

Of
Literature
&
Lattes

KATHERINE REAY

A Novel

Of Literature and Lattes

KATHERINE REAY



Chapter 1

You're free to move; we can run your interview out of the Chicago office. We'll be in touch."

Alyssa threw another Tums in her mouth and cracked down on chalky grape. She played the message again, for the fourteenth time in three days, and while the words gave her no new hope, this time she focused on tone. Was there a lightness in Special Agent Denek's voice? Did he sound relaxed? Optimistic?

Once determined to make the call, unable to avoid it for another day, Alyssa had rehearsed what to say countless times, written out two different conversational scenarios, and hadn't drawn a real breath during her fifty-eight-second message—and power-chewed six Tums afterward.

Denek's reply had taken seven seconds.

Alyssa scanned her apartment. Three years. In a whirlwind, she'd moved from Chicago to Palo Alto, started a new job, signed a lease with a new colleague, and moved into this now-empty space. Well, the space downstairs. This one they moved into only eight months before on the promise of a huge raise—a raise that never came. Yet despite that, she and Meera thought they had arrived—even while working fifteen-hour days more often than not.

After all, they had two bedrooms with a living room and a small balcony in a three-story walk-up just blocks off Stanford's campus. They stood in line at chic coffeehouses bumping shoulders with Nobel Laureates and Silicon Valley legends, not to mention the up-and-comers—who could be anybody from the slick Euro-dressed woman in the pencil skirt or the jean-clad skateboarder who hung his board off his forearm as he ordered an oregano-infused Ethiopian pour-over. They paid twenty dollars for an arugula salad with beets and goat cheese and convinced themselves they weren't still hungry.

And they'd held their heads high too. She and Meera knew they were mere worker bees, but they worked for "the" company—the newest and, some said, the greatest of the unicorns. The one that was not only going to make the Uber and Twitter IPOs look like chump change, but the one that saved lives, whole generations, from the chronic illness epidemic that was "engulfing the modern world."

Now there was nothing left.

Like many Vita XGC employees, Meera made the call to the special agent in charge of her division months ago and moved back to New Jersey as fast as she could load the U-Haul. She had taken most of her furniture with her—including their bulletin board with Alyssa's spare car keys hanging from a peg.

For six months Alyssa had been left with only her bedroom furniture, a few plates, an armchair, and the unrealistic hope that the scandal would soon blow over. The furniture she'd sold that morning. The plates she packed into the last box that rested on her counter. And her hope, along with the last of her savings, had fizzled out at new job interview number seventeen.

Sliding the box onto her hip, she grabbed her keys and headed down the tiled stairs. The building felt empty. It *was* empty. Everyone else was at work.

She scrawled her manager a short thank-you note. He had let her out of the lease four months early. It was a gift she hadn't expected and one she desperately needed.

The parking lot was empty too. There was no one to see her off or say good-bye—of her friends from Vita XGC, there was no one left. Period.

Three years in California, and the end of the dream came with a seven-second message from an FBI agent and her key plinking to the bottom of a metal drop box.

When federal agents had escorted every Vita XGC employee from the six-story, state-of-the-art, glass glory of an office building six months ago, just days before Christmas, most thought it was a joke. There was even some jostling in the parking lot that led to handcuffs and stern words. But as the sun set that afternoon, the mood changed. The manic chase for fun that had dominated company events outside the office twisted into the competitive paranoia that had reigned within. Sunset started with whispers, speculation, and glares. Darkness descended in silence with the FBI releasing anxious employees by department late into the night.

Though unstated, Alyssa assumed a “Don't leave town” was implied that night. After all, they'd shut the doors, taken away the CEO, and set up interviews for the executives, who lawyered up right on the spot. And the rest of them followed suit, hiring lawyers within the next two days. Yet to Alyssa's surprise, her lawyer, a young gunner at Perkins and Coie costing \$250 an hour, told her that within those two days a lot of XGC employees fled town.

“As long as the FBI knows where to find you, it shouldn't be a problem. You need work, and in a post-Theranos Silicon Valley, no company will want the liability of an XGC hire.”

Alyssa dismissed his counsel that day, certain he was wrong. She *needed* him to be wrong—going home wasn't an option. But after

sending forty resumes across the country with no reply, and sitting through seventeen failed interviews locally, home was now her only option.

As she shoved the box into her car, her mind cast back to her last-ditch effort, only days before, to remain in Palo Alto.

Interview seventeen began like all the others . . .

“You have an impressive resume. Other than the hiccup at Vita XGC.” The older woman’s voice arced as she peered over her bright red readers.

Alyssa knew it was a question. She knew what the woman was after. It was the story everyone wanted and, Alyssa suspected, the only reason she’d been granted her seventeen interviews in the first place. She sat silent. She had quit trying to profess ignorance to XGC’s perfidy at interview six and her innocence halfway through interview nine.

The woman tried a fresh tack. She offered a smile that only curled up on one edge as she leaned forward, inviting Alyssa into her confidence. “What do the letters stand for, anyway? XGC. I’ve always wondered.”

That was a question Alyssa could answer. “The X was for next gen and GC are Tag’s initials. His real name is Gabriel. Vita, vital good health, next gen Gabriel Connelly.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” The woman guffawed. “The great Tag, the great humanitarian, Architect of Predictive Medicine, Preserver of the People, named his company after himself. Called himself next gen and vital. That should have told us all something.”

Alyssa clamped her mouth shut, embarrassed she hadn’t peeled back more of the subtext on that one herself. Three years ago, when she had been flown out to Palo Alto and housed at the Four Seasons Hotel by that very Tag, she’d bought his whole story.

My mom died early of Korsakoff syndrome, a form of dementia,

and that shouldn't happen. We can know what's in our genes, and that means what might be in our futures. But now we can and will make our futures better. I will never stop loving my mom or feeling fury at her loss, and I will give everything I have to stop this epidemic of chronic disease and illness from engulfing generations.

He had spun heartwarming stories of reading, fishing, building forts, and hiking with this gorgeous, almost mythical-sounding mother. By the end Alyssa had wanted to trade her mom for his, despite her early death.

And that's what bothered Alyssa the most. She hadn't done her due diligence—fleeing Chicago and joining Vita XGC had been a hasty and emotional decision.

Homes and moms were very emotional topics.

The woman finally stopped chortling and scrolled across her tablet to resume the interview. “Let's track back through your experience. You left ‘XGC’”—she made air quotes with her free hand—“in December last year.”

“Yes.” Alyssa didn't add that everyone left XGC that day, under federal escort.

“Describe your responsibilities there.”

“I worked on a team of eight that built the company's predictive algorithms.”

“You managed the data?”

“No. We worked with scrubbed data. All departments worked that way because the amount of information made the data incredibly powerful. They were very protective about that.”

“Sure they were,” the woman scoffed. “So basically, you were responsible for all those people thinking they were headed to Alzheimer's, lupus, MS, diabetes, or whatever else was going to kill them. Tomorrow. How convenient—can't get sued for something that *might* happen.”

That sentence wasn't a question, but the woman's sneer demanded an answer.

"So it seems." Alyssa tried to bank her bitterness, which had crept in at interview number ten. While she knew it was off-putting and unlikely to land her a job, she found that her anger—at the company, at the lies, even at herself—kept her from crying, which was how she'd answered that line of questioning during interviews one, two, and three. Because it always came up.

During interview number four, she'd tried for honesty . . .

"Everything that happened is being unraveled, and it was horrible. But I do think my team's algorithms worked. Through three testing rounds we matched perfectly the reconstructed data sets . . . I don't know what went wrong, and if our work unwittingly harmed someone, my hope is they can be notified. Some customers . . . I can't imagine their questions and concerns. It was big stuff we were looking toward, but it was always years ahead. People can be notified, and the worry can stop. It was all predictive, not diagnostic—"

"Stop!" the interviewer had shot back. "Stop justifying yourself. No one had anything! You were playing God, for profit, and you have no idea what that lie could do to someone, to whole families." He escorted her out of his office within thirty seconds, and she stood throwing up in the parking lot within sixty.

The underlying questions in each interview had boiled down to a caustic mix of *How could you be so stupid?* and *Are you really that greedy and cruel?* One interviewer actually used those words, and Alyssa couldn't blame him. They were the million-dollar questions. Or in XGC's case—the 1.2-billion-dollar questions. Everyone in Silicon Valley wanted the answers, as did the federal agents working the case. And those questions were the reason why Alyssa, and

everyone else involved, remained the subject of multiple investigations, gossip, and speculation—and unhirable until answers were found.

The questions haunted Alyssa in her quieter moments as well. She tossed and turned most nights, stomach on fire with the ulcers that simmered during her final months at XGC and flamed higher during the last six unemployed.

Looking back, she could see last fall more clearly now. Tag had taken XGC's frenzy to a whole new level.

Always cavalier and charismatic, he showed signs of cracking. At the time she believed him—it was because they were close. Now she knew the truth . . .

We are at the end. All our hard work is paying off, and testing shows that we did it. We have rolled out results from our first live test. That's thirty thousand clients, and another boy won't lose his mom to dementia because she'll know in her teens how to stay healthy. A young girl, knowing MS is thirty years down the road, will take proper care of her health and happily hold her grandchildren someday. But we've got to push harder. The establishment doesn't want to put healthcare and vitality in the hands of the everyday common person, so we've got to get out there before it can stop us. This is all hands on deck. We're fighting for the future.

Even now, remembering that day, Alyssa felt the flush of energy that had filled her that afternoon. It was consuming and invigorating to be pursuing something pure and true and honest. And, from Alyssa's perspective, it was the first true and honest thing she had known. The light after her own lie.

Then it all came crashing down.

That's wrong, Alyssa reminded herself in the still darkness every night and now as she slammed the back door of her blue CRV. It

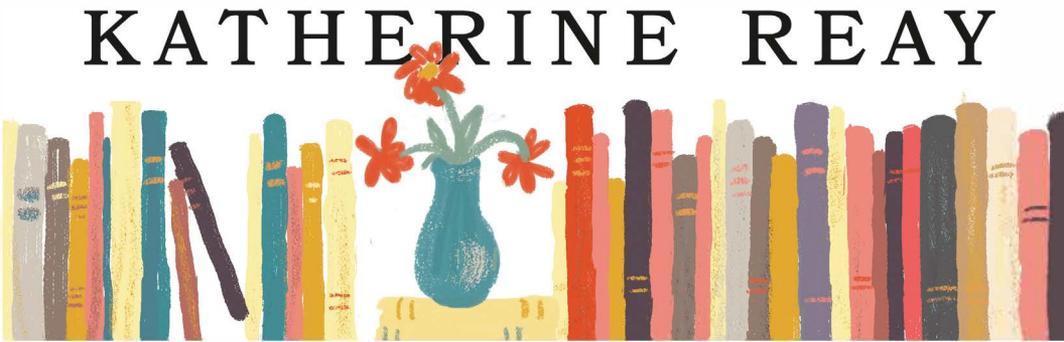
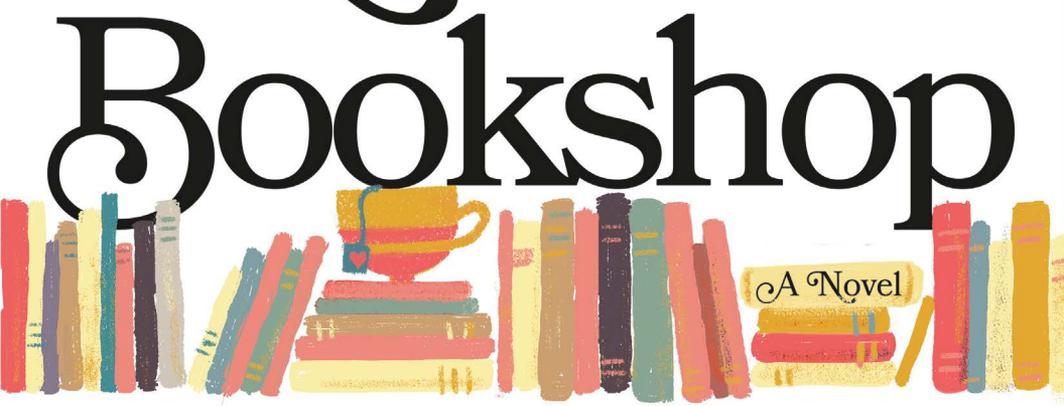
never existed in the first place. In fact, if the rumors proved true, the only real business that had occurred at XGC came from Tag selling their data to pharmaceutical companies overseas.

Alyssa dropped into the driver's seat. It was hot enough to instantly stick her T-shirt to her back and melt the tension in her shoulders. She closed her eyes in the warm quiet—until her thoughts crowded in again.

She tapped a button on her navigation system to head to the last place on earth she wanted to go, and the only option she had left.

2,175 miles away . . . Winsome, Illinois.

Home.



KATHERINE REAY

The Printed Letter Bookshop

KATHERINE REAY



Chapter 1

MADELINE

People parted around us in the courtyard. No one stopped to say anything—why would they? No one had ever seen us before. I paused, hearing something about champagne and a celebration. I was sure I was mistaken. Two women slid around me into the sea of black. From behind they appeared an unlikely pair. One stiff, as if held up by a single rod, while the other walked with the grace of a yogini. Black pants swirled around her ankles.

At the close of the service, we had walked back down the aisle, heads straight, following Dad's lead. But once we spilled out into the stone entryway, the crowd separated us. I looked around for Mom and found her several feet away, talking to a group of women. One reached out and held her arm, as if Mom needed consolation. Perhaps she did. She was the only one in our family who had kept in touch with Aunt Maddie over the years.

The icy rain had stopped, but the clouds felt no less foreboding. The sleet or snow would soon return. Dad watched the sky for a long time. So long, I tipped my head back as well.

"Almost twenty years." He dropped his gaze and stared at me. "That's how long since I spoke to my sister before last month, but she didn't tell me. She said she was calling to say she loved me." He

gripped the back of his neck. It wrinkled white under the pressure. “I wouldn’t have answered if I’d recognized the number.”

His eyes held a rare hint of vulnerability, so I pressed the advantage. “Well, it was about time. It wasn’t your fault. None of it.”

He cast me an odd, questioning look. Dad, who never questioned. Who held all the answers. “It *was* my fault. Every bit of it. I had never seen her so angry. But I was angry too, and . . . ashamed . . .” Dad breathed in. And out. “I hated that she judged me, but I don’t think she did. I don’t think she ever held it against me.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

His gaze flickered in alarm or pain before it drifted above and beyond me. He shook his head and walked toward the church’s circular drive.

Bits of conversation snagged me as we passed.

“Isn’t there a reception?”

“What about her house?”

“Her brother should host one. Didn’t she have a brother?”

“No . . . That was Pete’s brother in the front row. Maddie didn’t have any family.”

I looked to Dad and wondered if he’d heard. If those women had done the same, looked at my dad, they would have seen he never could have been Uncle Pete’s brother. He and his sister shared the same deep-set eyes, eyebrows, and nose. Her “Irish twins,” Granny Caoimhe called them. They looked alike, walked alike, laughed alike. Both bit the side of their cheek when deep in thought, narrowed their eyes when something didn’t sound right, and laughed loudest at their own jokes.

Though, if I remembered correctly, Aunt Maddie’s laugh was more of a contagious giggle that held strong until you caught on and joined her. Dad’s, I knew from experience, held a slight condescension—you simply hadn’t caught the brilliance of his humor.

Mom reached us as their driver pulled to the curb. “Maddie was certainly adored. So many people. Shouldn’t we go by her house to make sure it’s okay? Houses don’t like to be left alone.”

Dad opened the car’s door. “I haven’t heard from her lawyers. Who knows who owns it now? We could be trespassing . . . Madeline?”

I shook my head. “I have no idea. No one has contacted me.”

“That’s it then. Until told, it’s not our concern.” He dropped inside.

Mom pulled me into a hug. “I hate leaving you like this. We hardly saw you this trip.” She glanced into the dark car.

“It’s okay, Mom. You both are busy. I’m busy.”

“It’s not okay, but I’ll be back in four days.”

I nodded.

“I land on the seventh, as I’m sure the firm will host something extravagant on the sixth. I’ll get myself to your apartment.” She gestured to the parking lot. “How are you getting back downtown?”

“I took the Metra up.”

“In the rain? Let us take you back before it starts again.” She leaned into the car. “Do we have time to take—”

“Don’t worry about it.” I tugged at her shoulder. They didn’t have time before their flight back to New York. And Dad rarely veered from his predetermined schedules.

“Charlotte?” he called as if cued.

She waved her hand into the car. “As I said, I’ll be here on the seventh.” She curled a finger around my ear the way she used to do when I was young and drew a loose strand of hair forward. She often chided me for being too severe. The gesture made me smile and I leaned into her touch.

“My daughter is about to make partner, the youngest partner I might add, at one of Chicago’s top law firms. That’s worth celebrating.” She pulled me close and kissed my cheek. “It’s important to celebrate, to mark occasions, dear. Don’t forget that.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

One more squeeze and she, too, dropped into the car. I was left standing alone, with a sea of black behind me all consoling one another over their loss, and an empty street in front of me. No one knew me. I knew no one. And I wasn't sure what I'd lost.

Rather than turn into the crowd, I let memories of Aunt Maddie wash over me as I stepped across the church's driveway and headed toward the train station. Past the small village square. Past the gas station that had served soft swirls so long ago. I tripped over a shift in the sidewalk and found myself at the edge of the small park I had sat in before the service. I swiped at the bench and dropped onto it again. There was time before the train.

Madeline Cullen Carter. Same name as me, minus the Carter. I'd been named after her and, until that summer, my dad had only spoken of her in glowing terms. He worshiped her. Only thirteen months older, his “crazy” brilliant sister was everything he wasn't. And *crazy* was his highest compliment. I could hear it in his voice. *My crazy sister went skydiving. Skydiving at forty-five . . . She and Pete are headed to Haiti next month to help with relief efforts from Hurricane Gordon . . . She's up to more craziness; she and Pete want to open a bookstore . . .*

Crazy meant bold, daring, fearless. It was a radiant word, endowed with virtue and supernatural strength. For years, I wanted to be called crazy too. But after my last trip, nineteen years ago, the same word, previously laden with excitement, adoration, and a hint of envy, emerged with snarled derision and disgust.

Their retirement savings caused the rift and divided us all. She and Uncle Pete had invested in Dad's Millennium Tech Fund and—like practically every other tech fund in the spring and summer of 2000—it vanished.

But shouldn't she have been more understanding? More forgiving? Shouldn't family have meant more than money? Everyone was

hurt when the tech bubble burst. Everyone lost money. Yes, some more than others, but it wasn't the managers' fault. That was like blaming Hurricane Gordon on the meteorologists.

But anger can be as irrational as it is visceral. I felt it at school as my best friends avoided, then shunned me, sure my dad had caused all their parents' troubles. And after we returned from Aunt Maddie's house that summer, the apartment felt as silent and somber as school. Mom and Dad retreated to separate corners to heal. They never laughed, never went out to parties or dinners; they hardly spoke. In my most honest moments, I admit I chose Northwestern Law School in an attempt to push reconciliation. Maybe I was trying to rewrite history and prove people could be forgiving and kind. Maybe I wanted assurance that money, gained or lost, didn't rule the world. New York had taught me otherwise, but Chicago? Maybe . . .

It never happened.

Aunt Maddie occasionally called and invited me to Winsome for dinner, or volunteered to come visit me downtown, but she never mentioned my father, never said it was all okay, never let him off the hook, and never forgave him. And I never pushed it—I shouldn't have had to.

I leaned back against the bench. *It was my fault. Every bit of it . . .* Dad said those very words. How was that true? Aunt Maddie had spent years blaming him for something out of his control.

"Are you okay?"

I bolted upright. Somehow I had missed a bright-red Patagonia fleece standing feet from my face. "I— How long have you been standing there?"

The face above the fleece flashed straight white teeth. The straight teeth led to a slightly bumped nose and remarkable green eyes. His whole face lit with a smile.

"The length of that question. I just came from there." He pointed across the street to the Catholic church's rectory. "The

church maintains the park and I was working earlier, but needed to take a break.” He used the same hand to sweep behind him. I noted a pile of burlap and a wheelbarrow. As he turned back, he pulled his other hand from his jeans pocket and offered a white handkerchief.

I then felt what he must have noticed—my eyes were sticky and most likely red. He jiggled the handkerchief in front of me until I reached for it.

“I haven’t seen one of these since my grandfather died.”

“My granddad left me all his. They feel old-fashioned, but I find comfort in that.”

“Me too.”

“And damsels in distress love them.” His eyes were an extraordinary color. They danced with laughter. His voice dripped with innuendo.

“Damsels?” I gave a barkish laugh before I could choke it back and felt myself grow red. I waved toward the rectory. “You’re a priest. How is that appropriate?”

His eyes followed my hand, and his smiling face blanched. It had held a hint of tan that I only noticed as it washed away. “Where’d you get that? I’m—I’m the yardman.”

He stumbled over his job title as if surprised—or lying.

“Are you?” The lawyer in me awoke.

He leveled his gaze on me, and the eyes glittered again as if he knew exactly what I was doing and found it amusing. But people don’t deal straight unless pushed.

“Yes. My brother lives there. Father Luke, he’s the priest. You can go ask him who stole half his roast beef on rye if you’d like.”

“I believe you.” I remembered why I was holding the handkerchief and dried my eyes. I then forgot it was a handkerchief and blew my nose.

He caught my shocked expression and smiled again.

“I think I should keep it now. I can wash it and get it back to you.”

He flapped his hand. “That’s what you were supposed to do with it. I have plenty.”

I scanned the park. We were the only ones out.

“It’s not a nice day for yard work.” I gestured to the burlap.

He twisted to follow my gaze. “It’s not, but it’s my job. And if I don’t get all these covered today, we might lose some. We weren’t supposed to get really cold weather for another week, but we’re dipping to the single digits tonight and snow is coming. Shows what the meteorologists know.”

“I didn’t know it would be so bad when I left downtown. I came for a funeral.” I waved my hand in the general direction of the Episcopal church.

“Madeline Carter?” At my nod, he added, “I was there too.”

“I’m not surprised. It was packed. She was well known, wasn’t she?”

I heard the lift in my question even if he didn’t. *Who was she? Really?* After seeing Dad, hearing him, feeling his shame—for that’s what had layered him like a thick coat this morning—I wondered if I knew her, or him, at all.

“Well loved, that’s for sure.” The man pulled pruning shears from his other back pocket and tipped them across the street. “She met me at Luke’s about a year ago. She brought me soup, and books. Always books. You?”

“She was my aunt.”

His brow furrowed. Years of watching clients had taught me well. My comment either confused or bothered him. Before I could ask, he cleared the emotion from his face. “You sit and I’ll leave you be.”

Irritation tempered by disappointment.

I shook my head and stood. “I can’t.” I found myself eye to chin, thinking his was a nice chin. Clean-shaven with a good, firm

jaw and straight lines. I liked straight lines. Clear facts. Strong foundations. My gaze drifted north again and, despite his obvious displeasure in me, I found kind eyes—and ears that stuck out a little. That made me smile. Dumbo’s ears stuck out too.

I noted that he caught the change in my smile. His eyes flickered a question.

“The train,” I blurted. “I have to catch the 12:11 back downtown.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.” He turned and walked away.

I hesitated, not long enough to get his attention, but long enough to feel silly staring at his back.

Then I did the same; I turned on my heel and walked away, booking it double-time to the train station.



JANET

Ten forty and the church is packed. It should make me happy that everyone feels about Maddie as I do, that everyone loves her and will miss her, but it only ticks me off. I spent every day for the past two years with the woman, and now I can’t find a seat from which to send her off. Who are all these people? Where were they these past months? Or these past weeks when hospice came and her house grew quiet with that warm, sticky scent of death?

I can’t blame them. I want to, believe me I do. But I can’t. Maddie never let anyone know how bad it was. I only found out because I trampled on her privacy, for my own purposes. I had nowhere else to go, so I forced her to let me in.

Each night as we closed up the bookshop I’d ask her, “What are you up to tonight?” She was my employer, and more than ten years my senior, but I secretly hoped that one night she might hear my loneliness and maybe suggest we go out to dinner.

Despite being a widow, Maddie was never alone. “It’s bridge night at Suzie’s house . . . My prayer group is meeting for dinner at Valley Landing . . . My book club, the former squash players, not the library group, is meeting to discuss *In the Midst of Winter* . . . I’m volunteering at the soup kitchen on Waukegan . . . I’m . . .”

There was always something or someone filling her days—and her evenings.

Until one day I couldn’t take it any longer. “Can I come?”

She stared at me, a long smile building until it burst out. It made all the wrinkles in her face dig deep. Maddie’s wrinkles were born of a million smiles. She was all horizontal lines, stairstepping into her salt-and-pepper crown.

“That wasn’t so hard, was it? I wondered when you were going to ask to join.”

“You could’ve invited me,” I fired back.

“And you could stop playing the victim.” The words shot out staccato and seemed to startle her as much as they did me. She followed with a quick, “Let me grab my keys,” and fled the room.

By the time she returned, her bright smile was back in place and the moment had passed. And though my surprise and anger lingered, to revisit her sharp reply felt petty and beyond pathetic. I kept my mouth shut.

I only remember that exchange because it was one of the rare times I did keep my mouth shut. Maddie used to tease me about “living in the present tense”—allowing no time for reflection or a heartbeat of pause to separate my will and my actions.

She was right. I do live in the present. But I don’t see how it’s wrong. The past only brings regret, and the future holds nothing bright.

I survey the church. There are two pews in the front draped with red velvet Reserved signs. For family, I assume. They are empty. Figures. When Pete died ten years ago, I didn’t hear much

about family. I didn't know Maddie back then, but I still attended the funeral. Half of Winsome showed up, and all those groups of women came in hordes to help her. Every book club, volunteer organization, church group, and the town's business association banded together to make sure all her needs were met—well, not all her needs; her husband *had* just died.

But they brought enough food that Maddie didn't cook for almost a year. My husband—my ex-husband—Seth was close to Pete, and to her. It was his idea to give her a trunk-style freezer for her garage. At the time, I balked—I balked at most things in those days. But over the past few months, that freezer came in very handy.

Back then, no family came to honor Pete. And it looks like no family has come today. Not that Maddie didn't call us all family. I can't name a single person in Winsome who didn't love her. The letters framed all over the shop attest to that. They're from kids Maddie taught and tutored, and from friends who were excited about the new bookshop. They are letters of love, which Pete framed and hung when they opened their doors. She could recite each by heart.

But it's not the same—I know. Family means more. You can miss your family so much you have to look down to see your chest rise and fall, to confirm that it hasn't been cut open and you're not bleeding out and you're still breathing. Friends can't hurt you like that, nor can they fill that fissure.

There's a questioning hum around me. People aren't just missing her or whispering about her. They're wondering. I sense it more than hear it.

Did you know? How long was she sick?

No one knew, people. No one knew she got the diagnosis in late July. It's only December! She'd commented about headaches, backaches, stomachaches for the past couple years, then brushed them aside each and every time. *I'm getting old, girls.*

No one knew.

I'd barged in on her in September. The shop's restroom door was ajar and I needed a tissue. I banged it open and landed right on her, slumped over the toilet bowl.

"Maddie, Maddie, Maddie . . . Are you okay?"

"My head . . . Everything hurts. How can everything hurt so much? How bad can this get?" She pushed back from the toilet and leaned against the wall.

"How bad can what get?" I whispered and slid down the wall next to her. Her tone warned me Advil could not fix this, whatever *this* was.

"Dying." Her eyes widened as if she'd said "Voldemort."

It felt as hideous and evil as Harry Potter's dark wizard.

She then shook her head—not in an *I can't believe I said that* gesture, but in a *Please don't tell anyone* gesture.

I rubbed her back and I kept her secret.

I LOOK AROUND THE church more slowly this time, corner to corner, and across the nave. I begin to recognize people. Margo from the bank. Veronica Beven and her husband from one of Maddie's book clubs. Lisa Generis . . . Jasper from the gas station. Maddie left her mark on the hearts of everyone here.

For the past couple years, she did more than that for me. She was Seth's friend first. Then, as everyone else in my life drew away, she pulled me close. I felt the press of her every day. She kept me from flying about like ash scattered in the wind. Now she is gone, and I fear blowing away.

Claire, the Printed Letter's only other full-time employee, plucks at my sleeve. "We're too late. There's nowhere to sit."

I gesture toward the first two rows. "Let's sit up there. We have as much right as anyone."

“We will not,” she hisses. “It’s reserved for family.”

Always doing the right thing. If Claire weren’t so nice and perfectly polite, you’d want to hit her, constantly. Instead I cast her a glance, head to toe. She wears a wool crepe A-line dress—*Who is she, Kate Middleton?*—pumps, not boots, despite the icy mess outside, and stockings. Real silk black panty hose, not tights. Only the red-rimmed eyes and a few flyaway gray hairs escaping the neat brown bob let me know she’s human. I run a hand down my black pants to smooth the wrinkles. I don’t dare look at my boots. I couldn’t find the slim Ferragamos Seth bought me years ago, so I wore cowboy boots. They’re black so it’s okay. It’s not okay, but it’s the best I can do right now.

“They’re probably not coming anyway. Remember Pete’s service?”

“I didn’t live here then.” Claire glances across the church. “Besides, she has a brother and a niece. Remember? The one who lives downtown. They’ll come.”

I scoff at that. “The niece didn’t bother coming to the house these past months. What makes you think she’ll show up now? And if any of them do show up, they don’t deserve those seats.” I take a step down the aisle.

Claire tugs me.

“Fine.” I step back and loop a finger into my blouse’s neckline. I rarely wear more than one layer, but even this thin silk feels warm. I pluck again; it’s sticking to me. “It’s too crowded and it’s hot. We’ll never find seats . . . Why don’t they have the air on?”

“It’s thirty degrees outside. They probably have the heat on.” Claire levels a measured look at me. “And we will find seats.”

A man steps into the aisle in front of us. He extends his hand into the sixth row. “Please.”

I want to object. Not because I don’t appreciate his gesture or because I don’t want the seat, but because I simply want to protest. I want to stamp my feet and yell.

“Thank you.” Claire speaks for both of us. She slides in first and widens her eyes at me when I don’t move.

“Thank you.” It takes me that moment to focus and recognize him. Though twenty years younger, Chris McCullough has become a good friend. I squeeze his hand, and a wave of calm washes through me. It’s his green eyes. Green eyes are wondrous things and will always make my heart jolt. Seth had green eyes, has green eyes. I simply don’t look into them anymore.

Seth . . . He must be here. I settle into the pew and scan the nave—and land smack on him. On his eyes, looking at me. Moss in the fall when he pulls out his dark-green sweaters. Pale grass-green, citron almost, with flecks of gold, on a hot summer day or when he’s really tired. Electric emerald, hard and unyielding, in anger . . .

I’m used to emerald. I have endured over two years of Seth’s emerald eyes.

Yet today . . . moss. Seth, standing against a side wall, acknowledges me with a nod. I feel as if he’s been waiting for me to find him. Not because he’s reaching out, but because it’s a duty. Politely acknowledge the ex-wife. Check. Seth always performs his duty. He’s kind of like Claire in that way, which is probably why I never bop her. There’s something comfortable and secure about people who color within the lines.

He looks good, really good, in a dark-blue suit, blue shirt, and a dark tie with flecks of gray. Not flecks . . . tiny dolphins. He’s wearing the tie I gave him for our twenty-fifth anniversary. We swam with the dolphins in Hawaii for our trip that year. It’d be our thirty-second anniversary in eight months . . . It’ll never be our thirty-second anniversary.

“Where’s Brian?” I shift my focus from my ex-husband to Claire.

“He couldn’t miss some meetings in New York,” she whispers without turning her head.

Couldn't or wouldn't? The question floats unspoken between us. I nudge her again. "Seth is here."

Claire leans around me and waves before I can stop her. "Of course he is. He adored Maddie."

She smells of gardenias. I open my mouth to snap at her. *It's December! Change your perfume!* I clamp my lips tight before the words escape. Not to save her feelings, but because it's a beautiful spring smell—a green-blossoming, hope-filled smell, full of fresh new beginnings.

I'm in the fall of life and I hate it.

I close my eyes and breathe deeper. Spring fills me, and I almost believe . . .

"But she was my friend," slips out instead.

The hard silence opens my eyes to Claire's raised brow. Not for the first time, I wonder how much money or time she spends to get them that way. She has the darkest brows, not a hair out of place and contoured into perfect arcs. They're her best feature really, quite remarkable. She holds the brow up so long it becomes insulting.

"Don't." I raise a single finger.

She uses that look on her kids, or on me when I behave like one. But I'm too close to tears right now. Too close to becoming a puddle in public, again. That's all anyone thinks of me anymore—not the woman I used to be or imagined I could be—just a lying-cheating-emotional puddle. I keep the single finger pointed stiff and straight. It was my signature move, years ago, on my own kids. It divides the space between us.

We stay frozen for a moment, eyes clashing, but not in anger. That's not the emotion coursing through me, and I know Claire well enough to know she's not mad either. We're adrift. As stable as Claire is, Maddie was our anchor. Without her, we are each other's lifelines, whether we like it or not, whether we can handle it or not.

I sense the panic in her eyes, and I'm certain she's getting flooded as it pours from mine. Bottom line, we're sinking.

I face forward and press my shoulder into her. "I don't feel well. Maybe I'm dying too."

"That is not funny." She grinds out the words with perfect diction, but still reaches for my hand. I enjoy her comfort until she squeezes one shade too tight.

I butt-scoot a few inches away. "I'll be quiet."

I can't resist looking back to Seth. He's gone. I shift to find him, and the pew creaks with each twist. Now the entire congregation knows I'm searching for my ex-husband. He's nowhere in sight. Movement draws my eyes forward again. The family is filing into the first row. They don't fill it. There are only three of them.

"Told you," I whisper in Claire's ear. When she doesn't turn or reply, I continue, "That must be her brother. And the one on the end is probably that niece she always talked about but who never came to visit. She lives forty miles away, in some Chicago high-rise, but still couldn't make it here once to see her dying aunt."



CLAIRE

Claire kept one eye on Janet and one ear on the service. It was traditionally beautiful in many respects. The minister read a passage from Corinthians and one from the gospel of John. *Do not let your hearts be troubled.* The words felt like a warm spear, entering and stabbing, making her aware of how fragile she felt. But they didn't wound. They consoled. Hers was not the first heart to be troubled—and that meant she wasn't alone.

She shifted in her seat. Janet squirmed beside her as the service

took an unconventional turn. It ended. The family didn't make any comments or remarks. Songs, Scripture, sermon. There were no childish anecdotes, no expressions of thanks for support, no kind words about a sister or an aunt who would be missed. No scheduled time for friends to say good-bye. Claire peeked at her watch. A life wrapped up neat and tidy in nineteen minutes. Maddie had been an approachable, warm, and true friend with remarkable depth. She spent more time on the birthday cards she gave.

Claire looked at Janet. During the service she'd plucked at her blouse and pulled her highlighted blond mass of curls into a loose bun. She'd stopped short of fanning herself. Now she was swiping her eyes with another tissue. In the year Claire had known her, all Janet's emotions came out in one form: anger. The tears were unexpected. *Be patient with her* was the first advice Maddie gave Claire with regard to Janet, the day she began working at the shop. She had intimated to her that Janet was deep in a valley and it had washed out all her color, resilience, and grace.

As the notes of "Lift High the Cross" swelled around her, Claire cast back to the first day she'd met Maddie and Janet. Lost and alone in a new town, she had wandered into the Printed Letter Bookshop in hopes of escaping. Brian had started work, the kids were settling into their new school, and the cable company hadn't arrived yet, so she couldn't find some over-the-top romantic movie to hide within. And the coffee shop down the street terrified her. The Daily Brew was packed with groupings of people, almost like a town meeting of sorts, with friends calling *Hello* and *How are you?* across the tables, fireplaces (there were two), and lattes. She'd taken three steps in, patted the top of her head as if looking for her sunglasses, and backed right out.

Blocks of aimless walking landed her only a few storefronts from the coffee shop and outside the Printed Letter. A peek inside confirmed it was welcoming. She headed straight to her safe harbor,

the classics. *Anna Karenina*? Too depressing—and that made it too dangerous. *War and Peace*. Too trying. Too fraught.

They were the solid novels that had anchored Claire with deep roots and generational solidity through ten corporate moves, but that day they'd felt heavy and constricting, and she feared if she lingered in them she'd never break free and feel the sun again. After all, Dr. Zhivago and Lara lingered in gray, and look how it ended for them. She ran her finger across the spines . . . Alcott, Austen, Brontë, Cather, Chesterton, Dickens, Dostoyevsky . . . Didn't anyone write from Italy? Greece? Didn't anyone bask in sunshine and joy?

Then came that shuddering exhale, as if her last breath of hope and expectation was leaving her for good. It was embarrassing to have someone else hear it, and the two women working in the shop had definitely heard it. The older one, with the gray hair and laughing eyes, smiled at her. The highlighted blond one gave a quick glance and moved on to help another customer.

The gray-haired one focused on Claire. She lifted her head in a disconcerting way to look through her reading glasses rather than push them up on her nose—as if she saw beyond the surface.

“What do you like to read?” She stepped from behind the counter and narrowed her eyes as if daring Claire to lie.

Claire remembered how she'd waved a hand at the hand-printed New Fiction placard standing sentinel at the center table. She started the gesture in confidence, ended it in defeat. “Nothing there. I stick to the classics. I guess I'm old-fashioned. Or boring.” Claire shrugged—it was that or cry.

“Classics are never boring.” The woman's voice arched as if the classics were the hottest thing off the press. Yet she led Claire away from them, leaving behind all those paperback Penguin copies with their slightly Baroque oil painting covers.

Claire wondered where they were headed until they arrived right back where they started, the classics. But this time, the stories

were adorned in bright cloth covers and lined six shelves. “This is Penguin’s Project Drop Caps. All these fresh faces for some of the best works. But that’s not what I want you to see. Have you read *The Secret Garden*?”

“Too long ago to remember it. My children are older than that now, but even when they were young I couldn’t get them to read it.”

“I meant for you.” She slid a book from the shelf below the rainbow of color. This, too, was bright and fresh—striking and bold, with yellows, greens, and reds. She laid her palm on the cover as if offering a delicacy. “It appeals to the young or the young at heart, or to those who need to believe in dead things growing again.”

She offered Claire the book; rather, she laid it in her hands. “Mary Lennox begins her journey in a new and unfamiliar land, but makes her mark on it. She transforms it, and renews the people around her as well as herself. She blossoms . . . And when you’re finished, come back and we’ll talk some more . . . I’m Maddie.”

The hymn ended as Claire let the memory settle over her, as bright and clear as if it had happened that morning. She had pulled the book to her chest with one hand, knowing she had to buy it without understanding why, and reached for Maddie’s outstretched hand with the other. “I’m Claire Durand. We moved here a couple months ago.”

Maddie’s hand was weathered and her knuckles enlarged. Claire had felt every joint. She didn’t squeeze, and Maddie didn’t pull away.

As they walked to the counter, Maddie had rubbed one hand against the other. “They’re a little swollen from too much work in the garden yesterday. I’m planting some fall flowers to make the next few months more colorful. Do you garden?”

“Can anything last the winter here? It gets so cold.”

Maddie laughed. “Pick hardy plants and they’ll survive.”

Now, over a year later, in a church devoid of mirth, the memory of that laugh filled Claire with the same sense of wonder it had that

first afternoon. It was a laugh without subtext—genuine, soulful, and rich. It filled her with a sense of awe and terror—both then and now. Awe that someone could feel such genuine pleasure at the mundane; terror that she might never again feel it herself.

Janet ended Claire's memory with a poke in her back. "Go . . . It's our turn."

The pews were filing out. Janet tucked close behind her. "Can you believe that? That's all she gets? My hot flashes last longer than that service."

Claire reached behind for Janet's hand, unsure what message to send—commiseration or reprimand. She willed herself to commiserate. To always reprimand was hard, unbecoming, not who she wanted to be. She wanted to be Mary Lennox and enliven those around her.

She glanced back. Janet was a beautiful woman, with her long, loose curls and blond highlights, a spark plug most days, who carried herself with all the sophisticated armor she'd acquired in her youth. Even distraught, the woman had style and the hair to make twentysomethings envious. The tie at the neck of her silk blouse had come undone, revealing a chunky black and silver necklace, and her pants swirled around intricately detailed black boots.

But when Claire looked past the armor, the truth was evident in the deep lines around Janet's lips and the dark, hollowed skin beneath her eyes: Maddie's death had dealt a severe blow.

Claire withdrew her hand and pulled at the sleeve of her own wool dress. It had inched past her wrist again. "I'm sorry," she whispered over her shoulder.

"For what?"

"You carried too much these past weeks."

Janet's curls bounced as she shook her head. "Don't say that. You did your share at the shop. It would've gutted Maddie to close the doors, and you couldn't have stayed nights with her. You have a family."

“And . . .” Claire waited to catch Janet’s eye. “It’s your birthday. I almost forgot.”

“Fifty-four is not a memorable number. You’re welcome to forget. Everyone else will.”

She gave Janet’s hand another squeeze as, like water through a funnel, they followed the widening flow from the nave into the church’s lobby and spilled out into the stone courtyard.

“Let’s go have lunch. We’ll celebrate the spectacular life of one dear friend and the birthday of another. My treat.”

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