

behind  
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every lie

Christina McDonald



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## prologue

### *WHAT HAVE I DONE?*

The thought charged at me, stark and unrelenting. Blood was everywhere. Under my fingernails. In my mouth. In my hair. It was streaked across my shirt. On the floor, it blackened and congealed, filling the air with its metallic breath. The sickly sweet scent clung to the back of my throat.

My mother was slumped on the floor in the living room, mouth gaping, brown eyes staring at nothing. A dark pool of blood seeped from a gaping wound at the base of her neck. The urgent beat of her pulse had faded to an unrelenting nothingness.

Both my hands were clamped around her throat. An emotion thudded so viciously in my chest it was painful, like searing.

“Mom!” I tried to scream.

But only a choked sob came out.

Hail clattered against the windowpanes. The wind thrashed against the house. The living room lights flickered and darkened. Fear, salty on my tongue, shot through me like an electric pulse.

Suddenly I was outside, the night sky pressing on my skin.

The burning scent of ozone scorched the fine hairs of my nostrils, mingling with the pungent scent of wet earth. Black and purple clouds roiled in the night sky. Thunder rumbled ominously. The air

crackled with electricity, static lifting the fine hairs along my bare arms. Rain skidded into my scalp, licking at my face.

Tears mingled with the rain on my cheeks as I ran. I was crying so hard I could barely breathe. I skirted the perimeter of the elementary school and pounded toward the park, passing cars parked neatly along the curb. In the distance, a metal statue, the Seattle skyline just beyond.

There was a massive *boom*, an explosion as I drew level with the statue. Then only light was all around me, inside me, crashing against my retinas, hissing along my nerves, an explosion inside my organs.

I fell to the ground spasming, crippled with pain. Fire engulfed me from the inside, every nerve ending flayed open. I was no longer in control of my brain or body. They had cracked into a million pieces.

And then there was nothing.

Blackness swallowed me whole.

o n e

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*eva*

LIAM PARALLEL-PARKED on Langley's main street like it was the easiest thing in the world. Three movements: stop, reverse, straighten. Done. I'd never mastered the skill.

In the distance, a chilly morning wind whipped off the waters of Saratoga Passage, kicking the waves into frothy tips. The snow-capped Cascade Mountains rose in the distance. Scarlet and gold leaves licked the coastline along Whidbey Island. There were no rain clouds yet today, the promise of a crisp fall day held out like a gift.

"My hero," I teased. "I just need to get you a little black hat and you can be my chauffeur."

Liam reached into the backseat and grabbed one of the black baseball hats his builders wore. He put it on and grinned. "Your wish is my command, my lady."

He brushed his lips against mine, pulling me tight against him so I smelled the expensive sandalwood-and-citrus cologne he wore.

"I'm only going to work." I smiled against his lips.

"I know, but I want more of you, Eva Elizabeth Hansen." His blue eyes danced as he slid his hands lower down my back.

I laughed and pulled the baseball hat off, running a hand through his hair. It was still thick and sandy blond, not a strand of

gray, even though he was more than ten years older than me. “Are you working in Seattle today?”

Liam was a successful property developer with offices in Seattle and here on Whidbey Island. He spent most days in meetings, elbow-deep in profit and loss reports and zoning ordinances, or driving to and from property sites.

“No, I’m here. I have a meeting in an hour, but I’ll be at our new site over in Greenbank after that. My builders got the structure up for the new strip mall so I need to take a look at it before the inspector comes by later this week.”

I raised my eyebrows. “That was fast. I thought you said you didn’t have the building permit yet?”

Liam shrugged. “It’s just a technicality. I know they’ll approve it. Just sometimes the bureaucracy takes time to wade through.” He straightened his navy tie and glanced at his watch. “Don’t worry. I’ll be here to pick you up after work.”

“I have that dinner with my mom and brother tonight, remember?”

“I thought we were going to that Thai place you love over in Coupeville.” Liam said it in that way he had: a statement, not a question.

“No, that’s tomorrow.” I hesitated, unsure of myself. “Right?”

Liam showed me the calendar on his phone. “It’s today.”

“Oh God, I’m so sorry!” I clapped a hand over my mouth. “I totally messed up! Remember I told you my mom won the Seattle Medal of Courage? Andrew organized this dinner to celebrate. . . .” I bit my lip. “Should I cancel? Maybe I should cancel.”

“No, you should go. You wouldn’t want to disappoint them.”

“I’m sorry!”

“Why don’t I go with you?” His face was expectant, hopeful.

I froze. “It’ll be boring,” I said carefully. “Besides, my family is weird.”

He laughed. “Aren’t all families weird?”

Liam knew better than most how weird families could be. He’d

grown up so poor his dad kicked him out at sixteen, telling him he needed to fend for himself. I was sure that sort of rejection would have laid me flat on my face, but it didn't seem to bother Liam. He said it had just made him strive harder to succeed.

"I'll introduce you soon. I promise." I looked at the time on my phone. "I'll see you at home later, okay?"

I loved saying that. *Home*. After dating for a year and a half, I'd finally moved into Liam's house. My princess-cut diamond ring winked in the morning light. Slowly but surely my life was coming back together. A large part of that was thanks to Liam.

I leaned across the console and kissed him good-bye. "Love you!"

"Love you most!"

I headed up Langley's main street, a charming combination of antique shops, independent bookstores, eclectic boutiques, and art galleries. Town was quiet, the tourists gone now that fall was here. I hunched in my favorite green corduroy coat, a dreamy vintage style with a belted waist and buttoned front. I shoved my hands into its wide flap pockets, my boots clicking sharply against the pavement.

My neck suddenly prickled, the feeling of someone's eyes on me heavy and hot. Something moved in my peripheral vision. I swung around to look, but there was nobody there. The American flag above the door of the tavern at the end of the road flapped in the wind. Across the road, an elderly couple walked hand in hand along the sidewalk.

I scanned the road, the familiar feeling crawling over my body. I closed my eyes and breathed in. Nobody was there. Nobody was ever there.

I scuttled down the quiet lane to the Crafted Artisan, the art gallery where I rented space to paint and sell the clay pottery I made. Mostly dishware, pots, and vases. My favorites were the special requests from customers who stopped by the gallery with a piece in mind.

The bell over the door chimed as I entered. The gallery was small but brightly lit, with glossy white paint, black tiled floors, and

varnished redwood accents. A wall of floor-to-ceiling metal shelves holding colorful ceramics lined one wall; another featured a collection of glass mosaic works.

The owner, Melissa, was standing in the middle of the gallery. She held a dark-green vase with a crackle glaze that looked like it had been broken. An intricate web of gold beads filled the cracks. Her blue-black curls were wild around her round face, dark eyes winged with black eyeliner and coated in mascara, a slash of red lipstick on her mouth.

“What’s that?” I asked, slipping my coat off and stuffing it under the cash register desk.

“I met a woman on the beach in San Diego this summer and we got to talking. Turns out she’s an artist. She makes the most beautiful pieces, so I offered to display her work.”

I smiled. Melissa was one of those über-friendly types, like a hairdresser or one of those women in the makeup department at Macy’s, someone people told their secrets to without meaning to. She liked people, and they liked her. She’d become a good friend since I’d moved to the island, even if I still couldn’t bring myself to tell her the whole truth about my past.

“Look at the detail! She wrapped each broken piece in fabric, then used these beads to patchwork the pieces together. It’s based on kintsugi.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s a Japanese art. The artist fixes broken pottery by filling the cracks with gold. Usually they use epoxy to glue the pieces together. It’s supposed to highlight the damage instead of hiding it.”

I lifted the vase from her hands and examined it. “It’s beautiful.”

“Oh, by the way.” She reached behind the cash register and handed me a flyer for an art exhibit in Seattle in the spring. “You got mail.”

“Thanks.” I glanced at the flyer and dropped it in the garbage.

Melissa shook her head, one hand on her hip. “Why do you do that? You could totally get your work shown there!”



“Melissa, these are trained artists. They’ve been doing it their whole lives. I only bought my kiln and wheel a few years ago. My little homemade pottery can’t compete.”

“What is it going to take for you to just trust in yourself a little?”

She plucked the flyer from the trash and thrust it at me so I had no choice but to take it.

But I knew the truth: I couldn’t trust myself at all.

t w o

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*eva*

THE FIRST RUMBLE OF THUNDER came as I turned in to the parking garage in downtown Seattle. Despite morning sunshine, clouds had rushed to fill the afternoon with rain, and it looked like we were in for a storm.

I took my ticket from the machine and slowly nosed the car into a tiny space, wincing when my bumper scraped against a metal pole. I sucked at driving. I'd already stalled the engine an embarrassing number of times driving off the ferry. This was why I always let Liam drive.

I shook my umbrella open, hard drops of rain thumping against it like handfuls of gravel. I walked up the street's steep incline, my thighs and shoulders still burning from my lunchtime yoga class with Melissa.

Another low rumble of thunder. I ducked my head and tilted the umbrella over my forehead, keeping my eyes fixed on my phone. It was, I'd learned, the best way to disappear. Instagram told me one college friend had been promoted at work, another had just had her second kid. I had forty likes and six comments on my picture of my engagement ring.

As I arrived at the restaurant, I slid my umbrella closed and reached for the door, noticing as I did an elderly homeless man sitting under the restaurant's awning. Matted gray beard. Sad, rheumy

eyes. Ancient, weathered face. He was drenched. No coat. A crumpled umbrella lay on the soggy cardboard box under him, its frame bent and broken. My heart crunched with sadness.

“Here, take this,” I said gently. I pressed my umbrella in his hand.

His eyes lit up and he smiled, revealing a row of missing teeth. “Have a blessed day, miss!”

The restaurant was crowded. Mom was already sitting at a table in the middle of the room, her beige khakis, shapeless V-neck sweater-vest, and no-nonsense brown shoes clashing with the linen-draped tables and elegant Renaissance-style murals.

“You’re late,” Mom said, her crisp British accent disapproving.

“Sorry, Mom.” I knew she hated it when I called her Mom instead of Mum, which was probably why I did it, some stupid, knee-jerk reaction left over from my teenage years. “Traffic was pretty bad for a Sunday.”

I expected her to scorch me with a critical comment as I gave her a quick side hug, but she stayed silent. She smelled of pine trees and cotton body lotion, a bizarre bouquet of nostalgia that launched me back to happy family camping trips and sulky adolescent silences. I wondered if all mother-daughter relationships were as complicated as ours.

“Congratulations on the award!” I said. “You’re an actual, real-life hero!”

“Don’t be daft.” She waved a hand in the air.

I squeezed into a chair across from her, the only place I could comfortably eat as a lefty. My fingers fluttered to my mouth and I nibbled a fingernail.

Mom gave me the Look, her makeup-less eyes tiny behind thick, black-rimmed glasses. “I’d rather hoped you’d grown out of that.”

I dropped my hands and twisted my engagement ring instead. I wanted to tell her I was usually better, but she broke into a coughing fit. Her face reddened as she clutched her chest. She pulled a Kleenex from her bag and blew her nose.

“Are you okay?”

“Oh, just this bloody cold. Can’t seem to shake it.” She touched a hand to her head and winced. Was her skin tinted yellow, or was it just the restaurant’s lighting?

“I saw Jacob yesterday,” she said. “He’s moved back home to take care of his dad. Apparently Bill has cancer.”

Jacob Hardmann had lived across the road from us when I was a teenager. We’d met at the school bus stop when we were twelve. He was my best friend, and once, briefly, something more. But his work as a photographer took him out of the country a lot, and it had been years now since I’d seen him, or really even thought of him.

“Really?” I couldn’t hide my surprise. “Bill was pretty violent. I didn’t think they got along.”

“Well, since Barbara died there isn’t anyone else to care for him. Jacob’s a good boy. He always does the right thing.”

*Not always*, I thought.

“So, tell me. How are wedding plans coming along?” she asked. “When’s the big day?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” I said vaguely. “We haven’t really planned anything yet. We’re in no rush.”

That wasn’t exactly true. Liam was already pushing to set a date, calling around for venues, organizing a meeting with the priest in Coupeville.

Mom adjusted her glasses, her brown eyes suddenly sharp. “Have you told Liam about what happened?”

I looked at my hands. Shame slid down my spine, cold and sticky, like tapioca pudding.

“I can’t,” I whispered. This was exactly why I didn’t want them to meet. Liam couldn’t know about my past. What if he didn’t believe me? Worse, what if he rejected me? It was easier to pretend it had never happened. “He’ll think I’m broken or something.”

When I looked at Mom, her face was uncharacteristically soft. “Darling, I’m not entirely certain one can ever become unbroken,

but I do know we can be strong and brave and broken and whole all at the same time. It's called being human."

"Can we please not talk about it?"

Mom's forehead creased, her eyes puzzled. She was a stern, stoic physics teacher. She dealt in hard facts and cold truths. She didn't understand how I could pretend nothing had happened. But I'd learned that if you didn't let yourself feel too much, you could tuck the trauma into a box, seal it up, and get on with your life.

"I rather think telling the truth would be a better way to start a marriage," she said.

Aunt Lily swept in then, saving me from answering. She was wearing navy stilettos and a drapey linen pantsuit, her silver-platinum bob wrapped in a navy scarf that trailed over one shoulder.

"Hello, my lovely!" She kissed me on both cheeks. "Look at you! So pretty. And I love your hair that way!" She patted my cropped hair, recently streaked with toffee and bronze highlights.

Aunt Lily wasn't my real aunt, but she'd been Mom's best friend since she'd moved into our neighborhood when I was twelve. They'd both grown up in England, Mom in the north, Lily in the south, and bonded over a love of pinocle and old musicals. Mom was rules and discipline while Lily was laughter and fun. She gave us cake for breakfast, let us watch scary movies before bed, and even took me to get my belly button pierced when I was sixteen, much to Mom's horror.

"Where's Andrew?" She kissed Mom on the cheek.

"He's been held up at court. He'll be here shortly," Mom replied.

"Well, this is lovely! It's been ages since we've done anything together."

"Too long," Mom agreed. She turned to me. "Andrew mentioned you've moved in with Liam?"

I bit my lip. Mom had a fantastic poker face, but I still sensed her disapproval. It was there in the lift of her eyebrows, the purse of

her lips, like when I dropped out of college to be a dog walker, or when I was fired from my job as a barista because I could never wake up in time, or when I decided to be an artist rather than studying thermodynamics or quantum theory.

“We’ve been together a year and a half and we’re getting married. . . .” I trailed off, realizing I sounded defensive.

“Well, I’m sure he’s lovely. We’ll meet him when you’re ready for us to.” Lily reached for a piece of bread from the basket the waitress had left and slathered a chunk of butter on it. It was too cold, the bread tearing as she stabbed at it.

I tossed her a grateful smile.

The waitress arrived, and Lily ordered a glass of champagne, Mom a pint of Post Alley Porter.

“I, um . . .” I scanned the drinks menu, my heart kicking into gear.

“Good Lord, it’s just a drink, Eva! Not a life-or-death decision.” Mom sounded irritated.

I felt like a deer in the headlights. I knew I was being stupid, but even choosing a drink seemed impossible.

“How about a vodka cranberry?” Lily suggested kindly.

“Yes!” I turned to the waitress. “Only no vodka. Just cranberry.”

I smiled at Lily, relieved she’d made the decision for me. Mom scowled at her. I almost rolled my eyes. They were best friends, but sometimes they were more like an old married couple, right down to the arguments and nagging.

“Tell us how you’ve been, Eva,” Mom said, putting her hand on mine. “We hear from you so rarely these days.”

I threw her a surprised look. Mom wasn’t one for physical displays of affection. She had helped me with my homework, made sure I behaved and was polite and didn’t skip school, but hand-holding? Not so much.

“I’m good. Busy. Lots of work coming up to Christmas, plus I’ve

been packing and moving into Liam's. You should see his house! It's gorgeous! Here. . . ." I swiped through the pictures on my phone and held one out to them. "Here's a picture."

"It's stunning!" Lily exclaimed. Mom nodded her agreement. I smiled, warmed by their approval.

The waitress returned with our drinks, and Lily raised hers to Mom. I quickly followed suit. "I believe congratulations are in order. To you, Kat, for saving a little girl's life. We're so—"

An elderly lady pushed past my chair, her elbow jabbing into my back. I lurched forward, my glass slipping out of my hand. Ruby-red liquid splashed across the white linen, onto Mom's lap.

Mom and Lily both jumped up. An embarrassing red splotch was spreading across Mom's pants.

"I'm so sorry!" I grabbed a linen napkin and tried to wipe Mom's pants clean.

"Eva, stop! You're making it worse!" she exclaimed.

I plopped, impotent, into my seat, cheeks burning.

The waitress whisked the stained linen away and brought a glass of soda water, which Mom used to dab at her pants, then bustled about relaying the table. A few minutes later we were settled again, fresh drinks in front of us.

"I'm sorry," I said again.

Mom reached for her beer, her eyes filling with something I couldn't identify. Resignation? Worry? "Honestly, darling, it's fine. It wasn't your fault."

But it didn't matter whose fault it was when you blamed yourself.

Mom smiled at me, and a jumble of emotions filled my chest. Uncertainty. Love. Hope. But just then, my brother rushed in, bursting the moment like a soap bubble. Andrew's cheeks were bristly with a neatly trimmed beard, glasses glinting in the candlelight. He'd inherited our mother's shitty eyesight; I'd gotten her pale English skin.

Mom's gaze peeled away from mine, brightening at the sight of him. Andrew murmured something to the waitress, and she returned a second later with a short glass of amber-colored liquid.

He shed his coat and sat next to me, lifting his glass in a toast and smiling. "To Mom. The Messiah."

I looked down at my cranberry juice, wishing I'd gotten the vodka after all.



t h r e e

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*eva*

I COULDN'T MOVE.

Consciousness was a fickle thing, fading in and out. Everything in me hurt, a pain so deep it felt like I'd been cooked in a microwave.

Time passed. Sounds returned. A low thumping. A rhythmic beeping. Squeaking wheels. A periodic buzzing, material swishing, soft murmuring voices.

I propelled myself through a viscous darkness, bursting through the oily film of consciousness. My head hurt, hot, jabbing pain bolting around my temples and ricocheting through my body. A phosphorescent glow clung to the edges of my vision. The scent of burning hair lingered in my nostrils; under that, disinfectant and cold, recycled air.

*What happened?*

I tried to sweep through the cobwebs clouding my brain and figure out why the hell I hurt so much. The last thing I remembered was spilling cranberry juice all over my mom.

Something scratched at the surface of my mind, a fingernail against glass. Muffled voices came from very far away. A low ringing echoed in my ears, punctuated by an exasperated female voice.

*Unconscious.*

*Murder.*

*Lightning.*

A flash of memory bore down on me like an image emerging from a Polaroid.

My mom crumpled on the floor. An overturned chair. Light. Then shadows. Then the image disappeared and I was running. And then nothing—the memory was gone.

I struggled against the weight of my eyelids and moaned. I was in a hospital. A doctor in a white lab coat with a stethoscope draped around her neck approached. She was tall, midforties. Ruler-straight body. She had blond hair pulled into a tight ponytail, almond-shaped blue eyes, and cheekbones rising sharply under freckled skin.

I tried to speak, but my throat was too dry, my tongue glued to the roof of my mouth. She popped a straw in a plastic cup of water and held it to my lips. I slurped greedily.

“Hello, Eva.” Her voice was soft and comforting. “I’m Dr. Patricia Simm. Your fiancé’s just gone to get a coffee, but he’ll be back shortly.”

*Liam.* I exhaled, weak with relief.

“How are you feeling?” Her voice sounded muffled, as if she were speaking into a ball of cotton.

“I hurt,” I croaked. I tried to sit up, but the room slithered around me. Pain seared along my skull.

Dr. Simm helped me sit, then pressed her stethoscope to my chest and listened. “Can you squeeze my fingers?”

She placed two of her fingers in my palms, and I squeezed, my fingers thick and awkward. She then probed my arms, lifted and bent them at the elbows.

“Do you feel this?”

“Yes.”

“Good. There’s a little weakness on your left side but nothing to be concerned about.”

As she lowered my left arm, I caught sight of a strange pattern on my skin spreading up from a gauze bandage wrapped around my forearm. I pushed the hospital gown sleeve up higher. The visible

skin on my arm was covered in pink, fernlike markings, feathery branches stippled with angry red blisters.

“Wha . . . ?”

“Those are called Lichtenberg figures. I know they look psychedelic, but they’re harmless. They trace the path of the electricity that went through your body when you were struck by lightning.”

Struck by lightning?

She straightened, flipping the stethoscope back around her neck and smiling wryly. “They’ll disappear in a few weeks. Right now they’re a testament that you survived something extraordinary.”

I stared at her blankly.

“Don’t worry if it’s all still a blur—that’s completely normal after getting struck by lightning. You’ve been unconscious since they brought you in early this morning. Your left eardrum burst, so you’re likely experiencing some temporary hearing problems—”

Liam burst in, crossing the room in two long strides.

“Eva! Thank God you’re all right!” His hair was standing on end, as if he’d just rolled out of bed. His jaw was thick with morning growth, and his eyes were red-rimmed and shadowed. He wrapped his arms around me. “I got the first ferry I could when the police called.”

I laid my head against his shoulder, feeling safe for the first time since I’d woken. He was wearing one of the tight, Lycra T-shirts he wore for rowing, the slippery material cool against my throbbing ear. I touched my head and winced. A thick bandage covered a tender lump just above my left temple.

Dr. Simm noticed. “You got a pretty fierce bump to the head, so I’ve scheduled a CAT scan. The burns on your ears are from where your jewelry melted, and we had to cut your shirt off. We have some antibiotics in your IV to make sure those blisters on your arm don’t get infected. We’ll keep you in for observation for a few days, and I want to run a few more tests now that you’re awake, but physically speaking, you’re a remarkably lucky woman.”

She went on to list the physical afflictions I might experience: Parkinson's-like muscle twitches, severe headaches, scar tissue from the thermal burns, temporary or partial paralysis in my weak left hand.

"What we really need to look out for," she continued, "are psychological issues: paranoia, personality changes, mood swings, memory loss. Even trouble concentrating. All of these we'll watch for and deal with if they arise. You'll need to take it easy at first, okay? Lots of rest to help your mind and body heal. And I'll prescribe you some meds to help."

Dr. Simm glanced over her shoulder. I followed her gaze. A man I didn't recognize approached from the corridor and paused in the doorway. He was of average height and build with a thin mouth and short-cropped, dark hair that showcased tiny ears. His eyes were deep-set in a long, wolfish face, an intense, piercing blue against his pale skin. He radiated a sort of feral aggression that instantly set me on edge.

"Hello, Miss Hansen. I'm Detective Kent Jackson. I'm part of a task force with the Seattle Police Department."

His accent was East Coast, the flattened consonants and dis-tended vowels of Boston. He stepped into the room, his brown leather jacket creaking over a collared blue shirt and dark jeans.

I squeezed my eyes shut and I knew. Somehow I knew what he was going to say.

"I'm so sorry to tell you this. Your mother has unfortunately died. We believe she was murdered and we're investigating it as a homicide."

When I opened my eyes, tears blurred the room like a water-color. Liam's face crumpled, raw with disbelief. He pulled me tight against his chest, and for a minute the only sound in the room was me sobbing.

"Miss Hansen, can you tell me what you were doing late last night?" Detective Jackson asked.

I looked from Liam to Dr. Simm to the detective, trying to con-

jure my last concrete memory after dinner with my mom. I closed my eyes. Flashes of silvery images danced just beyond my grasp. Mom's face. A knife. A sharp, white light. Slashes of blood. I pressed my fingers to my forehead, trying to catch one.

"I can't remember," I whispered.

f o u r

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*eva*

“LET’S GET YOU to your CAT scan,” Dr. Simm said.

The detective looked like he wanted to argue, but she silenced him with a glare. She waved to a passing nurse who entered the room. They unlocked the wheels and pushed me into the corridor, Liam following. The detective stared after us, his brow furrowed as his sharp eyes skewered me, and I turned my head away.

“Why can’t I remember?” I tasted fear in my mouth, acrid and bitter.

“Getting struck by lightning can injure the nervous system, causing short-term memory loss,” Dr. Simm explained as she rolled my bed down the hall. “Our brains encode new memories so they can be stored and recalled later, but if you were struck by lightning before your brain had time to encode a memory and put it into storage, you might have problems recalling it later.”

I closed my eyes, blocking out the overhead lights. The hospital bed turned left, the wheels humming against the floor as it glided down the hall.

“When will I remember?”

“It’s difficult to say, and everybody’s different. Those memories might not come back at all. Just rest, give it time. The good news is you weren’t directly hit by the lightning. I would expect your memo-

ries that had a chance to be encoded will return slowly, like pieces of a puzzle slotting into place.”

After the CAT scan, Dr. Simm wheeled me back to my room. Detective Jackson stood when we entered, his thin lips pulling into an approximation of a smile. His hard, pale eyes glinted in the jaundiced light.

I stiffened. Liam glowered at him, his hand warm on my back, anchoring me. Dr. Simm ignored both of them. She checked my reflexes and helped me stand to make sure I could walk unassisted, then examined my left arm again. The dead feeling in my fingers was being replaced by a prickly pins-and-needles sensation; the marked skin drummed a fiery beat.

“I need to check on some other patients,” Dr. Simm said, jotting notes in my chart. “You okay here?” Her gaze was direct, and I knew if I wanted, she’d get rid of the detective. But I needed answers only he could provide, so I nodded.

“Hello again, Miss Hansen,” the detective began. He rummaged in his coat pocket, pulling out a black pen and a small spiral notebook. He clicked the pen, in and out. *Click, click*. “Eva, can I call you Eva?”

I nodded, but Liam shook his head. He pulled himself to his full height. He was a head taller than the detective—bigger and broader too, his chest solid from mornings rowing in the misty lake at the bottom of our yard.

“This isn’t a good time, Detective,” Liam said. He was using the boomy, authoritative voice he usually reserved for his building sites, low and loud for maximum effect.

“I understand, but I do need to ask Eva a few questions. Who are you?”

“I’m Eva’s fiancé. Liam Sullivan.” He extended his hand and the detective shook it.

“Detective Kent Jackson.”

“Well, Detective, as you’re aware, Eva was struck by lightning

last night. I'm afraid you'll need to wait to question her any further."

Detective Jackson smiled thinly, ignoring Liam and turning to me. Liam's eyes flashed with anger. He was not a man people usually ignored.

"We've been able to track down your brother. He was en route to L.A. for work but he's on his way back now."

"What happened to my mom?" I tried to sit up straighter, wincing in pain. The hospital room tilted dizzily around me. Liam put his hand in mine, and I gripped it, anxious for something to hold on to.

Jackson's eyes were like lumps of hot coal on mine.

"We had a call from a neighbor who heard shouts from your mom's house. Officers on the scene found the front door open. There were signs of a struggle. Her body was on the floor in the living room. She'd been stabbed."

He told me all of this as if he were reading a report on stocks and bonds, his voice cold and dispassionate.

I was glad I was in bed. My legs were rubbery. My arm buzzed. I felt like someone had scooped my insides out, leaving just a raw, pulsing hole. This must be a nightmare.

"Someone killed her," I whispered.

The detective studied me, as if the shape of my face would reveal what my brain could not.

"Yes."

"Who?"

"We're pursuing a number of leads." He clicked his pen again. *Click, click.* "Now, I have a few questions for you."

Liam puffed his chest up like an angry peacock and glared at the detective. "Absolutely not. We'll call and make an appointment once Eva's been released from the hospital."

"It's fine," I murmured.

"No. You need to rest. You can't even remember last night! You need time for your memories to piece together."



I snatched my hand away. “I *need* to find out what happened to my mom!”

Liam looked surprised, then hurt. “Eva—”

“Please. . . .” I cut him off, my voice cracking.

Indecision played out across his face. Finally he relented, moving to sit on a chair against the wall. But his body remained coiled tight as he watched the detective.

Detective Jackson shifted his weight and addressed me. “Did your mom ever tell you she was in danger in any way?”

I shook my head, flinching as starbursts of pain exploded inside my skull. My heartbeat pounded in my damaged ear. “No, never.”

“When was the last time you spoke?”

“Sunday.”

“Yesterday?”

“Yes. We had dinner. We were celebrating.”

He nodded, appearing attentive, focused, with none of the indifference I remembered from the last time I spoke to the police. But his presence sucked the air from the room, making me feel claustrophobic and tense. I didn’t trust him.

“I saw she won the Seattle Medal of Courage last month.”

“Yes, that’s why we were celebrating.”

“She saved that little girl’s life. What was she, three? She’d fallen on the light rail tracks in Pioneer Square. Your mom climbed onto the tracks when the train was approaching and grabbed her.”

“Yes.”

“Do you know of anyone who had a grudge against her?”

“A grudge?”

“Yes. Any enemies, bad blood, people who were angry with her? Family feuds, maybe?”

*Why is he asking me that?*

I swallowed hard. “No. I don’t think so.”

“It’s odd that someone would be murdered so soon after being in the public eye.” *Click, click.*

“Is it?”

“Don’t you think?” He let the question sit between us for a moment. “What time was your dinner?”

“Our reservation was for five p.m.”

“And what about after? Where did you go?”

I hesitated, trying to remember. “I got the ferry home to Whidbey Island. Why are you asking me these things?”

He ignored my question. “What’s the last thing you remember?”

I closed my eyes, allowing myself to shuttle back, to track the path of last night. Images flitted through my mind, clicking into place. “I was in the garage. I’d fired a set of bowls in the kiln.”

I looked at Liam for confirmation. He nodded, his face gray with worry.

“The timer went off. . . .” The sharp ring of earthenware hitting concrete rang out in my mind. My eyes flew open. “I took the pieces out of the kiln, but I tripped and dropped the tray and they smashed on the floor. I was cleaning it up when Liam came in. He told me he was going to make something to eat.”

I paused, reaching for the memory, but that was where it stopped. I tried to swallow past a dusty throat. “I can’t remember anything else.”

“So you remember other things, earlier in the day, for instance, just not past when the pottery broke?”

“No. Nothing,” I whispered.

Detective Jackson looked doubtful. My spit went thick in my mouth. He didn’t believe me.

“I want to remember!” I exclaimed, my voice too loud.

Liam looked alarmed by my outburst. What was wrong with me? But it was true. I wanted to remember, but the harder I tried to hold on to my memories, the further they sank beneath the waters of my subconscious.

“Eva, you shouldn’t be talking right now.” Liam came and stood by me. “Remember what the doctor said. You need to rest.”

Detective Jackson looked up from jotting notes and addressed

Liam. “Do you know what time Eva came back from dinner, Mr. Sullivan?”

“Maybe eight or so.”

“And what time did she leave in the night?”

Liam’s jaw worked and he shook his head. “I’m sorry, I sleep like the—” His eyes darted to mine, apologizing for being tactless. Once Liam was asleep, there was no waking him. He was an early-to-bed, early-to-rise kind of guy, the good angel on my shoulder. He’d convinced me to exercise more, give up gluten, start an IRA, keep my calendar organized. He’d been a good influence on my more free-wheeling ways.

“What’d you do after you ate?”

“Eva had a migraine, so I got her meds for her and she went to bed. I worked for a few hours and joined her. The next thing I knew, you guys were calling.”

Jackson looked at me again, his expression guarded. I could see shades of something creeping into his face.

“How’d you hurt your hand?” he asked.

I looked down. A thick white bandage was taped to the inside of my left palm. Something flashed in my mind, not a memory exactly, but something more ethereal, a sensation.

*In my mind I see a knife. I recognize it. It’s one of the old-fashioned wooden-handled boning knives my mom keeps in her kitchen. It’s covered in blood.*

My skin prickled with sweat, first hot, then cold. I inhaled sharply.

“I cut it,” I said. “Yesterday, when I was picking up the pottery.”

Detective Jackson looked at me for a long moment. Liam stepped in front of me, blocking the detective’s gaze with his body.

“I think that’s enough now, Detective,” he said firmly. “Eva’s told you everything she knows. You can direct any other questions to my lawyer.”

Detective Jackson opened his mouth to argue, but snapped it

shut. Liam had that effect on people. They just did what he wanted. Call it charm, charisma, whatever, people rarely questioned him. And if they did, he persisted until he got what he wanted. Liam's confidence, his certainty, were exactly why I fell in love with him.

Detective Jackson lifted his palms, like he was saying, *You win*. He pulled a card from his wallet, dropping it on my lap.

"Kat Hansen was murdered. I'm going to do whatever it takes to find out who's responsible for that."

He turned to go, then stopped and faced me. He held my gaze, direct, stony. "Again, I'm sorry for your loss."

five

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*eva*

ONCE THE DETECTIVE HAD LEFT, Liam turned to me. “All right, tell me what you really remember.”

He’d crossed his arms over his chest and was frowning. Hurt corkscrewed through me. Didn’t he believe me?

“I don’t remember anything,” I whispered.

“Babe, this is important!” Worry creased the skin between his eyebrows. “Your mom’s been murdered, and that detective is trying to question you.”

I put my hands over my face, tears pressing against my eyelids. “I don’t know! I don’t know what I remember! I can’t do this, that cop . . . It doesn’t matter what I say! He’s only going to believe what he wants to anyway!”

Liam sat next to me, his weight dipping the bed as he put his arms around me. I turned my face into his chest and leaned against him, needing his reassurance.

“Don’t worry. I won’t ever let anything bad happen to you. I’ll take care of this.”

He stood and started pacing, his mind whirling three steps ahead, mentally making lists of things to do. Nobody was as good in a crisis as Liam. When he set his mind to achieving something, he put all his energy into making it happen. He’d found me when I was at my lowest, picked me up, and fixed the broken pieces.

“I know a guy at the SPD,” he said. “I’ll call him and find out what exactly they know. And then we’ll call my lawyer. But first I need you to tell me what you really remember about last night. We’re on the same team here—I just want to make sure I know everything so I can help.”

I let my head drop back onto the pillow, wincing in pain. I ran a hand through my hair, my fingers gently kneading my aching skull. The IV tugged at the inside of my arm. I was profoundly tired. Like on a cellular level.

“I already told you,” I said wearily. “I don’t know.”

“Anything can help. Do you remember getting home or going to bed? Or cutting your hand?”

“I don’t remember anything!” I shouted.

We both froze. Liam’s mouth fell open in shock. I had never shouted at him, never lashed out, not even once. I could be sulky, maybe a little brooding, but never angry. Liam said it was the artist in me. In fact, it was one of the things he mentioned when he proposed. *I love that we never fight. I want to spend the rest of my life knowing I make you happy.*

Liam puffed his cheeks out and exhaled sharply. I knew exactly what he was thinking: *What the hell is wrong with her?* I was wondering the same thing.

“You believe me”—my voice hitched—“right?”

I needed Liam to believe me. I couldn’t lose him—he was the only stable thing in my life.

Liam rubbed a hand over his jaw, the stubble making a harsh rasping sound. “Look, everything’s going to be fine. I promise.”

It was only after he’d left that I realized he hadn’t answered my question.

-----

I woke that afternoon to the sound of rain pattering against the dirty window next to my bed. Anemic light filtered through the blinds. Beyond that, the sky was sullen, a hard, uniform gray. The sleep had

done wonders, and physically I already felt better. I could move my arm, my ear didn't throb as much, and my headache had dimmed.

Outside, a small brown bird hopped onto the window ledge. It stared at me solemnly. I took a crumb from the uneaten sandwich that had been left for my lunch and unlatched the window. It only opened an inch, but I pushed the crumb through and watched as the bird grabbed it and flew away, leaving me vaguely lonely.

A shadow, sharp as a sword, appeared on the other side of the frosted-glass door. It hovered there, someone trying to peer inside. My palms went slick.

*Somebody's there.*

I shrank against the bed, heart throbbing, feeling trapped and terrified. Images tumbled over me, twisting and shifting. I was running in the dark. Black and purple clouds. The air crackling. Rain hitting my scalp. The sound of shoes hitting wet pavement.

"Eva! What's wrong?" Liam's voice came from very far away. His arms circled my hunched body, warm and solid, and I realized I was rocking back and forth. My face was damp with tears.

"Someone's there," I whispered.

Liam's footsteps faded as he walked down the hall, then a minute later returned. He shut the door with a soft click.

"It's only a doctor." He gently pressed me onto the bed. "Here, lie down."

I struggled against him. "No! I need to go home!"

Liam's eyebrows shot to his hairline as he sidestepped my flailing limbs. My heart and head were pounding in tandem. I felt like I was floating out of my body, looking at myself and wondering who the hell had replaced me.

I swung my legs around to the floor, tentatively putting weight on my feet.

"Didn't you hear the doctor?" Liam's clenched jaw gave away the worry he meant to mask. "You need to rest, let your brain recover. You're hooked to an IV, for God's sake!"

Our eyes locked, mine pulsing, a staccato flicker in my peripheral

vision. Fear poured ice through my veins. I ripped the tape from my arm and the IV out in one smooth motion.

Liam gasped. “Eva! What are you—why’d you do that?”

We stared at the blood pumping from the inside of my arm. I hadn’t thought it would bleed so much.

Liam grabbed a handful of cotton balls from a canister and pressed them to my arm. “That IV was in a vein! What is wrong with you?”

The blood was already clotting, oozing instead of pumping. “Where are my clothes?”

“Don’t you remember? They had to cut your shirt off. There was no sign of your coat.”

I groaned, frustrated I’d forgotten.

“Eva . . .” Liam’s gaze was on the lightning marks that peeked out of the gauze bandaging on my arm. “Does it hurt?”

The marks looked like cracks embossed onto my skin, a mosaic of broken shards that climbed up my arm.

“No,” I lied. I tapped the gauze back down. It hurt like hell, but I’d rather eat my arm than stay in the hospital another minute. I had to get out of there. A deep sense of urgency pressed down on me. “I’m fine. Can we go home?”

I hobbled to the cupboard on the far side of the room. My body throbbed. My equilibrium was totally off. Inside I found a plastic bag with my things. My leggings and shoes were fine, my cell phone unharmed. But my socks were singed, my shirt and green corduroy jacket missing.

I slid my leggings on, then rolled up the hem of my hospital gown, pulling the ends together and tying them in a knot at my waist, nineties-style.

Liam sighed. “You look ridiculous.”

I ignored him and walked unsteadily to the open door.

“Eva, stop!” Liam’s fair eyebrows scrunched into balls. “What is going on? This isn’t like you!”



I knew I was behaving out of character, but I couldn't seem to find the words to explain how terrified I felt. An overwhelming sense that I wasn't safe here crashed over me.

Suddenly I was sobbing in giant, messy gulps, spluttering and gasping for air. I knew that something very bad had happened, worse than before. Something, or someone, threatened me still, but I couldn't remember what.

"Please! Someone . . . I was running. . . ." I wasn't making sense, the words coming out wrong. I couldn't convey what I was thinking because I couldn't rely on my brain to tell me the truth.

"Shhh . . ." Liam pulled me against him, so tight I could barely breathe. "It's okay. Remember, the doctor said this could happen. You just need to rest. Let's get you home. I'll get your meds later."

Downstairs, the chill of fall slid in through reception's rotating doors; then suddenly we were outside and I tasted it on the breeze, saw it in the harsh slant of the shadows cast between clouds bloated with rain. The wind whispered ominously in the treetops as we crossed to the parking garage. The remnants of a storm were everywhere: broken boughs, torn leaves, standing water, pieces of garbage strewn over the road.

Liam kept his arm around me as he led me to the car. I caught sight of my reflection in the window as he unlocked the door. My short hair was more disheveled than usual, tufts sticking up in every direction. My eyes were charcoal-hued, circled by dark moons and sunken in my small, pale face. A massive bandage covered the lump on my temple.

I swiped at the water on the window, smearing my reflection into a swirl of distorted colors, someone completely unrecognizable from the person who'd stood there only seconds before.

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The Mukilteo ferry terminal glowed in the fading light as we pulled up. Workers in high-vis vests shouted and waved their arms as we

drove onto the boat. Soon it was chugging into the choppy waters of Puget Sound. The trip was only twenty minutes, so we didn't bother going upstairs. Instead, I left Liam checking his phone while I went to the back of the car deck.

I stared at the steel-gray waters churning behind the ferry. Tears filled my eyes as reality smacked me in the face. This time yesterday I was about to get this ferry into Seattle to see my mom.

The mist swirled up and combined with the moisture on my cheeks. My relationship with my mother had become prickly these last few years. Distant. I'd never forgiven her for her cruel words, the arguments we'd had.

And now she was dead.

My cell phone rang. I looked at the caller ID and saw it flashing *Andrew*.

"Eva!" my brother exclaimed. "What's going on? I'm at the hospital. Where are you?"

Andrew was the kind of person who waited a half hour after eating before going swimming; who stopped at a stop sign even in the middle of the night. If the sign said *DON'T WALK ON THE GRASS*, he didn't walk on the grass. There was no way he'd understand my need to run, to hide, to get away from this.

"I left," I said.

"You *left*?" He sounded incredulous. I could hear footsteps striking pavement, the brisk, efficient walk of a lawyer. "You can't just leave the hospital. It's against the rules!"

"I had to get out of there!"

"Eva, come back to the hospital. This isn't like you."

"I don't understand what's going on!"

"Neither do I, but the detective will figure out what happened to Mom." I heard just the hint of a tremor in my brother's voice.

"I can't. I need to go home!"

"Do you have any idea how bad that will look? The police are already suspicious of you. . . ."

“What?” The noose around my neck tightened. I desperately needed somebody to explain what the hell was happening.

“Don’t you know?” Andrew asked. “The paramedics found you a few blocks away from Mom’s house last night. That’s where you were struck by lightning. Eva, the police think you might have been there when Mom was killed!”

---

*kat*

London  
25 years before

THE FIRST TIME I MET LAURA, she bit me.

I had taken Eva to the playground at Hyde Park, which, in retrospect, was an utterly ridiculous decision, as she had a dreadful cold. But that day the sky had been washed a spectacular blue by the previous night's rain, golden light filtering through the trees. Daffodils were blooming along the footpath, dancing on the cusp of spring's breath. As Eva trotted over to the sandpit, I pulled a fresh handkerchief from my bag and wiped moisture from a green bench before sitting.

Eva walked her teddy bear, Barnaby, across the pockmarked sand, murmuring childish secrets to him. She sneezed, her wispy blond curls bouncing in the breeze, and I instantly regretted bringing her outside when she was ill. A good mother would have stayed home, cuddled up on the couch watching cartoons on the telly. But I was going mad after days trapped inside by torrential rain.

I lifted my glasses off my nose and polished them on my coat sleeve as I watched her play. Suddenly a searing pain sliced through my shin.

"Ow!" I jumped up, holding my leg. A little girl peered up at me from under the bench, her eyes glittering with cheeky delight.

She was a tiny thing, about the same age as Eva, nearly four. Her hair was an unusual shade of red, a cross between cinnamon

and mahogany. It was long and wild, knotted with leaves and twigs. She had mud smudged across one cheek and was wearing a pink, gauzy ballerina outfit under her jacket.

I glared at the child, but she seemed immune to my fury. She grinned at me from her position on all fours.

“I’m a dog!” She stuck her tongue out and panted.

“Don’t be daft!” I huffed, rubbing my sore shin. “I’ve certainly never seen a dog ballerina before.”

The child’s face fell, and I felt cruel in that way I often didn’t understand. *Socially awkward*, my husband, Seb, always called me.

A woman with long, flame-red hair broke off from a group of yummy-mummies—black clothing, oversize designer prams, each with a takeaway coffee in one hand and a baby in the other. She was immaculately presented, full makeup on, gauzy, figure-skimming dress swirling, dangly earrings flashing. Her four-inch stacked heels sucked into the thick mud as she tottered toward us. I looked down at my practical, mud-splattered Wellington boots and couldn’t help feeling ever so frumpy.

“Laura, what have you done!” She scooped the child up and kissed her forehead. She was beautiful, feminine in a way I would never be, with soft curves and the same delicate bone structure and milk-pale skin as the girl. The neckline of her dress had slipped to expose the white lace of her bra. I looked away to preserve her decency, but she seemed not to have noticed one bit.

“I’m being a dog, Mummy!” Laura exclaimed.

“I hope you aren’t biting again, Laura-loo!” she scolded, looking mortified.

“It’s fine,” I said.

“Mummy, look!” Eva shouted from the sandpit. “I wrote my name!”

“Well done, darling!” I called.

Laura wriggled out of the woman’s grasp and went over to examine what Eva was doing. Eva showed her the letters, then handed her a stick and told her to have a go.

“Wow!” the woman said. “How old is your daughter?”

“She’ll be four in a few months.”

“And already writing her name? That’s astonishing! You must be chuffed to bits! Laura’s four in August, but she isn’t even close to writing her name yet.”

“I was training to be a teacher before I fell pregnant.” I couldn’t help the curl of pride that rose in me. “I’m preparing her for school in September.”

“Laura’s starting as well.”

I pushed my glasses up my nose, my face feeling stiff as I struggled to unstick my tongue from the roof of my mouth. She was so exquisitely beautiful, so alluring that it was quite intimidating.

“I’m Rose.” She extended a hand and smiled. When I shook it, it was smooth and cool, her fingers long and tapering to nails that were perfect pink ovals.

“I apologize for Laura’s behavior.” She rolled her eyes. “The girl can be positively feral sometimes.”

“Not a bother.”

“Do let me take you out to coffee to make it up to you!” She clapped her hands like a child and grinned. “Look, there’s a café just over there!”

“But, your friends—”

“I don’t really know them.” Rose waved a dismissive hand. “We were just chatting about children. Do say yes! It would make me feel so much better about Laura using you as a chew toy!”

“Very well, then.”

Rose called Laura to her, and I had no choice but to follow with Eva. She led us to a wooden pavilion with gray cladding and white trim overlooking the park. She ordered hot chocolate with marshmallows for the children and coffees for us from a spotty teenage boy running the till. I watched her, marveling at how easy she found conversation. It was quite extraordinary. Her tongue did not trip; her gaze did not waver. I found socializing all quite beyond me, really.

The boy behind the cash register seemed a bit overwhelmed by Rose's attention, his gaze occasionally dropping to the triangle of creamy cleavage exposed where her neckline dipped a little too low. I itched to tug it higher or to scold the boy, but Rose did nothing to discourage him, giving him a five-fingered wave as we headed to an empty table at the back of the café to await our drinks.

As soon as we sat, Rose slipped her heels off, setting them on an empty chair, then stretching her legs out and wiggling her toes. I wrinkled my nose, glancing at the filthy floor.

"Goodness! What was I thinking, wearing heels to the park?" Rose exclaimed with a charmingly self-deprecating laugh. "But I was simply desperate to feel more myself! You know how it is caring for small children. You lose such a piece of yourself!"

The waitress brought our drinks, sloshing liquid onto the table in her hurry to leave.

"Mummy, I wanted marshmallows!" Laura thrust her lower lip out.

Rose looked annoyed, although I could not be certain if it was at Laura or the waitress. She beckoned the waitress back.

"I ordered marshmallows with these," she said.

The waitress narrowed her eyes. "They sank. You'll have to go purchase more."

"Certainly." Rose began rummaging in her handbag.

"What? No." The injustice of it upset me greatly, though perhaps it wasn't my business to intervene. "The air bubbles in marshmallows mean they are less dense than the cocoa. They will float unless you squeeze them into balls to make them more dense than liquid. Did you do that?"

The waitress scowled and stormed away, returning a moment later with a small handful of marshmallows. She dropped them into both mugs of hot chocolate. They bobbed once, twice, then floated to the top. The waitress shuffled away looking embarrassed.

Rose burst out laughing. "That was amazing!"

I smiled and looked down at my coffee. I liked the sound of her

laughter and how it made me feel: as if I had just awoken, somehow. There was something about her. She was . . . magnetic. I was utterly drawn to her.

“Physical laws are infallible,” I said. “It is one of the few certainties in life.”

“Mummy, may I have your biscuit?” Eva asked.

“Certainly, my darling.” I plucked the biscuit off my coffee saucer and handed it to her.

Laura looked expectantly at Rose, but Rose shook her head and laughed, giving a little shrug. “Sorry, I already ate mine!”

She shook three packets of sugar into her coffee, stirred, and took a massive gulp. “I really shouldn’t have another coffee. This is my fourth today!”

Bored with the hot chocolate, Laura grabbed Barnaby from Eva, causing Eva to cry out in dismay. Her eyes, Seb’s sapphire blue, welled with tears. I rummaged in my bag and extracted a pad of paper and some crayons, handing them to Laura whilst retrieving Barnaby for Eva. She was far too old for a security object, but I couldn’t bring myself to take him away. The bear was becoming quite bedraggled these days, the yellow daffodils on his tie fading to a dirty gray. His hat, the trumpet-shape of a daffodil, had detached on one side.

“Oh, do stop being beastly!” Rose exclaimed crossly. She touched her fingertips to her temple and scowled at Laura. “I swear, some days I think about hiring a nanny!”

I tried to imagine the luxury of having someone else do all the dirty work.

“Why don’t you, then?” I asked. “Hire a nanny, I mean.”

She looked surprised. “Well, it . . . it isn’t what mums do, is it?”

I didn’t know how to respond. Who was I to say what a real mum would do? Mine certainly had been no example to live by.

She took a sip of coffee. “My mum fell ill when I was young and she died a few years later. I suppose I always wanted to create the



traditional home I didn't get." She looked away. "Hiring a nanny would mean I'd failed at that. That I was a bad mother."

My gaze leapt to Laura. Her long hair was tangled, her nose crusty with snot, her ballerina outfit streaked with mud. A piece of the gauze at the shoulder was torn. The child desperately needed a bath.

"I reckon it would make you a better mother." I bit my cheek, embarrassed. "Goodness, that sounded horrible! I do apologize. What I meant is, more hands make light work and all that!"

Rose threw her head back and laughed, exposing her slender neck. "I never thought of it that way. My husband agrees with you," she admitted. "He's recently rebranded his art gallery and he's away on business a lot, so he's no help whatsoever."

"Look! I drew a rocket!" Laura interrupted, holding her picture out to us.

"Well done," I said. I slid a blue crayon from the box and drew a rocket next to hers. "Did you know that rockets make it rain?" I drew a cloud under the rocket. "The smoke from the exhaust turns into clouds, and eventually, after the rocket has disappeared, the clouds start to rain!"

"Wow!" She picked up the crayon and drew clouds and rain in a frenzy of blue swirls.

Rose looked at me over the rim of her coffee mug. Her steady gray gaze made me feel itchy and hot all over, but also, strangely, like a cat being stroked. "This is a crazy thing to say, I know, but—would *you* want to be our nanny?"

I lifted my glasses off my nose to polish them, letting my eyes sweep over her face. She didn't appear to be joking. But Seb would never allow it. He liked me home with Eva, dinner on the table when he got home, laundry washed and neatly folded. It was our deal: he kept us financially secure; I took care of our daughter and made our house a home.

"I don't . . ."

“Of course.” Rose smiled and shrugged. “That was too forward. I do apologize.”

“No, it isn’t that.” I laughed, a surprised whoosh of air. “To be perfectly honest, I’m not certain we could afford to put Eva in nursery while I work.”

“Why, bring her with you! The children would have each other to play with. And look how well they get on!”

We watched Laura and Eva coloring together.

“We wouldn’t want to impose. . . .”

“Not at all. It would be lovely! I could start painting again, and Laura could learn so much from you before school starts!”

A gentle thrill buzzed through me. But I would have to ask Seb before I replied.

“I’ll give you my number.” Rose jotted her number on a crumpled receipt and handed it to me. “Do think about it. I’m afraid I must dash. We have a playdate organized soon.”

We left the café, and Laura and Eva bounced over to a clutch of daffodils swaying in the soft breeze, their hands knitted together. Laura picked one and tucked it behind Eva’s ear. Eva giggled.

“Thank you for the drinks,” I said.

Rose leaned forward and hugged me, her lips brushing my cheek. A gentle shiver raced down my spine as her hair tickled my ear. A strange, heady flush climbed my throat and stained my cheeks. I pulled away abruptly.

“It was lovely to meet you.” Rose’s eyes twinkled. “Please do phone me. My offer is genuine.”

I called Eva to me, and we said good-bye and headed in the opposite direction. As we walked, her gaze strained backward over her shoulder, at Laura and Rose.

Eva brought that daffodil home and put it on her bedside cabinet. It stayed there until it withered and shrank, eventually crumbling into tiny fragments that were cleared onto the floor and forgotten.

I am aware that the mind plays tricks. Brains are strange and

capricious things, and we humans are deluded to purport to be in control of them. A memory is no more reliable than the weather, broken, warped by the teller's view. But I remember that daffodil. The incandescent yellow glow against Laura's skin as she inhaled its scent before she gave it to Eva. Perhaps that's why daffodils always remind me of her.

Of the beginning of the end.