julia was sitting in the corner, marking a manuscript with a big red pen, her brow furrowed. Her smile was shaded with what Valerie read as alarm. But she greeted Valerie initially with a, “Goodness, you look gorgeous! When are you due again?”

“June,” Valerie said with a nervous smile.

Julia flashed a strained smile, one Valerie guessed was related to the fact that Julia needed the manuscript done before then. She needed her writers to get along; she needed something better than what she was getting.

“The book feels...” Julia said after they sat down, folding her hands, “a bit lost?”

Valerie’s heart pounded. She suddenly felt as though Julia could peer into her soul.

“Can you tell me why you think that?” Valerie asked, trying to be professional.

“The idea for the book was for you and your father to come together and tell a united story about your family, one that took both of your emotional arcs into account,” Julia said, removing her reading glasses and twirling them. “But the pages you’ve sent me are getting further and further away from your father’s, so much so that the work’s turning into two pieces again. I don’t fully know how to bring them together.” She pinched the skin along her eyebrow. “I know you and your father have your differences. I know that things are tricky. But is there any way you could come together—as professionals—and discuss this? I have a list of problems here.” Julia removed a printed-out list from under the manuscript and handed it over.

Valerie winced. The list was long. She started to read it and immediately felt her cheeks flush. Julia was a professional; she knew her way around a good book. It meant that Valerie had to trust her.

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Was it better to just call the whole book contract off?

After she met with Julia, Valerie left the coffee shop, bundling herself up as she hurried to her car. Rather than drive back to her house, she took the route to her parents' place, squeezing the steering wheel with stiff fingers. Very suddenly, she was at the door, her heart beating fast. When she turned the knob, it gave and let her in.

"Hello?" Valerie called.

Nobody said anything back, not at first. It was clear her mother wasn't home, because ordinarily Esme was downstairs, maybe in the kitchen or in the living room, doing an exercise video or reading a book or trying out a new recipe. That left her father. Was he in his study, working tirelessly on the worst book anyone had ever put to print?

Valerie crept up the stairs. She didn't want to frighten her father; she didn't want him to think there was an intruder. What was she doing, coming all the way over here like this? She should have called first. Was she reckless?

But what Julia had told her had alarmed her. It had forced her to reckon with the mess that she and her father had created. No, Dad created this mess. I stepped away from it, she reminded herself.

She put her knuckles to the door and knocked.

Within seconds, her father stood before her. He looked frankly awful, with a rough bearded face and red cheeks and a pair of sweatpants that looked like they hadn't

been washed in a while. There was a strange smell in the study, one that hadn't been there during any of their writing sessions. It was like sour milk.

"Valerie?" He looked surprised, and then he looked rather angry.

Valerie held the folder of Julia's notes out to him. "We have work to do," she said. Her tone was harsher than she'd wanted it to be.

Victor stepped back and sat down in his office chair. He opened the folder and looked down at the list. For a long time, he read what Julia had written and didn't say anything. Valerie turned to the window and opened it to let out the bad air. Her father didn't say anything about that, either.

In the back of Valerie's mind, she wondered, What if something happens to him? What if something happens, and we never mend our relationship, and I regret it for the rest of my life?

And then she reminded herself, It's his fault for not getting help. It's his fault for "therapizing" everyone and not bothering to mend his own heart and mind. It's his family who suffers. It's his family who falls apart because he can't save himself.

"Julia already sent me this," Victor said stiffly.

Valerie raised her shoulders. "So? What do we do?"

Victor closed the folder. "I thought you wanted to work separately." His tone was like a stone.

"I don't know. I don't know what I want."

I want you to get into therapy. I want everything to be fixed.

“Have you considered trying to figure that out?” her father asked.

Valerie was taken aback. But then she remembered a core fact: her father wasn’t very nice. He never had been.

“Should we call off the book?” she asked. Anger made her stomach roil.

“Maybe we should.” Victor threw the folder to the side.

There was a long moment of silence.

“I thought you didn’t want me to be around you. I thought you didn’t want all this stress to affect the baby,” Victor said.

Valerie had never seen him so volatile.

She realized he was hurt and didn’t know how to tell her.

She thought, Men of this age don’t know how to take care of their emotional health.

She thought, I wonder if there’s any way past his ego.

And then, Victor’s phone rang. Despite Valerie being there, despite Valerie actually wanting to try for the first time in nearly three months, he took it right away.

Valerie felt it like a closed door between them.

“Hello?”

Valerie hung there in his office, very pregnant and more alienated than ever. She tried to read her father’s face. She tried to understand him.

But then her father said, “I’ll be there right away.”

He was on his feet, his phone on the desk. He was looking at her like someone he had to deal with. “I have to go,” he announced.

Valerie’s heart panged. “Where are you going?”

“I have to help someone,” he said. “Someone who actually wants me in their life.”

It was a low blow, and Valerie could see from Victor’s face that he knew it. But he didn’t seem to care. He fled, hurrying down the hallway and the staircase. Next came the sound of the closet door opening, followed by the garage door.

Valerie remained in her father’s study, watching the softly falling snow.

It hadn’t gone the way she’d planned. Then again, she had no idea what she’d planned.

Was it possible that none of them knew what was going to happen next? That they were all flailing through time and space, trying to make sense of themselves and their surroundings and the people they loved before their time was up?

Was it possible she was too hard on her father?

Chapter Twenty-Two

Driving swiftly through that mid-fifties March afternoon, Victor reached the Nantucket combined middle school-high school in record time and stormed through the front door with the air of a superman come to rescue the world and everyone in it. In the office, he found Kade, doubled over and looking at his shoes. For Victor, the pain of seeing Kade like that was enormous. Marty McEvans, the guidance counselor, greeted Victor by name. “Thank you for coming.” And then he said, “Kade, I’m going to talk to Dr. Sutton for a little while. Is that okay?”

Kade nodded and still refused to look up.

Victor touched Kade’s shoulder and told him, “It’s going to be okay, Kade.”

Victor realized, in his heart of hearts, that he had to make it okay for Kade.

Victor followed Marty into his office and closed the door behind them. “What happened?” he said under his breath.

Marty shook his head. “We didn’t know till this afternoon. I don’t even know what to say.”

“Come on,” Victor urged. He was getting impatient. He could still feel Valerie back at the house, waiting expectantly, her eyes so sorrowful and angry. She looked like me, he realized.

Had Victor chosen Kade over Valerie? But then again, Valerie had been avoiding him for almost three months. She’d made it clear that she didn’t want him in her life.

The only reason she came over was because of the book.

Victor forced himself to focus on the topic at hand. He tuned in to Marty.

“Apparently, Jack Landan had a stroke last night,” Marty said. “Kade drove his great-uncle to the hospital and checked him in and then drove himself back.”

“Kade drove?” Victor cried. “He’s eleven years old!”

But then Victor remembered all the stories Kade had told him about his tremendous travels, about riding motorbikes and sailing back to safety. Kade was enormously capable, at least physically. It was his emotional landscape that Victor needed to worry about.

“We only learned because someone at the hospital called the school today,” Marty said. “Which means Kade drove himself to school this morning. Nothing else about Kade was amiss. When we asked him about what happened last night, he told us that his great-uncle was stable and that he was going to check on him after school. Like it was up to him to make sure Jack was all right. I can’t imagine what he did last night. I guess he drove himself home and put himself to bed? Did he make himself dinner?”

“He probably did. He’s very capable.” Victor collapsed on the chair opposite Marty and hung his head. “Wow. I don’t know what to say.”

“You’re the only one he wanted to see,” Marty explained.

And then, Victor remembered Joel in a hospital bed, so eager to see his father that he’d nearly fallen out of it. He shook the image out.

“He can’t go home by himself,” Victor said.

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“I know. We were thinking of calling child protective services.”

“Don’t,” Victor said. He’d had numerous bad experiences. He’d seen too many children slip through the cracks. “He can stay with me.”

Marty raised his eyebrows. “Are you sure about that? It’s highly unusual.”

Victor found that he was more than sure. There was nowhere else in the world this kid belonged. And Victor was the only person Kade had opened up to since he’d come to Nantucket. Where else could he go?

It was decided that Kade would leave school early that afternoon so he could visit his great-uncle Jack and pack up his things to move into Victor’s place, at least temporarily. This was not often done, not in Nantucket and not anywhere else, Victor knew, but he couldn’t think of any other way, and Marty agreed.

“If anyone gives you grief about this, I’ll stand up for you,” Marty said. “That kid has been through enough. He needs stability. He needs to be with someone he knows and trusts.”

Of course, Kade moving in with Victor meant that Kade would need a new therapist. Victor would deal with that later. He’d find someone he half trusted. But who in the world did he trust?

In the car, Kade hardly spoke. Victor asked him a few questions about what happened last night and learned that Kade had found Jack on the floor of the living room and called 911.

“What did it feel like to see him like that?” Victor asked tentatively.

Kade said, “I’ve seen plenty of accidents through the years. I know it’s better not to think about your emotions first. I know it’s better to act. It could save someone’s life.”

It was such a clinical answer that it shut Victor up.

To give Kade and his uncle space, Victor waited outside the hospital room for a little while, breathing in the smell of disinfectant and watching hospital workers whizz past. He felt like he was having an out-of-body experience as if he didn’t fully understand what was happening or what would come next. He hadn’t even asked Esme if he could bring Kade home. Then again, Esme was a softy and would take to the boy right away.

Probably, she’d see Joel in him, too.

He lurched with fear. He wasn’t sure if Esme could handle that. Then again, Esme was far stronger than he was, working one-on-one with a psychiatrist who had her on a good route forward. Esme was brave enough to ask for help and to start the healing process.

One day, she’d probably be brave enough to kick Victor to the curb because he wasn’t as brave as she was.

Victor went to the coffee machine and drank an espresso and felt concurrently rattled and high energy. It was terrible.

It shouldn’t have been a surprise that Bethany found him there in the hospital hallway. But it had been so long since any of his daughters had tried to see him that Victor had almost forgotten they were on the island at all.

Two in one day, Victor thought darkly.

It was incredible how quickly he'd alienated everyone he'd ever loved. After Manhattan, Valerie had stepped away, and then Bethany and Rebecca had found ways to drift, as well. Victor had hardly seen his grandchildren. They'd used plenty of excuses: school, sports, friends. But Victor knew they were too nervous to have him in their lives. He knew he'd done wrong.

"Dad?" Bethany was wearing scrubs and had her hair in a loose ponytail. She looked tired and older than she had around Christmas when they'd had such a joyful time celebrating the holidays and exchanging old and beautiful stories. He wondered if she was planning on marrying that boyfriend of hers sometime soon—maybe in a year or two, now that they were off to the races on a brand-new version of their high school love. He wondered if he'd be invited to the wedding, then felt bad for himself, then cursed himself for feeling like that.

"Dad, what are you doing here?" Bethany asked when Victor didn't answer. "Is Mom all right?"

Always, the children cared about their mother the most. But of course they did. Esme was perfect, or always on her way to being perfect. Victor was garbage.

"A friend of mine had a stroke," Victor said, gesturing vaguely.

"I'm so sorry, Dad. Really." She touched his shoulder, and Victor flinched with surprise. "Do you want me to check in with his doctor? See what's going on?"

Victor said he would like that. Very much.

Bethany returned a few minutes later with bad news. She said Jack's stroke was massive with repercussions that weren't fully understood yet. "He'll need months of

therapy of all kinds,” she explained. “Physical therapy and speech therapy and so on. And even then, with strokes of this magnitude, it’s never clear if he’ll be able to live on his own again.”

Victor’s heart dropped into his stomach.

Kade had lost everyone. Was he really going to lose Jack, too?

Suddenly, the door opened, and Kade stepped out, looking forlorn but not even close to tears. Victor wanted to drop down and hug him, but he held himself back. Bethany’s face transformed, and Victor wondered if it was because she saw Joelin Kade’s face, too. But he knew she would never say anything of that nature, never aloud.

“Bethany, this is Kade. Kade, this is my daughter, Dr. Bethany Sutton,” Victor said.

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Kade stuck out his hand to shake Bethany's. He was such a formal little kid. More adult than Victor was sometimes. "Are you a doctor like Victor is a doctor?"

Bethany shook her head. "I'm a surgeon. But we both had to go to medical school."

"That's cool," Kade said. "I had never been to school till recently. I always was homeschooled."

Bethany looked quizzical.

Victor knew he needed to fill in the blanks. "Kade's great-uncle is the one who had a stroke."

Bethany winced. "I'm sorry to hear that, Kade. Really."

Kade nodded. "I think it's bad. I mean, I know it's bad."

Bethany looked like she, too, wanted to hug him.

And then Victor came out with the news. "Kade is going to stay with me and your mom for a little while."

Bethany struggled to keep her shock off her face. "You're going to be very comfortable there, Kade. I grew up there, and it's just wonderful. Make sure to have Dr. Sutton make his famous pancakes."

Kade assessed Victor with new eyes. "I didn't know you could make pancakes."

Victor smiled. “They’re not bad.”

“They’re delicious,” Bethany said, sniffing. “I haven’t had one for a little while.”

“The door is always open,” Victor told her. “You know that.”

Esme was home from yoga when Victor returned with Kade in tow. Kade had packed two backpacks of mostly books and a few clothes and looked composed and unsurprised, as though this were just another step in a narrative he couldn’t control. None of us can control our lives, I suppose, Victor thought, guiding Kade through the door that led from the garage to the hall to the kitchen. But Kade kept getting hit again and again.

Esme was at the counter, slicing an apple and smearing it with peanut butter. She was still wearing her workout outfit and had her hair pulled up into a gray ponytail.

She looked every bit like the woman Victor had fallen in love with all those years ago.

She took one look at Kade and nearly dropped to her knees.

I wasn’t imagining it. He looks like Joel, Victor thought.

“Hello,” Kade said when Esme didn’t say anything at first. “My name is Kade.”

Esme’s voice was warm. “Hi, Kade. My name is Esme.”

Kade sat down on the sofa with his backpack at his feet and looked around the room. He looked really small, and his feet hardly touched the ground. His stature didn’t match his maturity. It was mind-boggling.

“Are you Dr. Sutton’s wife?” Kade asked.

Esme’s cheek twitched. “We’re partners,” she said.

“What does that mean?” Kade asked.

Esme explained it as simply as she could. “We used to be married, but we broke up for a very long time. Now, we’re trying to see if we work together as partners again.”

“And then you’ll get married again?” Kade asked.

Esme’s eyes flickered over to Victor. They seemed to demand what on earth is going on?

“We might get married again,” Esme said, although her words were stiff. “Do you mind if I talk to Dr. Sutton for a moment?”

Kade shifted. “That’s fine.”

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Esme led Victor upstairs and into their bedroom, where she closed the door behind them, crossed her arms, and looked up at him. Her jaw was stiff.

“Kade is one of my patients,” Victor said finally. “He lost both of his parents in a sailing accident last year and managed to sail to safety by himself. After that, he came here to live with Jack Landan, his great-uncle, but Jack had a stroke last night.” Victor went on to explain that Kade had driven himself to school, that he was emotionally mature for his age, but that it was clear there were multiple lasting emotional wounds. “He asked for me at school,” Victor said, breaking down. He sat down on the edge of the bed.

What he didn’t say was resting in the air between them. He asked for me, and he looked so much like Joel. How could I say no?

“I’m going to find him a new therapist,” Victor said, although he knew Esme didn’t care about that.

Esme sat beside him and wrapped her arms around him. After a very long time, she murmured, “There’s the kind Victor Sutton I fell in love with. There’s that heart I’ve longed for.”

Victor sniffed. “It’s been here the whole time. I just don’t always know how to show it.”

Esme kissed his cheek, then his nose. “He looks hungry.”

Victor was grateful that Esme didn’t bring up the Joel factor.

Victor said, “We ran into Bethany. She mentioned pancakes. I think I’d better get down there and mix ’em up.”

He got to his feet and wrung out his hands. “Valerie came by today.”

Esme dropped her gaze to the carpet.

“I know what she’s going to say,” Victor said. “I know she thinks I chose a patient over her again. I know she’s so hurt and trying to protect herself. I don’t know how to bridge the divide between us. I don’t know how not to make one mistake after another. I love her so much, Esme. I love all our children.”

“They love you, too,” Esme whispered.

The air was heavy. Victor thought he was going to burst into tears.

“Can you get started on the batter?” Victor asked, surprising himself. “I’m going to make a phone call.” He removed his cell from his back pocket and brought up the number for Dr. Frank Gallagher. He was finally and fully at the end of his rope. He showed the name to Esme, whose eyes lit up with recognition.

She kissed him on the lips and whispered, “There is no shame in getting help, my love. There is no shame in admitting that nothing is easy and that we’re all in this messy life together. Please, open your heart to him. Please, let yourself heal.”

Just before she went into the hallway, she whispered, “I do love you, Victor Sutton. I always have.”

Dr. Frank Gallagher answered the phone on the second ring. Victor pictured him in the spring sunlight, maybe on his wraparound porch, with a glass of wine beside him and the Nantucket Sound before him like a big indigo blanket. “Hi, Victor,” Dr.

Frank said. “How are you?”

Victor bit his tongue to keep from crying.

In as firm of a voice as he could muster, he managed to say, “I need help, man.”

Dr. Frank didn’t make him feel strange or bad or bizarre. He didn’t make Victor feel as though he was anything more than a man up against emotional powers that were often stronger than he was. “Let’s set up a meeting for tomorrow,” Dr. Frank said. “My afternoon is free and easy. We don’t have to go to that stuffy office, either. What do you say we go for a walk?”

Victor pressed the heel of his hand to his forehead and walked to the window, gazing out at the same ocean he knew Dr. Frank was looking at. It united them.

Another thing that united them was their ability to help and heal others.

“Do you have a therapist, Frank?” Victor asked before he got off the phone.

“You think I can handle the mess in my head by myself?” Frank asked, laughing. “There’s no way I could manage that. I need as much help as I can get.”

“Was it hard to admit that?”

Frank hesitated. “We’re men of a certain age, Victor. We grew up with fathers and mothers who thought therapy was a bunch of crock, a bad deal, a waste of money. We’re learned men, men of science, but I don’t think that can ever fully destroy what we’ve learned in our childhoods. We’re all works in progress, Victor. Remember, I’ve learned far more about this field from you and your research than I have from anyone else.”

Victor filled his lungs. From downstairs came the sounds of a little boy laughing and Esme telling a story. Esme and Joel, he thought before correcting himself. Esme and Kade. 2025. A new era of love.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Victor said to Dr. Frank.

“I’m looking forward to it.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

That afternoon in March, Bethany called Valerie and told her everything she knew. “Dad was at the hospital with a little boy. A little boy of about eleven years. A little boy who,” and here, her voice hiccupped, “who looked so much like him, Valerie. I swear. It threw me for a loop.”

Valerie was cozy on the sofa, still reeling from her difficult exchange with her father and how swiftly he’d run out the door. Just minutes ago, she’d decided to take a break on the book, maybe until after the baby came, maybe forever, and she’d been composing an email to her father that said exactly that. But this “Kade” person threw a wrench in her plans.

A part of her echoed with empathy for her father. A patient of his was eleven years old, a boy who looked so much like Joel that it alarmed Bethany (Bethany, who was never alarmed about anything), and she knew that couldn’t be easy. But was it really necessary for him to bring the boy home with him? Was it really necessary for him to get so much more involved with a difficult patient—when there was so much at stake within his own family?

“I wonder what Mom’s thinking,” Valerie said.

“We should call her,” Bethany agreed.

“Does Rebecca know?”

“I called you first,” Bethany confessed. Probably because she’d known it would

affect Valerie the most; Valerie, who'd been thick as thieves with Joel; Valerie, who'd been the most affected by his death because they'd been like twins, facing the world together until he'd been taken away.

But when Valerie called her mother later that afternoon, she heard a version of her mother that she hadn't known still existed. "Honey, he's alone in the world," she said of Kade, explaining the situation with the parents, the sailing accident, and last night's stroke. "He's such a darling. You wouldn't believe it. I really think we should have a big family dinner this weekend. We need to, you know, distract him and welcome him and show him what it means to belong to a big family. It's messy, and it's beautiful, and it's..."

Esme hesitated. Valerie tried to picture where she was and decided she was probably standing in the yawn of the fridge, trying to find yet another snack for the little boy. And was there anything really wrong about that? Was there anything "bad" about her parents giving love and tenderness to this little boy? No. There wasn't.

But Valerie didn't know if she could handle it. Not so soon before her baby was due.

She didn't know if she could see her father with that little boy.

Later that week, she brought all this and more to her psychiatrist. They were sitting in the sun-lit office a few blocks away from the Sutton Book Club, watching a soft spring rain filter through the tree branches out the window. Valerie's therapist was named Willa Tillman, and she was in her late fifties with a dusting of blond-gray hair and long fingers that, Valerie had once learned, had been trained formally in piano before an arm injury had rendered her fingers incapable of Rachmaninoff and Debussy. Valerie guessed that Willa had never fully gotten over it.

But she was a brilliant therapist. She was kind and empathetic and eager to dig deeper into Valerie's emotions.

And when Valerie told her about her father and Kade, about how she wasn't sure if she could see them together, about how hurt she still was about the past, Willa told her to be kind to herself and to draw boundaries where she needed to.

"Tell your father you can't write the book with him any longer," Willa suggested. "You have enough money coming in. You have four weddings this autumn and another ten next summer. You have the baby coming. And didn't you say that Alex secured even more funding for his documentary?"

Valerie nodded, feeling a wave of pride for her husband roll through her. He was going to finish that thing. He was going to put it out on the documentary circuits. It was going to sell for a great deal of money, yes. But it was also going to propel his art career into the stratosphere.

Valerie just knew it.

"I do want to mend things with my father," Valerie told Willa, told herself. "I want to sit with him and tell him everything I feel. I want him to tell me what he's feeling, too. But I don't think we need to do that with a book. I don't think we need to do that in public, on a radio station, or by going viral."

Willa nodded. "You're brave, Valerie. You'll know when the time is right."

Valerie went home and put on a big sweatshirt and sat on the porch with a book and a cup of tea. Alex was bundled up in the corner, wearing headphones as he edited through another few scenes in his documentary, and in the distance, seagulls swooped and cawed over the Nantucket Sound. Valerie told herself that someday soon, she'd find the time to sit with her father and make sense of everything. She told herself that she would mend their relationship.

Her father would hold her baby in his arms.

Her father would love all of them—and know how to show that love properly.

They had to find a way forward.

But not now. Valerie was too tired to fix everything right now.

Eventually that night, Valerie and Alex ordered pizza and ate it outside, watching the spring evening fade to blue darkness. Valerie chewed a bite of black olive, cheese, and crust, mulling over everything that had happened, and finally asked Alex, “Do you think there’s ever a right time to do something?”

Alex raised his eyebrows. “I think everything in life is about timing.”

“That’s what I keep thinking,” she said. “Music. Film. Conversation. Everything needs to follow a unique flow. And we can’t be too hard on ourselves when now it’s the right time.”

Alex nodded and touched her hand. After a long time, he asked, “Are you thinking about your dad?”

“Is it that obvious?” Valerie tried to smile, but it fell off her face.

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She knew the problem with “timing” was that often, we ran out of it. She knew the problem with “timing” was that, as humans, we never knew when our time to go would be.

She prayed that she and her father would have all the time in the world to heal.

She prayed that they’d look back at this pain and laugh about how silly they’d been.

She prayed. For weeks, she prayed.

And then one evening in June, just a week before her baby’s due date, she got into an accident, and everything went dark.

Chapter Twenty-Four

June 2025

It was a full week after Valerie’s accident, and Victor, Esme, Kade, and the baby were on the porch, taking in a gorgeous and light breeze off the sound. Alex was at the hospital, sitting by Valerie’s side, and Esme was doting on the baby, holding him as much as she could, even while he slept and maybe would have preferred to be in his crib alone. But how does anyone really know what a baby wants? Victor wondered. We’re all just guessing until they can grow up and say what they need. Kade and Victor were playing chess almost obsessively, to a point where it was like they were each ten to fifteen steps ahead of the other and frequently falling into stalemates. Victor had never felt so agitated in his life.

“We can stop whenever you want,” Kade said suddenly, looking at Victor with maturity and understanding. He’d just turned twelve, and it was like he was headed to college in a year.

“Sure. Yeah.” Victor stretched his arms over his head and checked the time. “I have to get over to meet Frank anyway.”

“Drive safe,” Esme ordered as softly as she could, so as not to wake the baby.

The baby still did not have a name.

Victor drove over to the little beach bar on the southern edge of Nantucket Island, where he liked to meet Frank for coffee and conversation. He found it easier to think of his times with Frank as “hang-outs” and “conversations” rather than “therapy,” and Frank went along with it, saying things like, See you next time, man, as though they were old buds. Maybe in another context, they might have been friends. The only difference was that Frank was actively helping Victor alter his course of thought—and Victor was paying him to do it.

Frank was seated at their usual table, drinking a cappuccino and a big glass of water. He got up to shake Victor’s hand and say hello. Victor collapsed across from him and touched his forehead with the tips of his fingers. It had been one heck of a week.

Since Valerie’s accident, Frank and Victor had been in communication. They’d texted and called. But this was the first time they’d actually met up. Victor guessed he looked worse for wear and said as much.

Frank just said, “You’ve been under a lot of stress. You don’t need to worry about what you look like.”

Victor ordered coffee and water and remained quiet for a little while, watching the

waves lap up on the beach. They were the only people at the beach bar, which he was grateful for. He didn't want to clam up.

Finally, he said, "When Esme told me that Valerie was in the hospital, I was burning what was left of the book we wrote together. I felt so angry with her for not reaching out to me. I felt so angry with myself for ruining our relationship." He bit his lip. "I know we've talked about not giving in to those feelings. Not 'performing' our anger. But that night, I couldn't help it."

Frank nodded. "Was it working? Was burning the manuscript helping you feel better?"

"No," Victor admitted. "It was making it worse."

Frank remained quiet, waiting.

"I have this sense that both Valerie and I were waiting for the right time to mend our relationship," Victor continued. "Maybe it was going to happen after the baby was born, or maybe it was going to happen on the Fourth of July, or later this summer, or on her birthday, or whatever. But now, we might never get that time. I hate myself for wasting any of our moments together. I hate myself for not really seeing how precious life is, even after everything that happened."

"We're so forgetful when it comes to the time we have," Frank said. "We live like we're going to be here forever."

For a little while, Victor talked about Kade, about the loss of Kade's parents, about how Kade's Great-uncle Jack had died in early May. Victor and Esme were discussing an official adoption but weren't sure about approaching Kade about it. How could they be sure that he really wanted that? Then again, it would set him up, legally, far better than he was right now.

Frank had been the one to help Victor find a viable replacement for Kade's psychiatrist. It meant that Kade and Victor could be friends and only friends, people who were there for each other in everything, people who could talk and talk and talk without medication needing to be involved. It was better this way.

It had taken nearly four weeks of therapy with Frank for Victor to mention how Kade had initially reminded him so much of Joel. But these days, Kade felt more and more like his own person, so much so that Victor knew to keep them apart. He didn't want to destroy his memory of Joel with his new memories of Kade. It was getting easier.

Toward the end of their hour-long session, Victor found himself discussing something he hadn't imagined he'd bring up.

"I'm worried about Dr. Benson," he said.

Frank knew immediately what he meant. Everyone on the island knew that the Suttons' couples therapist had been the other person in the car accident that had put Valerie in a coma. Everyone knew that Dr. Benson had taken a leave of absence from work. But nobody even knew if she was still on the island. Her husband hadn't been seen anywhere, either.

"Is it terrible if I reach out to her?" Victor asked delicately.

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Frank thought for a moment. “It’s highly unusual.”

“So is everything.”

Frank offered a soft smile. “I can’t pretend to know what Dr. Benson would say, nor what she needs. But if you want to reach out to her, if you have something kind to say to her, I see no reason you shouldn’t. She’s been your therapist for many months at this point. I’m guessing you know her pretty well.”

“She’s been instrumental in getting me the help I need,” Victor admitted. “And I can’t stand the idea that she’s off somewhere, beating herself up about this.”

There’s been so much pain, Victor thought, his throat closing up. How can we stop it?

It was later that afternoon that Victor dialed Dr. Benson’s number. He was hovering at the edge of the beach outside his place with Esme, watching as Kade threw a ball around with Rebecca’s son. The orange sunlight behind them made them look like little shadows running around.

Dr. Benson didn’t answer at first. But when Victor wrote her a text to say that he really needed to reach out to her, she called him back right away.

She sounded terribly broken. “Dr. Sutton,” she said. “I’m so sorry.”

Victor took a breath. He imagined that beautiful thirty-two-year-old therapist at the very beginning of her career. He imagined she was wondering if she could really keep going. Maybe she was thinking, Everything in my life has changed. I’m

different. I can't help anyone, not now that I've ruined someone's life. Victor understood because he'd felt the same after Joel had died, and he'd left his family for Bree. But he'd covered up his past and built a career founded on lies. He was on the path to forgiving himself. He hoped, one day, he would be able to.

What he told Hannah now was what he wished he could have told himself all those years ago. "What happened was not your fault. What happened was an accident, a pure act of fate. You're a good therapist and a kind person. You have a wonderful heart. Wherever you go and whatever you do next, I want you to remember that about yourself. I want you to remember that you can still do so much good in this world. If you stop, you're not only failing yourself. You're failing all your present and future patients. You're failing the time you have left."

Time is all we have, Victor thought as tears streamed down his cheeks.

Chapter Twenty-Five

June 2025

Nine days after the car accident, Valerie Sutton Garland opened her eyes again. Nine days, which, for her family members, had been no less than an infinite number of them. Days of worry. Days of fear. Days of reckoning with the idea that she might never get up.

But Valerie opened her eyes to a glossy hospital bedroom and a beautiful and panic-stricken husband sleeping fitfully in the chair beside her. She opened her eyes to find that—incredibly—she was no longer pregnant. She gasped, her hands flinching as she tried to touch her stomach. There was a tube in her mouth, which meant that when she started to cry out and ask where her baby was, she couldn't form any words. Where is my baby? she cried on the inside as tears fell down her cheeks. Where is he?

A part of her knew, even then, that she'd been able to wake up because her body knew it was needed. Her son was out here. Her son was waiting for her.

Valerie couldn't remember what had happened to her, not at first and not even after Alex explained the car accident and coma. How was it possible that such a pivotal event hadn't been stitched into her memories? He held both her hands and kissed her face and explained, "Our baby is fine. He's with your parents. He's gorgeous, Valerie, and everything is going to be all right. I love you. I love you." The kisses kept coming. Valerie's ears rang.

It all felt so unreal.

Valerie ached with thoughts of how unfair it all was. All her life she'd wanted to be a mother, to bring a baby into the world. She'd brought a baby into the world, sure. But she hadn't really been there to witness it. She hadn't been the first to kiss his ten fingers and ten toes.

When she said this to Alex—much later, long after she'd gotten well—Alex shrugged and said, "Guess we'll have to do it all over again!"

And they would. They had to.

They had so much love to give.

But now was now, and Valerie had to heal.

Three days later, Valerie was out of the hospital. Still weak from the accident and terribly tender, she was in a wheelchair, sitting in the sunlight outside her parents' place with her baby in her arms. She was obsessed with looking at him, gazing at his perfect eyelashes and his round face, the lips that looked like Alex's, the eyes that were straight from Victor Sutton himself. A large part of Valerie knew that people

hadn't thought she would survive the crash, so it was no small miracle that she was able to raise her baby at all.

She would be grateful for the rest of her life.

That morning, she and Alex named him.

They'd named him August Garland.

To Valerie, it was the most beautiful name in the world.

From where she sat in the sunlight with her baby in her arms, Valerie could see almost everyone in the Sutton family, all of whom had gathered for a Sutton barbecue, a "Welcome to the World, August" party and "Welcome Home, Valerie" party. Rod was at the grill, serving up burgers and hot dogs and brats, and Bethany and Rebecca were making the rounds, delivering drinks and taking frequent breaks to dote on Valerie and August.

Bethany told Valerie that their father had reached out to Dr. Hannah Benson to tell her to keep going, forgive herself, and move on.

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It boggled Valerie's mind. "Dad did that? Our dad?"

Bethany nodded. "I heard it from Dr. Benson's husband's secretary," she said. "So it's definitely gossip-gossip. But it sounds real to me. Dad has made huge strides since he started seeing Dr. Gallagher."

Valerie's ears rang. "When did he start seeing him?"

"It must have been around the time Kade came to live with them," Bethany said. "I think it's been good for them. I think they're being more honest with each other, if only because they have a kid at home to take care of. I think they feel like Kade is their second chance."

Valerie blinked back tears, watching as Kade ran around with Bethany and Rebecca's children. Initially, she'd thought he looked like Joel. But recently, he'd had a growth spurt that made him look different, lankier. He was blonder than Joel had ever been and far less silly. He wasn't their brother. Their brother wasn't coming back. But Kade needed the Suttons right now.

Alex came over with a plate for Valerie and urged her to eat up. "I can take him," he said of August, but Valerie was resistant to hand him away.

"I'm not hungry," she said.

Alex kissed the top of her head. "You need your strength, Val."

Valerie knew he was right. So, as quickly as she could, she ate a burger and some

potato salad. Feeling energized and wide awake, she walked back over to August's crib and picked him up. It wasn't the first time she'd been on her feet, of course, but she felt spry and easy and frankly beautiful, with the summer breeze through her hair and her baby in her arms. He cooed gently and turned into her. Her heart broke with love.

Suddenly, familiar voices rang out from the back porch. Valerie turned to find—to her surprise—Catherine Marrow with her baby, Esme, strapped to her chest. Unlike last December, she looked happy and plump and free, her smile bigger than Valerie had ever seen it.

Valerie's mother was doting on baby Esme, touching her hand and introducing herself as, "The other Esme."

Catherine laughed. "It's so good to see you again. Thanks for letting me know about your little party! Where's Val?"

Esme, the mother, turned to see that Valerie wasn't in her wheelchair. Valerie returned to it, feeling dutiful, wanting to keep herself and August safe. She raised a hand to Catherine, who approached to say hello.

"Valerie! I can't tell you how good it is to see you," Catherine said, drawing a chair up beside Valerie's wheelchair. "I've been praying so hard for you and the baby."

Valerie thanked Catherine. As Catherine spoke, moving her hands around and gesturing, Valerie realized she was no longer wearing a wedding ring.

Valerie decided to ask Catherine about it. What did she have to lose?

"Oh, gosh. Yes, we're getting divorced," Catherine said, smiling in a way that suggested she didn't care at all. (Valerie didn't fully buy that.) "But like I said before,

Max is fully involved in Esme's life. We have a great parenting schedule, and his new apartment is completely babyproof. It's been fantastic. He's not dating anyone seriously right now, which makes things easier. I'm sure that will change down the road for both of us."

"Wow." Valerie touched Esme's flyaway curls and smiled. She was truly adorable, with seemingly none of Max's looks. Not yet, anyway.

"But Valerie," Catherine continued, narrowing her eyes, "I wanted to tell you something. Something that happened last December. Max only just told me a week or so ago. You remember how he came over the day after the baby shower? How he regretted leaving?"

Valerie nodded. She remembered that fateful day, the snow swirling out the window of the brownstone. She remembered her father's wild ravings on the radio. She remembered how he'd yelled at her, and how, after that, she'd needed space. So much space.

"Apparently, your dad was at the bar the night before," Catherine said, arching her eyebrow. "Apparently, it was because of something your dad said that Max reconsidered."

Valerie's jaw dropped. "You're kidding."

Catherine said she wasn't, that whatever it was Victor had said to Max had forced Max to reckon with his actions, with the fact of his approaching fatherhood status and how cruel he'd been.

"I mean, everyone knows your dad's history," Catherine continued, her eyes to the ground. "I can't help but think he's trying to pass on everything he's learned along the way. He doesn't want anyone to make the same mistakes he did."

Valerie's heart hammered.

"And because of that?" Catherine continued, her voice breaking, "Esme will have a father."

Catherine said she wanted to thank Victor before she left. Valerie scanned the party, looking for him. Since she'd woken up from the coma, she'd hugged her father and seen him holding baby August, but she'd hardly spoken to him. There was too much love and gratitude; there was too much surprise at having woken up.

But there was a great deal left for them to say to one another.

Valerie knew better than to wait.

Later that evening, Esme helped the grandkids build a bonfire and pulled out the marshmallows and s'more equipment for a round of dessert. Valerie sat on the porch with August, watching as the kids swarmed, eating melted marshmallows and chocolate. For some reason, someone was setting off fireworks in the distance, and they exploded in turquoise, purple, and pink in the night sky. The noise didn't wake August up, thankfully. He remained soft and easy in her arms.

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Alex sat beside them for a little while, alternating between beaming at her and eating another brownie or cookie or s'more. He looked like he'd been through a car accident, too, but more one of the spirit than of the body. He'd taken a break from working on his documentary, which Valerie felt sorrowful about. She'd already told him to get back in it, but he'd said, "No. I want to enjoy these months with you. That documentary isn't going anywhere."

Valerie couldn't believe they'd been given yet another chance at happiness.

When Alex went inside to grab another diet soda, Valerie sat on the porch for a little while by herself, enjoying the beautiful night, the chill in the air, and the weight of her baby in her arms. Rebecca and Bethany popped over to say hello and check on her but were soon drawn back toward the fire for conversations with their children or to help put melted marshmallows on grahamcrackers. Valerie knew she'd be out there in some years, doing the same.

It was then that the back door opened, and her father came outside.

Since Valerie woke up, she and her father hadn't been alone together. He stalled, suddenly nervous, his jaw stiff. She wondered if he wanted to run back inside and hide from her. But that version of Victor Sutton had been left behind, it seemed. He'd left that version behind when Kade had come to live with them, when he'd forced himself to call Dr. Frank Gallagher and start the long and dramatic healing process. He'd certainly proven himself. He'd called Dr. Hannah Benson and said, "Keep going. Life is worth so much more than your guilt." He'd reached into the night and found Max Marrow and said, "Love your children. They aren't around forever." He'd done so much for those around him.

But what was it about father-child relationships that made them often so difficult? What made it so hard to love the people you were meant to love in a way that was perfect and worthy? Valerie blinked back tears. She opened her lips to say, “I’m sorry, I love you, I’m sorry.”

But before she could, her father said it first.

“I love you, Valerie.” He sat beside her and clasped his hands. “Every moment you were in that coma, I hated myself for everything that happened. I hated myself for how weak I’d been. I hated myself for not being able to be the writing partner you needed me to be. But I’ve been working on myself, too. I know that self-hatred is a version of self-obsession. I know that love is something you have to push and mold and grow. And I’m willing to do that. I’m willing to sit with you and acknowledge everything and talk in ways we were never able to.”

Valerie’s eyes filled. “Remember when we first started working on the book? I felt like we started to really talk then. And it made me so happy. It thrilled me that we could be honest.”

“I was too weak back then. Too afraid,” Victor admitted.

They held the silence for a little while before Victor said, “I burned the book.”

Valerie laughed with surprise. “It was garbage anyway.”

Victor smiled. “I thought you would never forgive me.”

“I don’t want to put our family through more publicity,” she said. “I want to hunker down and fix what’s broken here.”

Victor reached out to touch August’s head. Valerie’s heart shattered.

“I never got to meet any of my grandchildren on the day of their birth,” Victor said. “Not until now. It’s been beautiful to know him, to hold him, to care for him. But each one of those days was one of the hardest of my life. I didn’t know what was going to happen to you, Valerie. I didn’t know how to live with myself.” He swallowed and turned to look out at the bonfire, where Kade was making another s’more and laughing at something Shelby had said.

“We are only given one life,” Victor said gently. “It’s up to us to make what we can of it. To be kind to one another. To love as well as we can. I’m sorry that I’ve struggled with that. I’m sorry that I’ve given so much to so many people and haven’t been able to reflect that love back onto my family. But together with my therapist and with Esme, I’m trying my best. I really am.”

Valerie squeezed her father’s hand. She’d been home in Nantucket less than a year, and it already felt like she’d lived several different lives.

But before she could say anything more, August began to cry. It was a cry of need, of ache, of hunger, and it told Valerie everything she needed to know about the next eighteen-plus years of her life. Someone would love her through everything despite each of her flaws, simply because she was his mother. She was ready to greet each morning of that life with a full heart. She was ready to acknowledge her mistakes.

She was a Sutton, carrying the next generation into a brand-new world. All they could do was learn from their mistakes. All they could do was look at the light.