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"Wiggs excels at portraying the delicate dynamics among lovers, friends and family members." —*Publishers Weekly*

SUMMER *by the* SEA

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With a little determination and a lot of charm, Rosa Capoletti took a run-down pizza joint and turned it into an award-winning restaurant that has been voted "best place to propose" three years in a row. For Rosa, though, there has been no real romance since her love affair with Alexander Montgomery ended without explanation a decade ago.But guess who's just come back to town?Reunited at the beach house where they first fell in love, Rosa and Alexander discover that the secrets of the past are not what they seem. Now, with all that she wants right in front of her, Rosa searches for happiness with the man who once broke her heart and learns that in love, as in life, there are second chances.

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Praise for the novels of SUSAN WIGGS

"This is the perfect beach read."

—#1 New York Times bestselling author Debbie Macomber on Summer by the Sea

"[Wiggs's] keen awareness of sensory detail ensures that the scents and sounds of Rosa's kitchen are just as palpable as the heady attraction between the protagonists."

—Publishers Weekly on Summer by the Sea

"Wiggs is one of our best observers of stories of the heart. Maybe that is because she knows how to capture emotion on virtually every page of every book."

—Salem Statesman-Journal

"Wiggs explores many aspects of grief, from guilt to anger to regret, imbuing her book with the classic would've/could've/ should've emotions, and presenting realistic and sympathetic characters…. Another excellent title [for] her already outstanding body of work."

—Booklist on Table for Five

"With the ease of a master, Wiggs introduces complicated, flesh-and-blood characters into her idyllic but identifiable small-town setting, sets in motion a refreshingly honest romance, resolves old issues and even finds room for a little mystery."

—Publishers Weekly on The Winter Lodge

"Empathetic protagonists, interesting secondary characters, well-written flashbacks, and delicious recipes add depth to this touching, complex romance."

—Library Journal on The Winter Lodge

"Wiggs's uncomplicated stories are rich with life lessons, nod-along moments and characters with whom readers can easily relate. Delightful and wise, Wiggs's latest shines."

—Publishers Weekly on Dockside

"A wonderfully written, beautiful love story with a few sharp edges and a bunch of marvelously imperfect characters, this is one of Wiggs's finest efforts to date. It's sure to leave an indelible impression on even the most jaded reader."

—Romantic Times BOOKreviews on Dockside

"Susan Wiggs writes with bright assurance, humor and compassion about sisters, children and the sweet and heartbreaking trials of life—about how much better it is to go through them together."

—New York Times bestselling author Luanne Rice

"A bold, humorous and poignant romance that fulfills every woman's dreams."

—Christina Dodd on Enchanted Afternoon

"[A] delightful romp…With its lively prose, well-developed conflict and passionate characters, this enjoyable, poignant tale is certain to enchant."

—Publishers Weekly on Halfway to Heaven

"The Charm School draws readers in with delightful characters, engaging dialogue, humor, emotion and sizzling sensuality."

—Costa Mesa Sunday Times

"A rare treat."

—Amazon.com on The Firebrand

"A human and multilayered story exploring duty to both country and family."

—New York Times bestselling author Nora Roberts on The Ocean Between Us

Summerby theSea

Susan Wiggs
Summerby theSea

In memory of Trixie,
beloved companion, faithful friend.

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PART ONE
Antipasto

Antipasto: The Italian word for a snack served before a meal. These are dishes to pique the appetite, not quench it. Antipasto literally means “before the meal.” Mamma used to say it was the anti-noise course because my brothers, Robert and Sal, would be so busy stuffing their faces that they’d forget to complain about being hungry.

Caponata

This has an excellent flavor and makes a very nice presentation on a perfect leaf of lettuce, not that Robert and Sal ever gave a hoot about presentation. And it’s even quite low in calories, not that guys care about that, either. Serve this as a traditional antipasto with a good crusty Italian bread and a glass of chilled Pinot Grigio.

Peel and dice an eggplant, toss with salt, put in a colander and drain for at least a half hour. Then heat up a heavy skillet and add ¼ cup olive oil, a small onion, chopped, and a stick of celery, also chopped. Add the eggplant and sauté. Finally, add three chopped tomatoes, three minced anchovies, a pinch of sugar, ¼ cup wine vinegar and a spoonful of capers (the best ones come from Pantelleria Island). If your family likes olives, add some of those, too, along with a pinch of red pepper flakes. Simmer for ten minutes. Cool, then store overnight in a glass container. For a smoother spreading consistency, you can whirl the mixture in the food processor, but don’t overdo it. Things that are too smooth lose their character.

One

Rosa Capoletti knew that tonight was the night. Jason Aspoll was going to pop the question. The setting was perfect—a starlit summer evening, an elegant seaside restaurant, the sounds of crystal and silver gently clinking over quiet murmurs of conversation. At Jason's request, the Friday night trio was playing "Lovetown," and a few dreamy couples swayed to the nostalgic melody.

Candlelight flickered over their half-empty champagne flutes, illuminating Jason's endearingly nervous face. He was sweating a little, and his eyes darted with barely suppressed trepidation. Rosa could tell he wanted to get this right.

She knew he was wondering, Should I reach across the table? Go down on one knee, or is that too hokey?

Go for it, Jason, she wanted to urge him. Nothing's too hokey when it's true love.

She also knew the ring lay nestled in a black velvet box, concealed in the inner pocket of his dinner jacket, right next to his racing heart.

Come on, Jason, she thought. Don't be afraid.

And then, just as she was starting to worry that he'd chickened out, he did it. He went down on one knee.

A few nearby diners shifted in their chairs to look on fondly. Rosa held her breath while his hand stole inside his jacket.

The music swelled. He took the box from his pocket and she saw his mouth form the words: Will you marry me?

He held out the ring box, opening the hinged lid to reveal the precious offering. His hand shook a little. He still didn't know for sure if she would have him.

Silly man, thought Rosa. Didn't he know the answer would be—

"Table seven sent back the risotto," said Leo, the headwaiter, holding a thick china bowl in front of Rosa.

"Leo, for crying out loud," she said, craning her neck to see past him. "Can't you tell I'm busy here?" She pushed him aside in time to watch her best friend, Linda Lipschitz, stand up from the table and fling her arms around Jason.

"Yes," Linda said, although from across the dining room Rosa had to read her lips. "Yes, absolutely."

Atta girl, thought Rosa, her eyes misting.

Leo followed her gaze to the embracing couple. "Sweet," he said. "Now what about my risotto?"

"Take it back to the kitchen," Rosa said. "I knew the mango chutney was a bad idea, anyway, and you can tell Butch I said so." She let Leo deal with it as she walked across the dining room. Linda was wreathed in smiles and tears. Jason looked positively blissful and, perhaps, weak with relief.

"Rosa, you won't believe what just happened," Linda said.

Rosa dabbed at her eyes. "I think I can guess."

Linda held out her hand, showing off a glittering marquise-cut diamond in a gold cathedral setting.

"Oh, honey." Rosa hugged Linda and gave Jason a kiss on the cheek. "Congratulations, you two," she said. "I'm so happy for you."

She'd helped Jason pick out the ring, told him Linda's size, selected the music and menu, ordered Linda's favorite flowers for the table. They'd set the scene in every possible way. Rosa was good at things like this—creating events around the most special moments in people's lives.

Other people's lives.

Linda was babbling, already making plans. "We'll drive over to see Jason's folks on Sunday, and then get everyone together to set a date—"

"Slow down, my friend," Rosa said with a laugh. "How about you dance with your fiancé?"

Linda turned to Jason, her eyes shining. "My fiancé. God, I love the sound of that."

Rosa gave the couple a gentle shove toward the dance floor. As he pulled Linda into his arms, Jason looked over her shoulder and mouthed a thank-you to Rosa. She waved, dabbed at her eyes again and headed for the kitchen. Back to work.

She was smiling as she crossed the nonskid mat and entered the kitchen through the swinging doors. Quiet elegance gave way to controlled chaos. Glaring lights and flaming grills illuminated the crush of prep workers, line cooks and the sous-chef hurrying back and forth between stainless steel counters. Waiters tapped their feet, checking orders before stepping through the soundproofed doors that protected the serenity of the dining room from male shouts and clattering dishes.

The revved-up energy of the kitchen was fueled by testosterone, but Rosa knew how to hold her own here. She walked through a gauntlet of aproned men with huge knives or vats of boiling water, pivoting around each other in their nightly ballet. A stream from a hose roared against the dishwashing sink, and hot drafts from the Imperial grill licked like dragon's breath at precisely 1010°F.

"Wait," she said as a prep worker passed by with a plated steak that had been liberally sprinkled with tripepper confetti.

"What?" The worker, a recent hire from Newport, paused at the counter.

"We don't garnish the steaks here."

"Come again?"

"This is premium meat, our signature cut. Serve it without the garnish."

"I'll remember that," he said, and set the plate on the counter for a server to pick up.

She planted herself in front of him. "Go back and replate the steak, please. No garnish."

"But—"

Rosa glared at him with fire in her eyes. Don't back down, she cautioned herself. Don't blink.

"You got it," he said, scowling as he returned to the prep area.

"Well?" asked Lorenzo "Butch" Buchello, whose fresh Italian cuisine was drawing in patrons from as far away as New York and Boston.

"Yep." Rosa grinned and selected a serrated knife from the array affixed to a steel grid on the wall. "Went down on one knee and everything."

Neither of them stopped working as they chatted. He was coordinating dessert while she arranged fluffy white peasant bread in a basket.

"Good for them," said Butch.

"They're really in love," Rosa said. "I got all choked up, watching them."

"Ever the incurable romantic," Butch said, piping chocolate ganache around the profiteroles.

"Ha, there's a cure for it," Shelly Warren cut in, whisking behind them to pick up her order.

"It's called marriage," Rosa said.

Shelly gave her a high-five. She had been married for ten years and claimed that her night job waiting tables was an escape from endless hours of watching the Golf Channel until her eyes glazed over.

"Hey, don't knock it till you've tried it, Rosa," said Butch. "In fact, what about that guy you were dating—Dean what's his name?"

"Oh, actually, he did want to get married," she explained.

Butch's eyes lit up. "Hey! Well, there you go—"

"Just not to me."

His face fell. "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"It's all right. He joins a long and venerable line of suitors who didn't suit."

"I'm starting to see a pattern here," Butch said. He took a wire whisk to a bowl of custard and Marsala, creating an order of his famous zabaglione. "You run them off and then say they didn't suit."

She finished up with the bread baskets. “Not tonight, Butch. This is Linda’s moment. Send them a tiramisu and your congratulations, okay?”

She headed back to the dining room and went over to the podium, which faced the main entrance. It was a perfect Friday night at Celesta’s-by-the-Sea. All the tables in the multilevel dining room were oriented toward the view of the endless sea, and were set with fresh flowers, crisp linens, good china and flatware.

This was the sort of scene she used to dream about back when the place was a run-down pizza joint. Couples danced to the smooth beat of a soft blues number, the drummer’s muted cymbals shimmering with a sensual resonance. Out on the deck, people stood listening to the waves and looking at the stars. For the past three years running, Celesta’s had been voted “Best Place to Propose” by Coast magazine, and tonight was a perfect example of the reason for its charm—sea breezes, sand and surf, a natural backdrop for the award-winning dining room.

“Did you cry?” asked Vince, the host, stepping up beside her. They’d known each other since childhood—she, Vince and Linda. They’d gone through school together, inseparable. Now he was the best-looking maître d’ in South County. He was tall and slender, flawlessly groomed in an Armani suit and Gucci shoes. Rimless glasses highlighted his darkly-lashed eyes.

“Of course I cried,” Rosa said. “Didn’t you?”

“Maybe,” he admitted with a fond smile in Linda’s direction. “A little. I love seeing her so happy.”

“Yeah. Me, too.”

“So that’s two of us down, one to go,” he said.

She rolled her eyes. “Not you, too.”

“Butch has already been at you?”

“What do you two do, lie awake at night discussing my love life?”

“No, sweetie. Your lack of one.”

“Give me a break, okay?” She spoke through a smile as a party of four left the restaurant. She and Vince had perfected the art of bickering while appearing utterly congenial.

“Please come again,” Vince said, his expression so warm that the two women did a double-take. Glancing down at the computer screen discreetly set beneath the surface of the podium, he checked the status of their tab. “Three bottles of Antinori.”

Rosa gave a blissful sigh. “Sometimes I love this job.”

“You always love this job. Too much, if you ask me.”

“You’re not my analyst, Vince.”

“Ringrazi il cielo,” he muttered. “You couldn’t pay me enough.”

“Hey.”

“Kidding,” he assured her. “Good night, folks,” he said to a departing threesome. “Thanks so much for coming.”

Rosa surveyed her domain with a powerful but weary pride. Celesta’s-by-the-Sea was the place people came to fall in love. It was also Rosa’s own emotional landscape; it structured her days and weeks and years. She had poured all her energy into the restaurant, creating a place where people marked the most important events of their lives—engagements, graduations, bar mitzvahs, anniversaries, promotions. They came to escape the rush and rigors of everyday life, never knowing that each subtle detail of the place, from the custom alabaster lampshades to the imported chenille chair covers, had been contrived to create an air of luxury and comfort, just for them.

Rosa knew such attention to detail, along with Butch’s incomparable cuisine, had elevated her restaurant to one of the best in the county, perhaps in the entire state. The focal point of the place was a hammered steel bar, its edges fluted like waves. The bar, which she’d commissioned from a local artisan, was backed by a sheet of blue glass lit from below. At its center was a nautilus seashell, the light flickering over and through the whorls and chambers. People seemed drawn to its mysterious

iridescence, and often asked where it came from, and if it was real. Rosa knew the answer, but she never told.

She checked the time on the screen without being obvious. None of the servers wore watches and there was no clock in sight. People relaxing here shouldn't notice the passing of time. But the small computer screen indicated 10:00 p.m. She didn't expect too much more business, except perhaps in the bar.

She could tell, with a sweep of her gaze, that tonight's till would be sky-high. "I'm so glad summer's here," she said to Vince.

"You know, for normal people, summer means vacation time. For us, it means our lives belong to Celesta's."

"This is normal." Hard work had never bothered Rosa. Outside the restaurant there was not much to her life, and she had convinced herself that she liked it that way. She had Pop, of course, who at sixty-five was as independent as ever, accusing her of fussing over him. Her brother Robert was in the navy, currently stationed with his family overseas. Her other brother, Sal, was also in the navy, a Catholic priest serving as chaplain. Her father and brothers, nieces and nephews, were her family.

But Celesta's was her life.

She stole a glance at Jason and Linda, and fancied she could actually see stars in their eyes. Sometimes, when Rosa looked at the happy couples holding hands across the tables in her restaurant, she felt a bittersweet ache. And then she always pretended, even to herself, that it didn't matter.

"I give you two months off every year," she pointed out to Vince.

"Yeah, January and February."

"Best time of year in Miami," she reminded him. "Or are you and Butch ready to give up your condo there?"

"All right, all right. I get your point. I wouldn't have it any other—"

The sound of car doors slamming interrupted them. Rosa sent another discreet look at the slanted computer screen under the podium. Ten-fifteen.

She stepped back while Vince put on his trademark smile. "So much for making an early night of it." The comment slipped between his teeth, while his expression indicated he'd been waiting all his life for the next group of patrons.

Rosa recognized them instantly. Not by name, of course. The summer crowds at the shore were too huge for that. No, she recognized them because they were a "type." Summer people. The women exuded patrician poise and beauty. The tallest one wore her perfectly straight golden-blond hair caught, seemingly without artifice, in a thin band. Her couture clothes—a slim black skirt, silk blouse and narrow kid leather flats—had a subtle elegance. Her two friends were stylish clones of her, with uniformly sleek hair, pale makeup, sleeves artfully rolled back just so. They pulled off the look as only those to the manor born could.

Rosa and Vince had grown up sharing their summers with people like this. To the seasonal visitors, the locals existed for the sole purpose of serving those who belonged to the venerable old houses along the pristine, unspoiled shore just as their forebears had done a century before. They were the ones whose charity galas were covered by Town & Country magazine, whose weddings were announced in the New York Times. They were the ones who never thought about what life was like for the maid who changed their sheets, the fisherman who brought in the day's catch, the cleaners who ironed their Sea Isle cotton shirts.

Vince nudged her behind the podium. "Yachty. They practically scream Bailey's Beach."

Rosa had to admit, the women would not look out of place at the exclusive private beach at the end of Newport's cliff walk. "Be nice," she cautioned him.

"I was born nice."

The door opened and three men joined the women. Rosa offered the usual smile of greeting. Then her heart skipped a beat as her gaze fell upon a tall, sandy-haired man. No, it couldn't be, she

told herself. She hoped—prayed—it was a trick of the light. But it wasn't, and her expression froze as recognition chilled her to the bone.

Big deal, she thought, trying not to hyperventilate. She was bound to run into him sooner or later.

"Uh-oh," Vince muttered, assuming a stance that was now more protective than welcoming. "Here come the Montagues."

Rosa struggled against panic, but she was losing the battle. You're a grown woman, she reminded herself. You're totally in control.

That was a lie. In the blink of an eye, she was eighteen again, aching and desperate over the boy who'd broken her heart.

"I'll tell them we're closed," Vince said.

"You'll do nothing of the sort," Rosa hissed at him.

"I'll beat the crap out of him."

"You'll offer them a table, and make it a good one." Straightening her shoulders, Rosa looked across the room and locked eyes with a man she hadn't seen in ten years, a man she hoped she would never see again.

Two

"You asked for it." As though flipping a switch, Vince turned on the charm, stepping forward to greet the latest arrivals. "Welcome to Celesta's," he said. "Do you have a reservation?"

"No, we just want to drink," said one of the men, and the women snickered at his devastating wit.

"Of course," said Vince, stepping back to gesture them toward the bar. "Please seat yourself."

The men and their dates headed to the bar. Rosa thought about the nautilus shell, displayed like a museum artifact. Would he recognize it? Did she care?

Just when she thought she'd survived the moment, she realized one man held back from the group. He was just standing there, watching her intently, with a look that made her shiver.

Her task, of course, was simple. She had to pretend he had no effect on her. This was easier said than done, though, because she had trouble keeping her feelings in. Long ago, she'd resigned herself to the fact that she was a walking cliché—a curly-haired, big-breasted, emotional Italian American.

However, cool disregard was the only message she wanted to send at the moment. She knew with painful certainty that the opposite of love was not hate, but indifference.

"Hello, Alex," she said.

"Rosa." He lifted the corner of his mouth in a half smile.

He'd been drinking. She wasn't sure how she knew. But her practiced eye took in the tousled sandy hair, the boyish face now etched with character, the sea-blue eyes settling a gaze on her that, even now, made her shiver. He looked fashionably rumpled in an Oxford shirt, chinos and Top-Siders.

She couldn't bear to see him again. And oh, she hated that about herself. She wasn't supposed to be this way. She was supposed to be the indomitable Rosa Capoletti, named last year's Restaurateur of the Year by Condé Nast. Self-made Rosa Capoletti, the woman who had it all—a successful business, wonderful friends, a loving family. She was strong and independent, liked and admired. Influential, even. She headed the merchants' committee for the Winslow Chamber of Commerce.

But Rosa had a secret, a terrible secret she prayed no one would discover. She had never gotten over Alexander Montgomery.

"'Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, he walks into mine,'" she said. She pulled it off, too, with jaunty good humor.

"You know each other?" The woman with the Marcia Brady hair had come back to claim him.

He didn't take his eyes off Rosa. She refused to allow herself to look away.

"We did," he said. "A long time ago."

Rosa couldn't stand the tension, although she struggled to appear perfectly relaxed as she offered an impersonal smile. "Enjoy your evening," she said, every bit the hostess.

He looked at her a moment longer. Then he said, "Thanks. I will," and he stepped into the bar.

She held her smile in place as he and the others settled into an upholstered banquette. The women looked around the bar with surprised appreciation. The norm in these parts consisted of beach shacks, fried food, dated seaside kitsch. Celesta's one-of-a-kind bar, the understated handsomeness of the furnishings and the unparalleled view created an ambience of rare luxury.

Alex took a seat at the end of the table. The tall woman flirted hard with him, leaning toward him and tossing her hair.

Over the years, Rosa had kept up with his life without really meaning to. It was hard to ignore him when she spotted his face smiling out from the pages of a newspaper or magazine. "The thinking woman's hunk," one society columnist dubbed him. "Drives Formula One race cars and speaks fluent Japanese…." He kept company with billionaires and politicians. He did good works—funding a children's hospital, underwriting loan programs for low-income people. Getting engaged.

Pharmaceutical heiress Portia van Deusen was the perfect match for him, according to the people-watchers. With a slight feeling of voyeuristic shame, Rosa had read the breathless raves of society columnists. Portia was always described as “stunning” and Alex as “impeccable.” Both of them had the social equivalent of champion bloodlines. Their wedding, of course, was going to be the event of the season.

Except that it never happened. The papers ceased to mention them as a couple. The engagement was “off.” Ordinary people were left to speculate about what had happened. There was a whisper that she had left him. And she appeared so quickly on the arm of a different man—older, perhaps even wealthier—that rumor had it she’d found greener pastures.

“Vince said he offered to beat the crap out of him,” said Shelly, holding aloft a tray of desserts and espresso.

So much for privacy. In a place like Celesta’s, rumors zinged around like rubber bullets.

“As if he could stand to have one hair out of place.” In spite of herself, Rosa smiled, picturing Vince in a fight. The sentiment was touching, though. Like everyone who had seen the wreckage Alex had left in his wake, Vince was protective of Rosa.

“Are you all right?” Shelly asked.

“I’m fine. You can tell that to anyone who’s wondering.”

“That would be everybody,” Shelly said.

“For Pete’s sake, we broke up eons ago,” Rosa said. “I’m a big girl now. I can handle seeing a former boyfriend.”

“Good,” Shelly said, “because he just ordered a bottle of Cristal.”

From the corner of her eye, Rosa saw the sommelier pop the cork of the bottle, listed at $300 on the menu. One of the women at Alex’s table—the flirt—giggled and leaned against him as he took a taste and nodded to Felix to pour. The six of them lifted their glasses, clinking them together.

Rosa turned away to say good-night to a departing couple. “I hope you enjoyed your evening,” she said.

“We did,” the woman assured her. “I read about this place in the New York Times ‘Escape’ section, and have always wanted to come here. It’s even nicer than I expected.”

“Thank you,” Rosa said, silently blessing the Times. Travel writers and food critics were a picky lot, as a whole. But her kitchen had proven itself, again and again.

“Are you Celesta, then?” the woman asked as she drew on a light cotton wrap.

“No,” Rosa said, her heart stumbling almost imperceptibly as she gestured at the lighted portrait that hung behind the podium next to the numerous awards. Celesta, in all her soft, hand-tinted beauty, gazed benevolently from the gilt frame. “She was my mother.”

The woman smiled gently. “It’s a wonderful place. I’m sure we’ll be back.”

“We’d love to have you.”

When Rosa turned from the door, she used every bit of her willpower to keep from spying on Alex Montgomery. She knew he was watching her. She just knew it. She could feel his gaze like a phantom touch, finding her most vulnerable places.

They had said goodbye many years ago, and it was the sort of goodbye that was supposed to be permanent. She wondered what he was thinking, barging in on her like this.

“May I have this dance?” Jason Aspoll held out his hand to Rosa.

She smiled at him. It was a well-known fact that on most nights, near closing time, Rosa enjoyed getting out on the dance floor. It was good marketing. Show the public you like your place just as much as they do. Besides, Rosa did love dancing.

And she didn’t like going home. There was nothing wrong with her place, except that it simply wasn’t…lived in enough.

“I’d love to,” she said to Jason, and slipped easily into his arms. The ensemble played “La Danza,” and they swayed, grinning at each other like idiots.

“So you finally did it, you big goof,” she said.

“I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“I know,” she said breezily, then patted his arm. “Seriously, Jason, I’m honored that you asked for my help. It was fun.”

“Well, I’m in awe. You managed everything perfectly, down to the last detail. Her favorite food was tonight’s special, the ensemble kept playing songs she loves…You even had special flowers on all the tables. I didn’t know Lily of the Valley was her favorite.”

“In the future, knowing her favorites is your job.” Rosa was always mystified that people simply didn’t notice things about other people. She had once dated an airline pilot for five months, and he never learned how she took her coffee. Come to think of it, no man had ever bothered to learn that about her, except—

“How does Linda take her coffee?” she asked Jason suddenly.

“Hot?”

“Very funny. How does she like her coffee?”

“Linda drinks tea. She takes it with honey and lemon.”

Rosa collapsed against him in exaggerated relief. “Thank God. You passed the test.” She didn’t mean to dart one tiny glance at Alex. It just happened. He was looking straight at her. Fine, then, she thought. Let him look.

“I didn’t know there was a test,” Jason whispered to her.

“There’s always a test,” she said. “Remember that.”

The music wound down and then stopped. During the polite patter of applause, Linda joined them.

“I’ve come to claim my man,” she said, slipping her hand into his.

“He’s all yours.” Rosa gave her a quick hug. “And that’s for you. Congratulations, my friends. I wish you all the happiness in the world.”

Linda jerked her head in the direction of Alex’s table. “What the hell is he doing here?”

“Drinking a $300 bottle of champagne.” Rosa held up a hand. “And that’s all I have to say on the subject. Tonight is your night. You and Jason.”

“You’re meeting me for coffee tomorrow, though,” Linda insisted. “And then you’ll spill.”

“Fine. I’ll see you at Pegasus tomorrow. Now, take your man and go home.”

“All right. Rosa, I know how much you did to make this night special,” said Linda. “I’ll never be able to thank you enough.”

Rosa beamed. The look on Linda’s face was reward enough, but she said, “You can name your first child after me.”

“Only if it’s a girl.”

She and Linda hugged one more time, and the happy couple left. The music started up again, Rosa went back to work and pretended not to see Alex ask the tall woman at his table to dance.

This was absurd, she thought. She was an adult now, not a wide-eyed kid fresh out of high school. She had every right to go over to him this minute and demand to know what he was doing here. Or for that matter, what he’d been doing since he’d said, “Have a nice life” and strolled off into the sunset.

Did he have a nice life? she wondered.

He certainly looked as though he did. He seemed relaxed with his friends—or maybe that was the champagne kicking in. He had an air of casual elegance that was not in the least affected. Even when she first met him, as a little boy, he’d had a certain aura about him. That in-born poise was a family trait, one she’d observed not just in Alex, but in his parents and sister, as well.

The quality was nothing so uncomplicated as mere snobbery. Rosa had encountered her share of that. No, the Montgomerys simply had an innate sense of their place in the world, and that place was at the top of the heap.

Except when it came to loving someone. He pretty much sucked at that.

Maybe he'd changed. His date certainly appeared hopeful as she undulated her "Sex and the City" body against his on the dance floor.

"You want I should break his kneecaps?" inquired a deep voice behind her.

Rosa smiled. "Not tonight, Teddy."

Teddy was in charge of security at the restaurant. In another sort of establishment, he'd be called a bouncer. The job required a thorough knowledge of digital alarms and surveillance, but he lived for the day he could wield those ham-sized fists on her behalf. "I got lots of footage of him on the security cameras," he informed her. "You can watch that if you want."

"No, I don't want," Rosa snapped, yet she could picture herself obsessively playing the tape, over and over again. "So does everybody in the place know the guy who once dumped me is here tonight?"

"Oh, yeah," he said unapologetically. "We had a meeting about it. We don't care how long ago it happened. He was harsh, Rosa. Damned harsh. What a dickwad."

"We were just kids—"

"Headed to college. That's pretty grown-up."

She'd never made it to college. Her staff probably had a meeting about that, too.

"He's a paying customer," she said. "That's all he is, so I wish everyone would quit trying to make such a big deal out of it. I don't like people discussing my personal affairs."

Teddy gently touched her shoulder. "It's okay, Rosa. We're talking about this because we care about you. Nobody wants to see you hurt."

"Then you've got nothing to worry about," she assured him. "I'm fine. I'm perfectly fine."

It became her mantra for the remainder of the evening, which was nearly over at last. The bartender's final call circulated, and the ensemble bade everyone good-night by playing their signature farewell number, a sweet and wistful arrangement of "As Time Goes By."

The last few customers circled the dance floor and then dispersed, heading off into the night, couples lost in each other and oblivious to the world. Rosa couldn't keep count of the times she had stood in the shadows and watched people fall in love right here on the premises. Celesta's was just that kind of place.

How'm I doing, Mamma?

Celesta, twenty years gone, would undoubtedly approve. The restaurant smelled like the kitchen of Rosa's childhood; the menu featured many of the dishes Celesta had once prepared with warmth, intense flavors and a certain uncomplicated contentment Rosa constantly tried to recapture. She wanted the restaurant to serve Italian comfort food, the kind that fed hidden hungers and left people full of fond remembrances.

She pretended to be busy as Alex and his friends left. Finally she let out the breath she hadn't known she was holding. When the last patron departed, so did the magic. The lights came up, revealing crumbs and smudges on the floors and tables, soot on the candle chimneys, dropped napkins and flatware. In the absence of music and with the kitchen doors propped open, the clank and crash of dishes rang through the building.

"Ka-ching," Vince said as he printed out a spreadsheet summarizing the night's receipts. "Biggest till of the year so far." He hesitated, then added, "Your dumbshit ex-boyfriend left a whopper tip."

"He's not my ex-anything," she insisted. "He's ancient history."

"Yeah, but I bet he's still a dumbshit."

"I wouldn't know. He's a complete stranger to me. I wish everyone would get that through their heads."

"We won't," he assured her. "Can't you see we're dying here, Rosa? We're starved for gossip."

"Find someone else to gossip about."

“We were all watching him with the new security cameras,” Vince said.

“I can’t believe you guys.”

“Teddy can zoom in on anything.”

“Good for him.” Her head pounded, and she rubbed her temples.

“I got this, honey,” Vince said. “I’ll close tonight.”

She offered a thin smile. “Thanks.” She started to remind him about the seal on the walk-in fridge, the raccoons in the Dumpster, but stopped herself. She’d been working on her control-freak impulses.

As she left through the back entrance, she wished she’d thought to grab a sweater before rushing out today. The afternoon had been hot; now the chill air raised goose bumps on her bare arms.

Debris from last week’s windstorm had been cleared away, but broken trees and fallen branches still lay along the periphery of the parking lot. The power had been knocked out for hours, but the cameras had come through unscathed.

Her heels rang on the pavement as she headed for her car, a red Alfa Romeo Spider equipped with an extravagant stereo system. As she used the remote on her key chain to unlock the driver’s side door, a shadow overtook her.

She stopped walking and looked up to see Alex, somehow not surprised to find him standing in the dull glow of the parking lot lights. “What, you’re stalking me now?”

“Do you feel stalked?”

“Yeah, I generally do when a man approaches me in a deserted parking lot at midnight. Creeps me out.”

“I can see how that could happen.”

“You should hear what they’re saying about you inside.”

“What’s that?”

“Oh, all sorts of things. Dumbshit, dickwad. Stuff like that. Two different guys offered to break your kneecaps. They liked your tip, though.”

He offered that crooked smile again, the one that used to practically stop her heart. “It’s good to know you surrounded yourself with quality people.”

She gestured at the security camera mounted on a light pole.

“What are you doing?” Alex asked.

“Trying to let my quality people know I don’t need rescuing.” It was late. She couldn’t keep batting this pointless conversation back and forth. She just wanted to go home. Besides, it was taking every bit of energy she possessed to pretend he had no effect on her. “What are you doing here, Alex?” she asked.

He showed her his hand, which held a palm-sized cell phone. “I was calling a taxi. Is the local service as bad now as it used to be?”

“A taxi? You’d be better off hitchhiking.”

“That’s supposed to be dangerous. And I know you wouldn’t want to put a customer in danger.”

“Where are your friends, anyway?”

“Went back to Newport.”

“And you’re headed…?”

“To the house on Ocean Road.”

No one in his family had visited the place in twelve years. It was like a haunted mansion, perched there at the edge of the ocean, an abandoned, empty shell. Wondering what had brought him back after all this time, she shivered. Before she realized what he was doing, he slipped his jacket around her shoulders. She pulled away. “I don’t—”

“Just take it.”

She tried not to be aware of his body heat, clinging to the lining of the jacket. “Your friends couldn’t give you a ride?”

"I didn't want one. I was waiting for you…Rosa."

"What, so I can give you a lift?" Her voice rose with incredulity.

"Thanks," he said. "Don't mind if I do." He headed for the Alfa Spider.

Rosa stood in the amber glow of the floodlights, trying to figure out what to do. She was tempted to peel out without another word to him, but that seemed a bit juvenile and petty. She could always get someone from the restaurant to give him a ride, but they weren't feeling too friendly toward him. Besides, in spite of herself, she was curious.

She didn't say another word as she released the lock on the passenger side door. She waved goodbye to the security camera; then they got in and took off.

"Thanks, Rosa," he said.

Like he'd given her a choice. She exceeded the speed limit, but she didn't care. There wasn't a soul in sight, not even a possum or a deer. This area was lightly patrolled by the sheriff's department, and given her association with Sean Costello, sheriff of South County, she didn't have much concern that she'd get a ticket.

At the roadside, beach rose hedges fanned out toward the dunes and black water. On the other side lay marshes and protected land, an area mercifully untouched for generations.

"So I guess you're wondering why I'm back," Alex said.

She was dying to know. "Not at all," she said.

"I knew Celesta's was your place," he explained. "I wanted to see you."

His directness took her aback. But then, he used to be the most honest person she knew. Right up until he left, never looking back.

"What for?" she asked.

"I still think about you, Rosa."

"Ancient history," she assured him, reminding herself he'd been drinking.

"It doesn't feel that way. Feels like only yesterday."

"Not to me," she lied.

"You were dating that deputy. Costa," Alex said, referring to the day he'd briefly returned, about ten years ago, and she'd sent him away. He would remember that, along with the fact that she didn't need or want him.

"Costello," she corrected him. "Sean Costello. He's the sheriff now."

"And you're still single."

"That's none of your business."

"I'm making it my business."

Rosa drove even faster. "It was awkward, you showing up like that."

"I figured it would be. At least we're talking. That's a start."

"I don't want to start anything with you, Alex."

"Have I asked you to?"

She pulled into the crushed gravel and oyster shell drive of the Montgomery house. Over the years, the grounds had been kept neat, the place painted every five years. It was a handsome Victorian masterpiece in the Carpenter Gothic style, complete with engraved brass plaque from the South County Historical Preservation Society.

"No," she admitted, throwing the gear in Neutral. "You haven't asked me for anything but a ride. So here's your ride. Good night, Alex." She thought about tossing off a remark—Say hi to your mother from me—but couldn't bring herself to do that.

He turned to her on the seat. "Rosa, I have a lot to say to you."

"I don't want to hear it."

"Then you won't. Not right now. See, I'm drunk. And when I say what I want to say to you, I need to be stone-cold sober."

Three

The next morning Rosa went to Pegasus, a coffeehouse furnished with overstuffed sofas and chairs, low tables and a luxurious selection of biscotti. The café offered the New York Times and Boston Globe, along with the Providence Journal Bulletin and local papers. Rosa was friendly with the proprietor, Millie, a genuine barista imported from Seattle, complete with baggy dress, Birkenstocks and a God-given talent for making perfect espresso.

While she fixed a double tall skinny vanilla latte, Millie eyed the stack of notebooks and textbooks Rosa had set on the table.

"So what are we studying now?" She tilted her head to the side to read the spines of the books. "Neurolinguistic Programming and its Practical Application to Creative Growth. A little light reading?"

"It's actually an amazing topic," Rosa said over the whoosh of the milk steamer. "Did you know there's a way to recover creative joy simply by finding pleasurable past associations?"

Millie set the latte on the counter. "Too advanced for me, Einstein. What school?"

"Berkeley. The professor even offered to read my final paper if I e-mail it to him."

Millie eyed her admiringly. "I swear, you have the best education money can't buy."

"Keeps me out of trouble, anyway." Rosa had never left home, but over the years she'd managed to sample the finest places of higher learning in the world—genetics at MIT, rococo architecture at the University of Milan, medieval law at Oxford and chaos theory at Harvard. She used to contact professors by phone in order to finagle a syllabus and reading list. Now the Internet made it even easier. With a few clicks of the mouse, she could find course outlines, study sheets, practice tests. The only cost to her was the price of books.

"You're nuts," Millie said with a grin. "We all think so."

"But I'm a very educated nut."

"True. Do you ever wish you could sit down and take an actual class?"

Long ago, that had been all Rosa had dreamed of. Then she'd found herself in the midst of an unspeakable tragedy, and the entire course of her life had shifted. "Sure I do," she said with deliberate lightness. "I still might, one of these days, when I find the time."

"You could start by hiring a general manager for your restaurant."

"I can barely afford my own salary." Rosa had a seat and opened one of the books to an article on Noam Chomsky's Transformational Grammar.

Linda showed up wearing a T-shirt that read What if the Hokey Pokey is what it's all about? and went to the counter to order her usual—a pot of Lady Grey with honey and a lemon wedge on the side. "Sorry I'm late," she said over her shoulder. "I tried to get off the phone with my mom, but she couldn't stop crying."

"That's sweet."

"I guess, but it might be a little insulting, too. She was just so…relieved. She's been worried that I'd never get married. A major tragedy in the Lipschitz family. So the fact that Jason's Catholic didn't even faze her." She held out her hand, letting the sunlight glitter through the facets of the diamond in her new engagement ring. "It looks even better in broad daylight, doesn't it?"

"It's gorgeous."

Linda beamed at her. "I can't wait to change my name to Aspoll."

"You're taking his name?"

"Hey, for me it's an upgrade. We can't all be born with names like Puccini opera characters, Miss Rosina Angelica Capoletti." Linda drizzled honey into her tea. "Oh, and I have news. The wedding has to be in August. Jason's company transferred him to Boise, and we're moving right after Labor Day."

Rosa smiled at her friend, though when Jason had told her that, she'd wanted to hit him. "So we have less than twelve weeks to plan and execute this wedding," she said. "Maybe that's why your mom was crying."

"She's loving it. She'll be flying up from Florida next week. There's nothing quite like my mom in event-planning mode. It's going to be fine, you'll see."

She seemed remarkably calm, Rosa thought. The reality of getting married and leaving Winslow forever probably hadn't hit her yet.

Linda lifted her cup. "How you doing, Ms. Rosa? Still recovering from the shock of seeing Mr. Love-'em-and-leave-'em?"

Rosa concentrated on sprinkling sugar in her latte. "There's nothing to recover from. So he showed up at the restaurant, so what? His family still owns that property out on Ocean Road. I was bound to run into him sooner or later. I'm just surprised it took so long. But it's no big—"

"You just put four packets of sugar in that coffee," Linda pointed out.

"I did not…" Rosa stared in surprise at the little ripped packets littering the table. She pushed the mug away. "Shoot."

"Ah, Rosa." Linda patted her hand. "I'm sorry."

"It was just weird, okay? Weird to see that someone who was once my whole world is a stranger now. And I guess it's weird because I had to imagine him having a life. I didn't do that when we were little, you know? He'd go away at the end of summer, and I never thought about him in the city. Then when he came back the next year, we picked up where we left off. I thought he only existed for the three months he was with me. And now he's existed for twelve years without me, which is completely no big deal."

"Oh, come on, Rosa. It's a big deal. Maybe it shouldn't be, but it is."

"We were kids, just out of school."

"You loved him."

Rosa tried her coffee and winced. Too sweet. "Everybody's in love when they're eighteen. And everybody gets dumped."

"And moves on," Linda said. "Except you."

"Linda—"

"It's true. You've never had anyone really special since Alex," Linda stated.

"I go out with guys all the time."

"You know what I mean."

Rosa pushed the coffee mug away. "I went out with Greg Fortner for six months."

"He was in the navy. He was gone for five of those six months."

"Maybe that's why we got along so well." Rosa looked at her friend. Clearly, Linda wasn't buying it. "All right, what about Derek Gunn? Eight months, at least."

"I'd hardly call that a lifelong commitment. I wish you'd stuck with him. He was great, Rosa."

"He had a fatal flaw," Rosa muttered.

"Yeah? What's that?"

"You'll say I'm petty."

"Try me. I'm not letting you out of my sight until you 'fess up."

"He was boring." The admission burst from Rosa on a sigh.

"He drives a Lexus."

"I rest my case."

Linda got an extra mug and shared her tea with Rosa. "He's got a house on the water in Newport."

"Boring house. Boring water. Even worse, he has a boring family. Hanging out with them was like watching paint dry. And I'll probably burn in hell for saying that."

"It's best to know what your issues are before going ahead with a relationship."

"You been watching too much Dr. Phil. I have no issues."

Linda coughed. "Stop that. You'll make me snort tea out my nose."

"Okay, so what are my issues?"

Linda waved a hand. "Uh-uh, I'm not touching that one. I need you to be my maid of honor, and it won't happen if we're not speaking. That's what this meeting's about, by the way. Me. My wedding. Not that it's anywhere near as interesting as you and Alex Montgomery."

"There is no me and Alex Montgomery," Rosa insisted. "And—not to change the subject—did I just hear you ask me to be your maid of honor?"

Linda took a deep breath and beamed at her. "I did. You're my oldest and dearest friend, Rosa. I want you to stand up with me at my wedding. So, will you?"

"Are you kidding?" Rosa gave her friend's hand a squeeze. "I'd be honored."

She loved weddings and had been a bridesmaid six times. She knew it was six because, deep in the farthest reaches of her closet, she had six of the ugliest dresses ever designed, in colors no one had ever seen before. But Rosa had worn each one with a keen sense of duty and pride. She danced and toasted at the weddings; she caught a bouquet or two in her time. After each wedding, she returned home, carrying her dyed-to-match shoes in one hand and her wilting bouquet in the other.

"…as soon as we set a date," Linda was saying.

Rosa realized her thoughts had drifted. "Sorry. What?"

"Hello? I said, keep August 21 and 28 open for me, okay?"

"Yes, of course."

Linda finished her tea. "I'd better let you go. You need to deal with Alex Montgomery."

"I don't need to deal with Alex Montgomery. There's simply no dealing to be done."

"I don't think you have a choice," Linda said.

"That's ridiculous. Of course I have a choice. Just because he came back to town doesn't mean it's my job to deal with him."

"It's your shot, Rosa. Your golden opportunity. Don't let it pass you by."

Rosa spread her hands, genuinely baffled. "What shot? What opportunity? I have no idea what you're talking about."

"To get unstuck."

"I beg your pardon."

"You've been stuck in the same place since Alex left you."

"Bullshit. I'm not stuck. I have a fabulous life here. I never wanted to be anywhere else."

"I don't mean that kind of stuck. I mean emotionally stuck. You never got over the hurt and distrust of what happened with Alex, and you can't move on. Now that he's back, you've got a chance to clear the air with him and get him out of your heart and out of your head once and for all."

"He's not in my heart," Rosa insisted. "He's not in my head."

"Right." Linda patted her arm. "Deal with him, Rosa. You'll thank me one day. He can't be having an easy time, you know, since his mother—"

"What about his mother?" Rosa hadn't heard talk of Emily Montgomery in ages, but that was not unusual. She never came to the shore anymore.

"God, you didn't hear?"

"Hear what?"

"I just assumed you knew." Linda jumped up and rifled through the stack of daily papers. She returned with a Journal Bulletin, folded back to show Rosa.

She stared at the photo of the haughtily beautiful Emily Montgomery, portrait-posed and gazing serenely at the camera.

"Oh, God." Her hands rattled the paper as she pushed it away from her on the table. Then, in the same movement, she gathered the paper close and started to read. "Society matron Emily

Wright Montgomery, wife of financier Alexander Montgomery III, died on Wednesday at her home in Providence…"

Rosa laid down the paper and looked across the table at her friend. "She was only fifty-five."

"That's what it says. Doesn't seem so old now that we're nearly thirty."

"I wonder what happened." Rosa thought about the way Alex had been last night—slightly drunk, coming on to her. Now his recklessness took on a different meaning. He'd just lost his mother. Last night, she had dropped him off at an empty house.

Linda leveled her gaze at Rosa. "You should ask him."

Four

Rosa drove along Prospect Street to the house where she'd grown up. Little had changed here, only the names of the residents and the gumball colors of their clapboard houses. Buckling concrete driveways led to crammed garages with sagging rooflines. Maple and elm trees arched over the roadway, their stately grace a foil for the homely houses.

It was nice here, she reflected. Safe and comfortable. People still tended their peonies and hydrangeas, their roses and snapdragons. Women pegged out laundry on clotheslines stretched across sunny backyards. Kids rode bikes from house to house and climbed the overgrown apple tree in the Lipschitzes' yard. She still thought of it as the Lipschitzes' yard even though Linda's parents had retired to Vero Beach, Florida, years ago.

She pulled up to the curb in front of number 115, a boxy house with a garden so neat that people sometimes slowed down to admire it. A pruned hedge guarded the profusion of roses that bloomed from spring to winter. Each of the roses had a name. Not the proper name of its variety, but Salvatore, Roberto, Rosina—each one planted in honor of their first communion. There were also roses that honored relatives in Italy whom Rosa had never met, and a few for people she didn't know—La Donna, a scarlet beauty, and a coral floribunda whose name she couldn't remember.

The sturdy bush by the front step, covered in creamy-white blooms, was the Celesta, of course. A few feet away was the one Rosa, a six-year-old with a passion for Pepto-Bismol pink, had chosen for herself. Mamma had been so proud of her that day, beaming down like an angel from heaven. It was one of those memories Rosa cherished, because it was so clear in her heart and mind. She wished all the past could be remembered this way, with clarity and affection, no tinge of regret. But that was naive, and by now, she had figured that out.

She used her ancient key to let herself in. Pop had given it to her when she was nine years old, and she had never once lost it. In the front hall, she blinked the lights a few times. Out of habit she called his name, though it had been some years since he'd been able to hear her.

An acrid odor wafted from the kitchen, along with a buzzing sound.

"Shit," she muttered under her breath, clutching the strap of her purse to her shoulder as she ran to the back of the house. On the counter, a blender stood unattended, its seized motor humming its last, rubber-scented smoke streaming from the base. She grabbed the cord—it felt hot to the touch—and jerked it from the wall. Inside the blender, the lukewarm juice sloshed. The kitchen smoke alarm blinked—what good was that if Pop wasn't looking?

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph, you're going to kill yourself one of these days," Rosa said, waving the smoke away from her face. She peered through the window and saw him out in the backyard, puttering around, oblivious.

On the kitchen table, a newspaper lay open to the Emily Montgomery obituary. Rosa pictured her father starting his breakfast, paging through the paper, stopping in shock as he read the news. He'd probably wandered outside to think about it.

She opened the windows and turned on the exhaust fan over the range, then emptied the blender carafe into the sink. As she cleaned up the mess, Rosa felt a wave of nostalgia. In the scrubbed and gleaming kitchen, her mother's rolled-out pasta dough used to cover the entire top of the chrome and Formica table. Rosa could still picture the long sleek muscles in her mother's arms as she wielded the red-handled rolling pin, drawing it in smooth, rhythmic strokes over the butter-yellow dough.

The reek of the burnt-out motor was a corruption here, in Mamma's world. The smell of her baking ciambellone used to be so powerful it drew the neighbors in, and Rosa could remember the women in their aprons and scuffs, sitting on the back stoop, sharing coffee and Mamma's citrusy ciambellone, fresh from the oven.

To this day, the sweet, dense bread was one of the signature brunch items at Celesta's-by-the-Sea. Butch prepared the dough directly on the countertop with his bare hands, no bowls or spoons, just like Mamma had. Rosa appreciated Butch's skill at cooking and his exquisite palate, but some subtle essence was missing; she could only put it down as magic. No one could capture that, though Rosa knew in some part of her heart that she would never stop trying.

She went out back to talk to her father. The yard had a long rectangular garden that had been laid out and planted by her mother before Rosa was born. Nowadays, her father tended the heirloom tomatoes, peppers, beans and herbs, happy to spend his silent hours in a place his young wife had loved.

He was seated on a wooden folding chair beneath a plum tree, smoking a pipe. A few branches lay around, casualties of the recent windstorm. He looked up when her shadow fell over him.

"Hi, Pop," she said.

"Rosa." He set aside the pipe, stood and held out his arms.

She smiled and hugged him, then gave him a kiss on the cheek, inhaling his familiar scent of shaving soap and pipe tobacco. When she stepped back, she made sure he was looking directly at her, and told him about the blender.

"I guess I forgot and left it on," he said.

"The house could have burned down, Pop."

"I'll be careful from now on, okay?"

It was what he always said when Rosa worried about him. It didn't help, but neither did arguing with him. She studied his face, noticing troubled shadows in his eyes, and knew it had nothing to do with the blender. "You heard about Mrs. Montgomery."

"Yes. Of course. It was in all the papers."

Pop had always been addicted to reading the newspapers, usually two a day. In fact, Rosa had learned to read while sitting in his lap, deciphering the funny pages.

He took her hand in his. He had wonderful hands, blunt and strong, callused from the work he did. His touch was always gentle, as though he feared she might break. "Let's sit. Want some coffee?"

"No, thanks." She joined him in the shade of the plum tree. He seemed…different today. Distracted and maybe diminished, somehow. "Are you all right, Pop?"

"I'm fine, fine." He waved off her concern like batting at a fly.

This wouldn't be the first time he'd lost a client. In the forty years since he had emigrated from Italy, he'd worked for scores of families in the area. But today he seemed to be particularly melancholy.

"She was still so young," Rosa commented.

"Yes." A faraway look came into his eyes. "She was a bride when I first saw her, just a girl, younger than you."

Rosa tried to picture Alex's mother as a young bride, but the image eluded her. She realized Mrs. Montgomery must have been just thirty the first time Rosa had seen her. It seemed inconceivable. Emily Montgomery had always been ageless in her crisp tennis whites, her silky hair looped into a ponytail. She wore almost no jewelry, which Rosa later learned was characteristic of women from the oldest and wealthiest families. Ostentation was for the nouveau riche.

Mrs. Montgomery had lived in terror for her fragile son and had regarded Rosa as a danger to his health.

"I wonder how she died," Rosa said to her father. "Did any of the obituaries say?"

"No. There was nothing."

She watched a ladybug lumber over a blade of grass. "Are you going to the service, or—"

"No, of course not. It is not expected. She doesn't need the gardener. And if I sent flowers, well, they would just get lost."

Rosa got up, pacing in agitation. She walked over to the tomato bushes, the centerpiece of the spectacular garden plot. In her mind's eye, she could see her mother in a house dress that somehow looked pretty on her, a green-sprigged apron, bleached Keds with no socks, a straw hat to keep the sun from her eyes. Mamma never hurried in the garden, and she used all her senses while tending it. She would hold a tomato in the palm of her hand, determining its ripeness by its softness and heft. Or she would inhale the fragrance of pepperoncini or bell peppers, test a pinch of flat leaf parsley or mint between her teeth. Everything had to be at its peak before Mamma brought it to the kitchen.

Rosa bent and plucked a stalk of dockweed from the soil. She straightened, turned to find her father watching her, and she smiled. His hearing loss broke her heart, but it had also brought them closer. Of necessity, he had become incredibly attentive, watching her, reading every nuance of movement and expression with uncanny accuracy. His skill at reading lips was remarkable.

And he knew her so well, she thought, her smile wobbling. "Alex came by the restaurant last night."

Pop's eyebrows lowered, but he didn't comment. He didn't have to. Years ago, he had thought Alex a poor match for her, and his opinion probably hadn't changed.

"He didn't say a word about his mother," she continued. That was when she felt a twist of pain. He'd been drinking last night because he was hurting. Surely his friends must've realized that. Why had they simply left him? Why didn't he have better friends? Why did it matter to her?

"Well." Pop slapped his thighs and stood up. "I must go to work. The Camdens are having a croquet party and they need their hedges trimmed."

Rosa removed his flat black cap and kissed his balding head. "You come up to the restaurant tonight. Butch is fixing bluefish for the special."

"I'm gonna get fat, I keep eating at your place all the time."

She gave his arm a playful punch. "See you, Pop."

"Yeah, okay."

She stepped through the gate and turned to wave. The expression on his face startled her. "Pop, you sure you're doing all right?"

Instead of replying to her question, he said, "You shouldn't mess with that guy, just because he came back."

"Who says I'm messing with him?"

"Tell me I'm wrong, Rosa."

"Don't worry about me, Pop. I'm a big girl now."

"I always worry about you. Why else am I still here on this earth?"

She touched her hand to her heart and then raised it to sign I love you.

He'd learned American Sign Language after losing his hearing in the accident, but rarely used it. Signing in public still made him feel self-conscious. But they weren't in public now, so he signed back. I love you more.

As she pulled away from the curb, she let her father's warning play over and over in her head. You shouldn't mess with that guy, just because he came back.

"Right, Pop," she said, then turned onto Ocean Road, heading toward the Montgomery place.

Ciambellone

Ciambellone is a cross between a cake and a bread, with a nice texture well suited to be served at breakfast or with coffee. The smell of a baking ciambellone is said to turn a scowl into a smile.

4 cups flour

3 eggs

1 teaspoon vanilla

1 cup sugar

1 cup milk

1 teaspoon cinnamon

½ cup oil
1 teaspoon baking powder
zest from 1 lemon, finely chopped
garnish: milk, coarsely granulated sugar

Make a mound with the flour on a board, creating a well in the center. Using your fingers, begin alternating the liquid and other dry ingredients into the well, mixing until all the ingredients are combined, adding additional flour as needed and kneading to make a smooth dough. Divide into 2 parts and shape into fat rings. Brush the tops with milk and sprinkle with sugar. Place the coils on a buttered baking sheet and bake at 350° F for about 40 minutes or until golden brown.

PART TWO
Insalata

When she made a salad, Mamma used only the most tender hearts and cores of the lettuce. She tossed everything in a bowl so big and wide, a small child could sit in it. That's the secret of a great salad. Give yourself plenty of space to toss. You always need more room than you think you need.

Romaine and Gorgonzola Salad

Wash two heads of romaine lettuce in cold water, discarding the tough outer leaves. Shake dry and tear into bite-sized pieces. Add basil sprigs and cherry tomatoes, cut in half. Right before serving, toss the lettuce with Gorgonzola vinaigrette.

Gorgonzola Vinaigrette

¼ cup white wine vinegar + ¼ cup apple juice

1 Tablespoon minced shallots

2 Tablespoons mustard

2 teaspoons chopped basil

2 Tablespoons toasted pine nuts (pinones)

¼ cup walnut oil + 3 Tablespoons olive oil

2 Tablespoons crumbled Gorgonzola—preferably the aged variety from Monferrato

freshly ground black pepper

Put everything in a jar and shake well. Makes about 1 cup. Store in the fridge for up to 5 days.

Five

Summer 1983

When Rosa Capoletti was nine years old, she learned two important lessons. One: after your mother dies, you should still remember to talk to her every day. And two: never put up a rope swing in a tree containing a beehive.

Of course, she wasn't aware of the hive when she coiled a stout rope around her shoulder and shinned up the trunk of a venerable elm tree by the pond in the Montgomerys' garden. The pond was stocked with rare fish from Japan and water lilies from Costa Rica, and had a burbling fountain. Pop had told Rosa she should never bother the fish. The pond was Mrs. Montgomery's pride and joy, and under no circumstances must it be disturbed.

Pop had told her to stay out of trouble. He was going to the plant nursery with Mrs. Montgomery and Rosa was not to leave the yard. That was fine with her, because it was a perfect summer day, third grade was behind her and she had nothing but lazy days ahead. When Mamma was alive, Rosa used to help her in the kitchen garden at home. Mamma's tomatoes and basil were so good they won prizes, and she always made Rosa wear a straw hat with a brim, tied on with a polka dot scarf. She said too much sun was bad for the skin.

Since Mamma died and the boys went into the navy, there was no one to look after Rosa once school let out for summer, so she went to work with Pop each day. The nuns from school urged Rosa's father to send her to a Catholic summer camp. Rosa had begged to stay home, promising Pop she'd stay out of the way.

Going to work with her father turned out to be the only thing that kept Rosa from shriveling up with sadness over Mamma. He used to be a familiar sight around the area, going from place to place on his sturdy yellow bicycle. Now they drove together in the old Dodge Power Wagon, with all his gardening tools in the back. During the summer, he worked from dawn to dusk at six places—one for each day of the week—mowing, pruning, digging and clipping the yards and gardens of the vast seaside estates that fringed the shoreline.

This was Rosa's first visit to the Montgomery place, a giant barge of a house with a railed porch on three sides and tall, narrow windows with glass so old it was wavy. She found all sorts of things to explore in the huge, lush yard that extended out to touch an isolated stretch of beach. Still, she was bored. She wanted to go to the beach, to take the little dinghy out, to go on adventures with her friends. But she was stuck here.

Spending the afternoon alone would be a lot more fun now that she had a rope swing, she thought, sticking one bare foot in the bottom loop and pushing off. She laughed aloud and started singing "Stray Cat Strut," which played on the radio at least once a day. She didn't really know what a "feline Casanova" was, but it was a good tune, and her big brother Sal had taught her all the words before he left.

He and her other brother, Rob, took the train early this morning. They were going to something called Basic Training, and who knew when she'd see them again?

She soared high enough to see the empty beach beyond the lavish gardens and then low enough to skim the soft, perfectly groomed carpet of grass. The sky was bluer than heaven, like Mamma used to say. In the garden below, the button-eyed daisies and fancy purple lobelias were reflected in the surface of the pond. Seagulls flew like flashing white kites over the breakers on the beach, and Rosa felt all the fluttery excitement of freedom.

Summer was here. Finally, endless days out from under the glare of Sister Baptista, whose stare was so sharp she could make you squirm like a bug on a pin.

The little seaside town of Winslow changed in the summer. The pace picked up, and people drove along the coast road in convertibles with the tops down. Pop would comment that the price of

gas and groceries went sky-high and that it was impossible to get a table at Mario's Flying Pizza on a Friday night, even though Rosa and Pop always got a table, because Mario was Mamma's cousin.

Rosa came in for a landing, aiming her bare foot for the crotch of the tree. Her foot struck something dry and papery that collapsed when she touched it. A humming noise mingled with the rustle of the breeze through the leaves. Then Rosa's foot burst into flame.

A second later, she saw a black cloud rise from the tree, and the faint humming sound changed to a roar. A truly angry roar.

She didn't remember getting down from the tree, but later she would discover livid rope burns on the insides of her knees, along with a colorful variety of scratches and bruises. She hit the ground running, howling at the tops of her lungs, then stabbing the air with a separate shriek each time she felt another sting.

She headed straight for the pond with its burbling fountain.

Rosa took a flying leap for the clear, calm water. She couldn't help herself. She was on fire. It was an emergency.

The cool water brought relief as she submerged herself. The places she'd been stung were instantly soothed by the silky mud on the bottom. She broke the surface and saw a few bees still hovering around, so she sat in the shallow water, waving her arms and legs, stirring up brown clouds. She didn't know how long she sat there, letting the mud cool the stings. She could detect six of them, maybe more, mostly on her legs.

"What in heaven's holy name is going on?" demanded a sharp voice. A woman rushed out of the house and down the back stairs.

Rosa almost didn't recognize Mrs. Carmichael in her starched housekeeper's uniform. The Carmichaels lived down the street from the Capolettis, and usually Rosa only saw her in her housedress and slippers, standing on the porch and calling her boys in to dinner. Everything was different in this neighborhood of big houses overlooking the sea. Everything was cleaner and neater, even the people.

Except Rosa herself. As she slogged to the edge of the pond, feeling the smooth mud squish between her toes, she knew with every cell in her body that she didn't belong here. Muddy and barefoot, soaked to the skin, bee-stung and bruised, she belonged anywhere but here.

She waited, dripping on the lawn as Mrs. Carmichael bustled toward her. "I can explain—"

"What are we going to do with you, Rosa Capoletti?" Mrs. Carmichael demanded. She was on the verge of being mad, but she was holding her temper back. Rosa could tell. People tried to be extra patient with her, on account of her mother had died on Valentine's Day. Even Sister Baptista tried to be a little nicer.

"I can get cleaned off in the garden hose," Rosa suggested.

"Good idea. I hope you didn't do in any of the koi."

"The what?"

"The fish."

"I didn't mean to."

Mrs. Carmichael shook her head. "Let's go."

As she followed Mrs. Carmichael across the lawn, Rosa glanced at the house and saw a ghost in the window. A small, pale person with a round Charlie Brown head stood staring out at her, veiled by lace curtains. She looked again and saw that the ghost was gone, shy as a hummingbird zipping out of sight.

"Holy moly," she muttered.

"What's that?" Mrs. Carmichael cranked opened the spigot.

"Oh, nothing." It was kind of interesting, seeing a ghost. Sometimes she saw Mamma, but she didn't tell anyone. People would think she was lying, but she wasn't.

“Stand right there.” Mrs. Carmichael indicated a sunny spot. The grass was as soft as brand-new shag carpet. “Hold out your arms.”

Rosa’s shadow fell over the grass, a skinny cruciform with stringy hair. An arc of fresh water from the hose drenched her. “Yikes, that’s cold,” she said.

“Hold still and I’ll be quick.”

She couldn’t hold still. The water was too cold, which felt good on the beestings but chilled the rest of her. She jumped up and down as though stomping grapes, like Pop said they used to do in the Old Country.

The ghost came to the window again.

“Who is that?” Rosa asked through chattering teeth.

“He’s Mrs. Montgomery’s boy.”

“Is he all alone in there?”

“He is. Put your head back,” Mrs. Carmichael instructed. “His sister went away to summer camp.”

“I bet he’s lonely. Maybe I could play with him.”

Mrs. Carmichael gave a dry laugh. “I don’t think so, dear.”

“Is he shy?” Rosa persisted.

“No. He’s a Montgomery. Now, turn around and I’ll finish up.”

Rosa squirmed under the impact of the cold stream of water. When the torture stopped, Mrs. Carmichael told her to wait on the back porch. She disappeared into the house, carefully closing the door behind her. She returned with a stack of towels and a white terry-cloth bathrobe. “Put this on, and I’ll throw your clothes in the dryer.”

As Rosa peeled off her wet clothes, Mrs. Carmichael stared at her legs. “Mother of God, what happened to you?”

Rosa surveyed the welts on her feet and legs. “Bee-stings,” she said. “I kicked a hive. It was an accident, I swear—”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Rosa thought it would be rude to point out that she had already tried to explain.

“Heavenly days,” said Mrs. Carmichael, wrapping a towel around her. “You must be made of steel, child. Doesn’t it hurt like hellfire?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“It’s all right to cry, you know.”

“Yes, ma’am, but it won’t make me feel any better. The mud helped, though. And the cold water.”

“Let me find the tweezers and get those stingers out. We might need to call a doctor.”

“No. I mean, no, thank you.” Rosa hoped she sounded firm, not impolite. While Mamma was sick, the whole family had had their fill of doctors. “I don’t need a doctor.”

“You sit tight, then. I’ll get the tweezers.”

A few minutes later, she returned with a blue-and-white first-aid kit and used the tweezers to pluck out at least seven stingers. “Hmm,” Mrs. Carmichael mused, “maybe it wasn’t such a bad idea, jumping in the pond. I think it’ll keep the swelling down.” She gently pressed the palm of her hand to Rosa’s forehead, and then to her cheek.

Rosa closed her eyes. She had forgotten how good it felt when someone checked you for fever. It had to be done by a woman. A mother had a way of touching you just so. It was one of the zillion things she missed about Mamma.

“No fever,” Mrs. Carmichael declared. “You’re lucky. You’re not allergic to beestings.”

“I’m not allergic to anything.”

Mrs. Carmichael treated the stings with baking soda and gave Rosa a grape Popsicle. “You’re very brave,” she said.

“Thank you.” Rosa didn’t feel brave. The beestings hurt plenty, like little licks of fire all over, but after what happened with Mamma, Rosa had a different idea about what was worth crying about.

Mrs. Carmichael got a comb and tugged it through Rosa’s long, thick, curly hair. Rosa endured it in silence, biting her lip to keep from crying out. “This is a mass of tangles,” Mrs. Carmichael said. “Honestly, doesn’t your father—”

“I do it myself,” Rosa said, forcing bright pride into her tone. “Pop doesn’t know how to do hair.”

“I see.”

Rosa pressed her lips together hard and stared at the painted planks on the porch floor. “Mamma taught me how to make a braid. When she was sick, she used to let me get in bed with her, and she’d do my hair.” Rosa didn’t tell Mrs. Carmichael that by the end, Mamma was too weak to do anything; she couldn’t even hold a brush. She didn’t tell her that the sickness that had taken Mamma took some of Rosa, too, the part that was easy laughter and feeling safe in the dark at night, the security of living in a house that smelled of baking bread and simmering sauce.

“Dear? Are you all right?”

Rosa tucked the memories away. “Mamma said every girl should know how to make a braid. But it’s hard to do on your own head.”

Mrs. Carmichael surprised her by holding her close, stroking her damp head. “I guess it is hard, kiddo.”

“I’ll keep practicing.”

“You do that.” Like all grown-up women, Mrs. Carmichael was a champ at braiding hair. She made a fat, perfect braid down Rosa’s back. “I’ll put these things in the dryer. Wait here, and try to stay out of mischief.”

Six

The housekeeper disappeared again and Rosa tried to be patient. Waiting was the pits. It was totally boring, and you never knew when it would end. She fiddled with the long tie that cinched in the waist of the thick terry robe. It was way too big for her, the sleeves and hem practically dragging.

Somewhere far away, the phone rang three times. Mrs. Carmichael's voice drifted through the house. Rosa couldn't hear the conversation, but Mrs. Carmichael laughed and talked on and on. She probably forgot all about Rosa.

The door to the kitchen was slightly ajar. Rosa pushed it with her foot and, almost all by itself, it swung open. She gasped softly at what she saw. Everything was white and steel, polished until it shone. There were miles of countertops, and Rosa figured the Montgomerys owned every tool and utensil that had ever been invented—strainers and oddly shaped spoons, gleaming pots hanging from a rack, a huge collection of knives, baking pans in several shapes, timers and stacks of snow-white tea towels.

Boy, thought Rosa, Mamma would love this. She was the world's best cook. Every night, she used to sing "Funiculi" while she fixed supper—puttanesca sauce, homemade bread, pasta she made every Wednesday. Rosa had loved nothing better than working side by side with her in the bright scrubbed kitchen in the house on Prospect Street, turning out fresh pasta, baking a calzone on a winter afternoon, adding a pinch of basil or fennel to the sauce. Most of all, Rosa could picture, like an indelible snapshot in her mind, Mamma standing at the sink and looking out the window, a soft, slightly mysterious smile on her face. Her "Mona Lisa smile," Pop used to call it. Rosa didn't know about that. She had seen a postcard of the Mona Lisa and thought Mamma was way prettier.

Rosa walked through the strange high-ceilinged kitchen, running her finger along the edge of the counter. She stood on tiptoe to peer out the window over the sink. It framed a view of the sea. Her mother would've gone nuts for this kitchen.

But it didn't smell like anything, just faintly of cleanser. Mamma's kitchen always smelled like roasting chicken or baking pizza or freshly squeezed lemons.

Rosa finished her Popsicle and put the stick in a shiny, bullet-shaped trash can. She tried to keep still, she really did, but curiosity poked at her. She knew it was wrong, but she was going to snoop. She had always wondered about these great big houses. She'd seen them from the outside, painted giants with white scrollwork trim, shiny cars in the circular drives and yards where people in summer hats and starched white shirts held garden parties.

She walked down a hallway, her bare feet soundless on the polished wood floor, the hem of the robe dragging. Her hand stole inside the bathrobe to clutch at the shiny new key Pop had given her. She was old enough to have a house key now, and he told her never to lose it.

She could hear snatches of Mrs. Carmichael's phone conversation, and when she realized it was about her, she froze right under a big painting of a sailboat in a rustic frame.

"…know what to do with that poor little girl all summer. Pete wasn't gone five minutes and she got in trouble."

Pete was Pop. It seemed like every woman who knew him was waiting for him to mess up now that he didn't have a wife anymore.

"Oh…no idea," Mrs. Carmichael was saying. "The kindest thing he can do for that child is remarry. She needs a mother."

No, thank you. Rosa buried her face in the overly long sleeves of the bathrobe to stifle a snort. She absolutely did not need a mother. She had the best mother in the world, and just because she wasn't around anymore didn't mean she was gone. She belonged to Rosa in a special way. That's what Father Dominic said, and everyone knew priests didn't lie.

I still talk to you, don't I, Mamma? She thought the words as hard as she could.

"At least Pete's got his work," Mrs. Carmichael went on. "He's happy when he works. He's like a different person." She gave a gentle laugh. "Hmm. I know. And with those looks of his…"

Rosa got bored with eavesdropping. Everyone was always saying how Pop was still young and good-looking, and that he ought to find another wife. Why did people think you could replace someone, like she was a lost schoolbook and all you had to do was bring a check to the office and they'd give you another?

She continued her silent exploration of the house, feeling as though she had stepped into an enchanted castle. The front room was all white and lemony-yellow, with white furniture and a seashell collection in a jar. Photographs in silver frames pictured people in white clothes without wrinkles, just like in a magazine ad. There was a huge bouquet of cut flowers, probably from the garden Pop took care of. The glass-topped coffee table displayed an important-looking scrimshaw collection. The mantel had a crystal candelabrum with long white tapers that had never been lit.

This wasn't like going over to Linda's house to play. Everything was so big and so incredibly quiet. The flowers made it smell like the funeral home where they took Rosa's mother.

She backed out of the room and tiptoed down the hall. Tall double doors with glass panes framed a room that had more books than the Redwood Library in Newport.

Rosa loved books. When Mamma got too sick to do anything else, and couldn't even braid hair anymore, Rosa used to get in bed with her and read and read and read—The Indian in the Cupboard, Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing, Charlotte's Web and poems from A Light in the Attic. And of course, Goodnight Moon, which Mamma used to read to Rosa every night when she was tiny.

She stepped into the room and inhaled the musty sunshine smell of books. She walked over to the lace-paneled windows and discovered a view of the garden and pond. Rosa caught her breath. The ghostly boy had stood right there, at the window, watching her run from attacking bees.

She wanted to browse through the books on the shelves, but she became aware of a hissing-gurgling-sucking sound. A creepy chill slipped over her skin. This was a haunted library.

She spun away from the window and saw the ghost on the couch.

Rosa had to push both fists against her mouth to keep from screaming. He was doing a terrible thing, sucking steam from a snaky plastic tube into his mouth. The tube was attached to a box, which emitted the hissing sounds.

Finally she found her voice. "What are you doing?"

He pulled the tube away from his mouth. "This helps me breathe," he said. "It's a portable bronchodilator."

She edged a little closer, but still felt wary. He was very skinny, lying on a leather sofa with a sailboat quilt covering him up. He wore wire-rimmed glasses and had a nice face, nicer than you'd expect for a ghost boy. Pale yellow hair, pale blue eyes, pale white skin.

"You need help breathing?" she asked.

"Sometimes." He set aside the tube, hooking it into a holder on the side of the machine. A wisp of steam coughed from the mouthpiece. "I have asthma."

"Can you get rid of it?" Rosa tensed up, wishing she hadn't asked. Sometimes a person got sick and there was no way to get better.

"No one can tell," he said. "It can be controlled, and maybe it'll improve when I get bigger and my lungs grow. What's your name?"

"Rosina Angelica Capoletti, and everyone calls me Rosa. What's yours?"

"Alexander Montgomery."

"Does everyone call you Alex?"

He offered a mild, sweet smile. "No one calls me that."

"Then I think I will."

They verified that they were just a year apart in age, but in the same grade. Alex had started kindergarten a year late on account of having trouble with his asthma. He admitted that he disliked school, and she got the impression that he got bullied a lot. She declared that she, too, despised school.

"I know I have to go," she lamented. "It's the only way to get ahead."

"Ahead of what?" he asked.

She laughed. "I don't know. My brothers were in ROTC and joined the U.S. Navy for their education."

"You go to college to get an education," he said with a frown.

"If you go in the navy first, then the navy pays for it," she explained patiently. "I thought everybody knew that." She indicated the book that lay open across his lap. "What are you reading?"

He picked it up and showed her the spine. "Bulfinch's Mythology. It's a collection of Greek myths. This one is about Icarus. There's a picture."

Rosa sat beside him on the sofa and scooted over to see. Alex thoughtfully put half the book on her lap. "He's flying," she said.

"Yes."

"He doesn't look like he's having much fun."

"Well, he's in pain."

"Why would he fly if it hurts him?"

"Because he's flying," Alex said as if that explained everything.

Rosa stuck out her bare foot. The beestings formed red dots on her ankle and shin. "I tried flying, and trust me, it's not worth the pain."

"I saw you," he said. "I was watching from the window."

"I know. I saw you watching me."

"I was going to come and help, but I didn't know what to do."

"That's all right. Mrs. Carmichael came straightaway when she heard me yelling."

He nodded gravely, studying her with such total absorption that she felt like the only person on the planet. "Do the beestings hurt?"

"Not anymore. Mrs. Carmichael put baking soda on them. She said I'm lucky I'm not allergic."

"You are lucky," he said with a funny, dreamy look on his face. "You get to be outside and do whatever you want."

She thought about telling him just how unlucky she was. She was a girl without a mother. But she didn't want to say anything. Not just yet. It might be too scary for him, this sick boy, to hear about a sick person who had died.

"You mean you're not allowed outside?"

He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "Not without supervision. I might have an asthma attack."

"Going outside causes an attack?"

"Sometimes."

She'd heard of a heart attack. An attack of nerves. But not an asthma attack. "What's it feel like?"

"It's like…drowning. But in air instead of water."

Rosa had some knowledge of the sensation. More than once, while swimming, she'd gone out too far and under too deep, and she'd experienced the momentary panic of needing air. The feeling was horrifying. "Then you'd better not go outside."

He stared down at Icarus, whose mouth was twisted in agony as he flew too close to the sun. Then he looked up at Rosa, and there was a new light in his blue eyes. "Let's go anyway."

"Really?"

"My lungs were twitchy this morning, but I'm better now. I'll be okay."

She looked at him very closely. There were no lies in that face of his. She could just tell. “I have to get my clothes. Mrs. Carmichael put them in the dryer.”

“I think that might be in the utility room.”

As she followed him through the house, she marveled that he didn’t know for sure where the dryer was. At her house, everyone knew, because laundry was everyone’s business. He opened a painted door in the kitchen to reveal a dim, cavernous room dusty with dryer lint. “It’s in there.”

“You wait here.”

“Are you sure?”

“I have to change. I sure don’t need any help doing that.” The room smelled of must and dryer lint, and a hissing sound came from the water heater. Her clothes were still damp, but she put them on anyway—undies, cutoffs and a T-shirt from Mario’s Flying Pizza. The sun would finish the job of drying them. She left the bathrobe on top of the dryer and hurried back to the kitchen.

There, she found Alex and Mrs. Carmichael locked in a staredown. “I’m going,” he said to the housekeeper.

She sniffed. “You’re not to leave the house.”

“That was this morning. I’m better now. I have my inhaler and my epi-pin, see?” He took a plastic thing in a yellow tube from the pocket of his shorts.

“I’ll watch him,” Rosa blurted out. “I will, Mrs. Carmichael. If he starts looking sick, I’ll make him come right back inside.”

The housekeeper kept her hands planted on her hips, though her eyes softened and there was a barely perceptible easing of her shoulders. Mothers were like that. They gave in with their eyes and their posture before saying okay out loud. “You will, will you?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am. I got my things from the dryer. Thank you, Mrs. Carmichael.”

“You’re very welcome.” She looked from Alex to Rosa. “Try to keep your noses clean, all right?”

“Yes, Mrs. Carmichael,” they said together, trying not to look too gleeful.

Out in the sunlight, Rosa noticed that Alex’s eyes were ocean-blue, and they crinkled when he grinned at her. She vowed to be on her best behavior, just like Mrs. C had admonished them. If she got in trouble, Pop wouldn’t let her come to work with him anymore. He’d make her stay with that dreadful Mrs. Schmidt, the widow with the mustache, whom Rosa likened to a circling buzzard. Even before Mamma died, Mrs. Schmidt had started coming around the house, bringing covered dishes and making eyes at Pop, which of course he never even noticed.

“Here. Have a cookie.” As they headed for the door, Mrs. Carmichael held out a white jar in the shape of a sandcastle.

“Thank you.” They each took one and stepped out into the sunshine. Rosa nibbled on the cookie as she grinned at Alex.

It was a store-bought sugar cookie. Not as good as Mamma’s, of course. Mamma made hers with a secret ingredient—ricotta cheese—and thick, sweet icing. Now that was a cookie.

Ricotta Cheese Sugar Cookies

1 cup softened butter

2 cups sugar

1 carton full-fat ricotta cheese

2 eggs

3 teaspoons vanilla (the kind from Mexico is best)

½ teaspoon salt

1 teaspoon baking soda

1 teaspoon grated lemon zest

4 cups flour

For the glaze:

1 cup powdered sugar

2-4 Tablespoons milk
2 drops almond extract (optional)
sprinkles

Preheat oven to 350° F. Mix cookie ingredients to form a sticky dough. Drop by teaspoonfuls on an ungreased cookie sheet. Bake 10 minutes or until the bottoms turn golden brown (the tops will stay white). Transfer to wire racks to cool. To make the glaze, stir milk a few drops at a time, along with the almond extract if desired, into the powdered sugar in a saucepan. Stir over low heat to create a glaze. Drizzle over cooled cookies and top with colored sprinkles. Makes 3-4 dozen cookies.

Seven

"Too bad about the rope swing," Alex said, eyeing the rope that still hung from the tree branch.

"I took it from that shed behind the—what is that building, anyway? It's too big to be a garage," Rosa said, stopping to put on her flip-flops. The tall building was painted and trimmed to match the house. It had old-fashioned sliding wooden doors like a barn, an upper story at one end with a row of dormer windows facing the sea and a cupola with a wind vane on top.

"My mother parks her car there. She calls it the carriage house even though there's no carriage in it."

Sunlight glinted off the windows at the top of the house. "I knew it was way too fancy to be called a garage. Does somebody live there?"

"No, but somebody used to. In the olden days, a caretaker lived upstairs."

"What did he take care of?"

"The horses. And carriages, I guess, but that was a long time ago. My grandfather used it as an observatory. He showed me how to spot the Copernicus Crater with a telescope."

He sure did seem smart. Rosa nodded appreciatively, as though she knew what the Copernicus Crater was.

"My grandfather was teaching me about the stars, but he died when I was in first grade."

Rosa didn't quite know what to say about that, so she followed him across the property to the carriage house. The front doors were stuck, but they struggled together to push them along the rusted runners. Inside was a maze of spiderwebs, old tools and some sort of car under a fitted cover. "My mother's car," Alex said. "She calls it her beach car. It's a Ford Galaxy. She hardly ever drives it, though."

"My mother didn't like driving, either."

He shot her a quick look, and Rosa realized that now was her chance to tell him, because she'd said "didn't" instead of "doesn't." But she decided not to say anything. Not yet. She might later, though. She'd already decided he was that kind of friend.

Before he could question her, she ran up the stairs. Sure enough, there was a whole house up there, flooded with dusty sunshine. Alex sneezed, and she turned to him. "Is this going to cause an as—" She couldn't remember the word. "An attack?"

"Asthma attack. I don't think so." He stuck his hand into his pocket and she could see him feeling for the inhaler. Still, he seemed fine. So far, so good.

The furniture was stacked in a broken heap, like old bones on Halloween. The most interesting item was a spinning wheel. Rosa stepped on the pedal, and when the large wheel spun, she jumped back with a yell of fright.

Alex laughed at her, but not in a mean way.

"What are you going to do with all this stuff?" Rosa asked.

"I don't know. My mother says she keeps meaning to clean it out, but she never gets around to it. I get to keep the telescope, though." It was on a table in front of the biggest window. He opened the long black case to reveal the instrument broken down in parts.

"Can you see the man in the moon with that?" Rosa asked.

"There's no such thing as the man in the moon."

"I know. It's just an expression."

He shut the case, and a cloud of dust rose. When he breathed, he made a scary wheezing sound, and his face turned red.

"Hey, what's wrong?" Rosa asked.

He waved his hand and headed for the stairs, gasping all the way like a cartoon character pretending to die. Rosa followed him in terror. When they got outside, she headed for the house to tell Mrs. Carmichael, but Alex grabbed her arm and pulled her back.

His touch felt desperate but not angry. “I’m okay,” he said, though his voice was only a whisper.

“Are you sure?”

He nodded. “Cross my heart and hope to—I’m sure.” His eyes looked brighter, somehow, than they had before. Magnified by the lenses of his glasses, they appeared huge.

“Was that an asthma attack?”

He grinned. “No way. That was just a little wheezing.”

“I’d hate to see an attack, then.”

“I’m all right. Let’s go to the beach.”

She hesitated, but only for a second. You just didn’t say no to a kid who spent half his life cooped up like Alex did. “Okay,” she said.

The Montgomery house overlooked a part of the shore almost no one visited, an area known as North Beach. It was a long, isolated curve of the coastline, a good hike from the nearest public beach. It was also a bird sanctuary, safe from development and a good distance from town. A path, overgrown by runners from wild roses and greenbrier, led through the sanctuary to the shore. The summer crowds had never discovered the marsh-rimmed beach, or if they had, it was too rocky to be popular.

“Too cold for swimming yet,” Rosa said, running down to the water’s edge. “But soon. Ever seen a tide pool?”

“In a book,” he said, following more slowly, breathing hard.

“I can take you to see some real ones.”

“All right.”

His breathing worried her. “Can you make it?”

“Sure, I’m okay.”

It was impossible to walk in a straight line on the beach; Rosa had never been able to do it. They darted back and forth, examining shells, overturning rocks to watch the tiny crabs run for cover, picking out a perfectly round, flat stone to skip.

Alex turned out to be a big talker. In fact, he was a funny, clever boy who took delight in everything she said and did, everything she showed him. And he knew things, too. He knew a dolphin swims at thirty-five miles per hour, and a baby gray whale drinks the equivalent of two thousand bottles of milk each day. So all that reading was good for something, after all.

He had a sister who was away at horseback riding camp. “Her name’s Madison. She’s fifteen. I’m not allowed to go to camp on account of my asthma.”

“It’s just as nice here,” Rosa declared, though she had no idea whether or not that was true.

“My family’s firm has offices in the city, and my father comes to the beach house only on weekends and holidays,” he said.

She didn’t really get what a firm was, but it seemed to keep his father plenty busy. “Which city?”

“New York City. And Providence, too. Where do you live?”

“In Winslow.”

“You’re lucky. I wish I could live here all year around.”

“I don’t know. It gets pretty cold in the winter. Summers are the best. Do you like swimming or hiking, going out in boats?”

“I don’t do things like that,” he said. “I’m not allowed.”

“That’s too bad.” What an odd boy, she thought. “Pop says when I’m twelve, I can go parasailing.”

“See what I mean? Lucky.”

"I guess. Maybe we could go down to the docks at Galilee and catch a ride on a fishing boat that's heading out for the day. Mrs. Carmichael's husband is a lobsterman. Did you know that?"

"No."

She had a feeling he didn't do much talking to the housekeeper. "My brothers' names are Roberto and Salvatore. We call him Sal but never Sally." She pointed out a firepit with the charred remains of a few logs. "My brothers used to build bonfires that would shoot sparks a mile high." Just saying it made her miss Rob and Sal, who were so much older than her. Her parents used to call her their last blessing. After the boys, they weren't really expecting to have a daughter, too, nine years later. Her parents had been older than the parents of her friends, but Rosa never cared about that. She was surrounded by love, she was the last blessing and she used to think she was the luckiest girl in the world.

"Maybe we could build a bonfire," Alex said.

It was nice, the way he seemed to feel her turning sad, and spoke right up. "Maybe," she said, and took him past the public beaches and parking lots to the rocky tip of Point Judith. "You have to be careful here," she warned him. "The rocks are slippery. Sharp, too."

He took a step and wobbled a little on his skinny white legs, then regained his balance. He looked very small, standing on the sharp-edged black rock with the waves exploding high into the sky.

Rosa put out her hand. "Hang on and watch where you step."

He grabbed on, and his strong grip surprised her. He studied each move with deliberation, but they made steady progress. When a fount of white foam erupted between the rocks he was straddling, Alex jumped, but not in time to avoid getting his shorts soaked.

"Are you all right?" asked Rosa.

"Yes." With his free hand, he straightened his glasses. "It's steep."

"Don't worry." She stepped down to the next rock. "I'll catch you if you fall."

"What if you fall?" he asked.

"I won't," she declared. "I never fall." Step by unsteady step, she led him down to the placid clear pools that stayed filled at low tide. They studied hand-sized starfish and sea cucumbers, neon-colored algae and clusters of black mussels clinging to the rock. Alex knew what everything was from his reading, but he didn't know how to make sunburst anemones squirt. Rosa showed him that. Splat, right on his eyeglasses.

Alex laughed aloud as he wiped his face, and the sound made her smile bigger than she'd smiled in weeks. Months, maybe. Crouched by the pool, she felt a slight change, like the wind shifting. They weren't just two kids anymore. They were friends.

She sat back on her heels and tilted her face up to the clear blue sky. A trio of seagulls swooped over them, and Rosa looked away. Mamma used to have a lot of superstitions. Three seagulls flying together, directly overhead, are a warning of death soon to come.

Until Mamma, Rosa had never known a person who died. She used to think she knew what death was: a bird fallen from the nest. A possum at the side of the road, buzzing with flies. She had grandparents who had died, but since she'd never met them, that didn't count. They were from a place in Italy called Calabria, which her parents called the Old Country.

One time, she asked Pop why he never went to Italy to see his parents while they were alive. You can't go back, he'd said dismissively. It's too much bother.

Rosa didn't really care. She didn't want to go to Italy. She liked it right here.

"What school do you go to?" asked Alex.

"St. Mary's." She wrinkled her nose. "I think classes are boring, and the cafeteria food makes me gag." When they had to say the blessing right after Second Bell, she used to give extra thanks for her mother's sack lunches—chicken salad with capers or provolone with olive loaf, sometimes a slice of cake and a bunch of grapes. There was always a funny little message on the napkin: "Smile!" Or "Only 12 more days to summer!"

“I like sports,” she told Alex, not wanting him to think she was a total loser. “I can run really fast and I like to win. My big brothers taught me everything they know, which is a lot. I play soccer in the fall, swimming in the winter, softball in the spring. Do you play sports?”

“Not allowed,” he said, trailing his hand in the crystal clear water. “Makes me wheeze.” Then he was quiet for several minutes. Rosa watched the way the breeze tossed his shiny white-blond hair. He looked like a picture in a book of fairy tales, maybe Hansel, lost in the woods.

He turned those ocean-blue eyes on her. “Your mom died, didn’t she?”

Rosa felt a quick hitch in her chest. She couldn’t speak, but she nodded her head.

“Mrs. Carmichael told me this morning.”

Rosa drew her knees up to her chest, and as she watched the waves exploding on the rocks, she felt something break apart inside her. “I miss her so much.”

“I was scared to say anything, but…it’s okay if you want to talk about it.”

She started to shake her head, to find a way to change the subject, but this time the subject refused to be changed. Alex had brought it up and now it was like the incoming tide; it wouldn’t go away. And to her surprise, she kind of felt like talking. “Well,” she said. “Well, it’s a long story.”

“The days are long in the summer,” he reminded her. “The sun sets at 8:14 tonight.”

She rested her chin on her knees and gazed out at the blue distance. Usually she tried not to bring up the subject of her mother’s death. It made her brothers all awkward, and Pop sometimes cried, which was scary to Rosa. Now she could feel Alex staring right at her, and it didn’t scare her at all.

“When Mamma first got sick,” she said, “I didn’t worry because she didn’t really act sick. She went for her treatments, and came back and took naps. But after a while, it got hard for her to act like she was okay.” Rosa thought about the day her mother came home from the hospital for the last time. When she took off her bright blue kerchief, she looked as gray and bald as a newborn baby bird. That was when Rosa finally felt afraid. “The nuns came—”

“Like Catholic nuns?” Alex asked.

“I don’t think there’s any other kind.”

“Are you Catholic, then?” he asked.

“Yep. Are you?”

“No. I don’t think I’m anything. I want to hear about the nuns.”

“They used to sit and pray in the bedroom with my mother. My father got really quiet, and his temper was short.” Rosa wasn’t going to say any more about that. Not today, anyway. “My brothers had no idea what to do. Rob went to Mamma’s garden, which she didn’t plant last year because she was too sick, and he mowed down a whole field of brambles using only a machete.” Rosa pictured her brother, sweat mingling with the tears on his face even though it was the middle of winter. “Sal lit so many candles at St. Mary’s that Father Dominic had to tell him to put some of them out to avoid starting a fire.”

None of it helped, of course. Nothing helped.

“Mamma said it was a lucky thing, to be able to say goodbye, but it didn’t feel…lucky.” Rosa pressed the heel of her hand into the rock hard enough to hurt. Her mother had been too weak to prop up a book, so Rosa got on the bed and lay down beside her and read Grandfather Twilight, and it felt strange to be the one reading it.

“She died on Valentine’s Day,” Rosa told Alex. “A week after my ninth birthday. All kinds of people came, and the neighbors brought food, but mostly it just spoiled in the refrigerator and then we threw it out because nobody was hungry. Some of the women got right to work on my father. They wanted him to marry again immediately.” She shuddered.

“Mrs. Carmichael thinks he looks like Syvester Stallone. I heard her talking to somebody about it on the phone.”

Rosa made a face. “He just looks like Pop.”

The chill water sluiced in, breaking over Rosa’s feet and Alex’s checkered Vans sneakers.

“Tide’s coming in. We’d better go back,” he said.

“All right.” She stood up and offered her hand.

“I can make it,” he said.

As they headed back along the public beach, she glanced at the sky. It wasn’t that late yet. “Do you think we should hurry?”

“No, but my mother doesn’t like me to be late for dinner. At least when we’re at the shore, we don’t have to dress for dinner like we do in the city.”

“You mean you eat naked?” Rosa fell down laughing, landing in the sun-warmed sand.

“Ha-ha, very funny,” he said, trying to act serious. But he fell down next to her, clearly not in a hurry anymore. They watched Windsurfers skimming along, and families having picnics and feeding the seagulls. Alex found a piece of driftwood and dug a deep moat while Rosa formed the mound into a castle. It wasn’t a very good one, so they weren’t sorry when a wave sneaked up and swamped it. Rosa jumped up in time to avoid getting wet, but Alex got soaked to the skin.

“Yikes, that’s cold,” he said, but he was grinning. When he stood up, he had something in his hand. He bent and washed it in the surf. “A nautilus shell. I’ve never found one before.”

It was a nice big one, a rare find, not too damaged by the battering waves. Alex couldn’t know it, but it was Mamma’s favorite kind of shell. The nautilus is a symbol of harmony and peace, she used to say.

“You can have it if you want,” he said, holding the shell out to her.

“No. You found it.” Rosa kept her hands at her sides even though she wanted it desperately.

“I’m not good at keeping things.” He wound up as if to throw it back into the surf.

“Don’t! If you’re not going to keep it, I will,” Rosa said, grabbing it from him.

“I wasn’t really going to throw it away,” he said. “I just wanted you to have it.”

When they got back to Alex’s yard and Rosa saw what awaited them, she closed her hand around the seashell. “I hope this thing brings me good luck. I’m going to be needing it,” she said.

Mrs. Montgomery and Pop stood waiting for them, both their faces taut with worry and anger. Before either of them spoke, Rosa could already hear them. Where have you been? Do you know how worried we’ve been?

“Where on earth have you been?” demanded Mrs. Montgomery. Rosa was speechless at the sight of her. She had flame-red hair and wore a straight white summer dress and white sandals. Her long, thin fingers held a long, thin cigarette. Mrs. Montgomery herself looked like a cigarette. A giant human cigarette.

“What are you thinking, eh? I told you to stay out of trouble,” said Pop.

“And you’re soaking wet,” Mrs. Montgomery declared as though being wet was the crime of the century. From her shiny white handbag, she took out a bunch of what appeared to be first-aid gear. “Honestly, Alexander, I can’t imagine what you were thinking. Come over here and let me take your temperature.”

He dragged his feet, but submitted to her with the resignation of long habit. Mrs. Montgomery didn’t check for fever like a regular mother, by feeling with her hands. She stuck a cone-shaped thing in his ear and then took it out and read the number.

“All right for you,” Pop said, marching Rosa toward the truck. “We’re gonna get you home, talk some sense into you.”

As their parents separated them, Rosa and Alex caught each other’s eye. Neither of them could keep from grinning. They both knew this wasn’t the end of their adventure.

Eight

Summer 1984

During the second summer Rosa and Alex spent together, she saw him suffer a full-blown asthma attack, and it made her weep with terror. She had never seen anything like it before. She had stopped thinking of him as being sick at all, because the medications and breathing apparatus kept his condition under control.

But not always. On a bright August day, they convinced his mother to allow them to fly kites on the beach, something that—incredibly—Alex had never done before. Rosa showed up with a kite her brother Sal had sent from Hong Kong, where the destroyer he was serving on had made port. She and Alex spent an entire morning putting the kite together, then headed for the beach.

At the long shoreline, isolated from the public beaches by a dense salt marsh, the wind was perfect for kite-flying. It blew strong and steady, a warm current up from the south. Rosa held the kite for Alex to launch. He got so excited and ran so fast along the beach that at first she had no clue there was anything wrong.

"Go, Alex, go!" she called, waiting to feel the wind fill the kite so she could launch it. "Faster!"

But he didn't go faster. He stumbled as though tripping over a log, yet there was nothing but sand beneath his feet.

"Hurry up," she urged.

He collapsed like a bird shot from the sky. His glasses flew off and landed in the sand.

"Alex!" she said, dropping the kite. She plunged to her knees beside him and touched his shoulder.

His face was turning blue and gray, like a ghost's. The rattle and wheeze of his struggling lungs terrified her, and she burst into tears. "Oh, Alex, I don't know what to do," she said, feeling helpless and horrible all at once. She looked around wildly, but there was nothing in sight except a pair of blue herons wading in the shallows. "Tell me what to do."

He shook his head and groped in the pocket of his khaki shorts. He took out his inhaler and inhaled three quick puffs. His eyes looked bright and desperate, but his coloring didn't improve and his wheezing grew worse. He couldn't seem to get his lungs working right.

Then he took something from another pocket. A black-and-yellow tube. He ripped open the plastic packaging and then, with his teeth, removed the gray cap from the end. Finally, in one smooth movement, he stabbed the black tip of the tube at his thigh and held it there for several seconds. He wheezed hard four times—in a panic, Rosa counted them—but then his breathing seemed to start working better.

He slowly removed the tube and inspected the black tip. Rosa was horrified to see a rather large needle sticking out of it. The whole business had taken only a few seconds. In the strange aftermath, Alex lay weak upon the sand, and Rosa was still crying.

"It's okay," he said, his voice soft and raspy. "I'm all right. Cross my heart and hope—"

"Are you going to be able to make it back home?"

"I need a minute."

Rosa started to scramble to her feet, but stopped when his cold hand touched hers. "No, wait," he said. "The kite—"

"You're not flying the kite."

"I know. But…how about you fly it for me? I need to rest." His voice was thin and pleading. "Come on, Rosa. She's going to take me straight to the hospital. That's the rule."

"Then I should go right now and get help."

"A few minutes won't make any difference one way or another. I'll be able to walk back if I can rest a little. The shot lasts twenty minutes, and I'm over the wheezing anyway. Fly the kite. Please."

"I can do that. But only for a minute." She looked down at their hands—hers dark, his pale—and felt a wave of emotion moving through her. Then she gave him his glasses. Spying a mermaid's purse in the sand, she gave him that, too. "For luck," she explained, closing his hand around the small shell.

It felt particularly important to get it right. Like if she didn't, if she messed up, she would be letting him down along with the kite. It was a beautiful, one-of-a-kind kite, yellow with red streamers, and Pop had given her a brand-new spool of string to use. She refused to let Alex launch the kite, because he needed to rest. Instead, she planted it in the sand to catch the wind, and ran with the string shortened until the kite spiked up. Then she put on a full burst of speed and paid out the string.

She could hear Alex saying, "Go, Rosa," and that only made her run faster. Don't let him down, she thought. Don't let him down.

She managed to hoist the kite upward until it took off as though it had a will of its own, and would stay up no matter what she did on the ground. Breathless from running, she brought the string spool to Alex.

"It's up," she said.

"It's up," he echoed, taking hold and watching with shining eyes.

The moment they got back, there was a big fuss, just as Alex had warned her. They tried to act as though nothing had happened, but Alex's mother had an uncanny eye, and the minute she saw him, she said, "You were running on the beach, weren't you?"

"No, we just—"

"You were running, and you started wheezing."

He stared at the floor as he held out the autoinjection tube for her to inspect. Her face turned hard as alabaster marble. "I need to get my purse," she said. She brushed past Rosa as though she didn't see her at all.

Rosa and Pop stood on the porch and watched them go. Mrs. Montgomery hardly ever drove the car that was parked in the old carriage house, and when she gunned the engine, it coughed and wheezed worse than Alex. She didn't seem to be a very good driver, either, Rosa observed. The blue Ford Galaxy lurched and shuddered backward out of the driveway, and the engine banged and backfired all the way down Ocean Road.

"It's so sad that he's sick," Rosa said to her father. "When he couldn't breathe, I got really scared, like—" She stopped, not wanting to upset her father by mentioning Mamma. "Do you think Mrs. Montgomery is really mad at me?"

"She is afraid for her boy." Pop grabbed his pruning shears, ready to get back to work. "I think next week, you will stay with one of the neighbors."

"Pop, no." Rosa panicked. The neighbor ladies—those who stayed home instead of going to work—were old and smelled funny and some even had chin whiskers. Worse, the widowed ones all wanted to marry her father. "Please, Pop, I'll be good, I swear I will. Just give me a chance, okay, Pop. Okay?"

Returning from the doctor's a couple of hours later, Alex seemed to be having a similar argument with his mother. "It's no big deal, you know it's not," he said, banging the car door shut.

Rosa came running from the yard, where she had been watching the koi fish feed on hapless bugs. "Are you all right, Alex?" she asked. "Hello, Mrs. Montgomery."

Mrs. Montgomery was inspecting Alex fiercely; she didn't even seem to hear Rosa. "You're not to do anything but rest," she scolded. "You heard the doctor."

"Fine," Alex said. "I'll teach Rosa to play chess."

"I don't think Rosa—"

"I already know how to play chess," Rosa declared. "We could have a tournament."

"Then that's what we'll do," Alex said. "We'll have a chess tournament."

Rosa was aware of Mrs. Montgomery's stern disapproval, but she chose to ignore it.

So did Alex. He had the key to his mother. She would rather put up with Rosa than say no to Alex. He showed her that he had kept the mermaid's purse she'd given him. "I think it did bring me luck," he said.

He was good at chess, way better than she was. She was impulsive, he was deliberate. She moved by intuition while he applied his knowledge and intelligence. She didn't bother looking ahead at things; he studied the board as though it held the meaning of life.

Despite her poor skills, she managed to win a few victories. She improved quickly, and before long, she was asking about all the other interesting games stashed in a tall cabinet in the library.

"Canasta and backgammon," he said, then took down a long, narrow pegboard. "Cribbage."

She chuckled. "Sounds like something to eat."

"It's a good game. I'll show you."

Nine

Summer 1986

By their fourth summer together, Rosa and Alex had fallen into a routine. From mid-June until Labor Day, they were best friends. Mrs. Montgomery objected, but as usual, Alex knew how to handle her. He had all these long arguments about how being with someone his own age helped him manage his illness, because being alone was stressful and made his lungs twitchy.

Rosa couldn't believe his mother bought that. Maybe a mother's love made her putty in his hands. She was a severe woman but she adored Alex. She used to try to get him to invite other boys over, "other" meaning boys like him, summer people. Alex pitched such a fit that eventually his mother stopped trying. Rosa was just as glad about that. With the exception of Alex, summer people were snooty, and they seemed to have nothing better to do than work on their tans or shop. Pop said they were his bread and butter so she'd better be polite to them.

Each year at summer's end, Alex went away, and Rosa felt bereft after he was gone. They always said they'd write to stay in touch, but somehow, neither of them got around to it. Rosa got busy with school and sports, and the year would speed past. When the next summer rolled around, they fell effortlessly back into their friendship. Getting together with Alex was like putting on a comfortable old sweater you'd forgotten you had.

That fourth summer, they were both going into the seventh grade, and they didn't ease back into the friendship as effortlessly as before. For some strange reason, she felt a little bashful around him that year. He was just plain old Alex, skinny and fair-skinned and funny. And she was just Rosa, loud and bossy. Yet there was a subtle difference between them that hadn't been there before. It was that stupid boy-girl thing, Rosa knew, because even the nuns were required to show kids those dumb videos, Girl into Woman and Boy into Man.

According to the videos, Rosa was still at least ninety percent girl, and Alex was definitely a boy. He had the same scrawny chest and piping boyish voice. She was pretty scrawny herself, and even though she sometimes yearned for boobs like Linda Lipschitz's, she also dreaded the transformation. Maybe if her mother was still alive, she'd feel differently, but on her own, she was more than happy for nature to take its time.

Mrs. Montgomery hadn't changed one bit, either. The whole first week of summer, Alex was confined to the house because his mother said he had a head cold. Fine, thought Rosa, trying not to feel frustrated about missing out on perfect weather. They'd find indoor things to do.

One day in June she showed up with an idea. She found Alex in the library, reading one of his zillions of books. Before she could lose her nerve, she took out a folded flyer and handed it to him.

"What's this?" he asked, adjusting his glasses.

With great solemnity, she indicated the flyer. "Just read it."

"'Locks for Love,'" he read. "'A non-profit organization that provides hairpieces at no charge to patients across the U.S. suffering from long-term medical hair loss.' And there's a donation form." He touched his pale hair. "Who would want this?"

She sniffed. "Very funny. Get the scissors."

He eyed her thick, curly hair, which swung clear down to her waist. "Are you sure?"

She nodded, thinking of her mother, the baby-bird baldness that had afflicted her after the chemo kicked in. She'd worn scarves and hats, and someone at the hospital gave her a wig, but she said it didn't look like real hair and never wore it. If only Rosa had known about Locks for Love then, she could have given Mamma her hair.

"Do it, Alex." She blew upward at the springy curls that fell down over her forehead. Her hair was always a mess. There was never a hair tie or barrette to be found in the house. Pop never thought to buy them, and she never remembered to tell him.

She looked up to see Alex watching her. “What?”

“You really want me to cut off your hair?”

“I need a haircut, anyway.”

He grew solemn. “There are salons. My mother takes me to Ritchie’s in the city.”

“I don’t think I would like a salon. Mamma used to cut my hair when I was little.” Suddenly it was there again in her throat, that hurtful feeling of wanting. She blinked fast and tried to swallow, but it wouldn’t go away. That was another thing about this girl-into-woman business. Sometimes she cried like a baby. Her emotions were as unpredictable as the weather.

Alex watched her for a moment longer. He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose—a nervous habit. She looked him straight in the eye and conquered her tears. “Go get the scissors. And a hair tie.”

“A what?”

She rolled her eyes. “You know, like a rubber band with cloth on it for making a ponytail. Or just a rubber band will do. The instructions say I have to send my hair in a ponytail. Do it, Alex.”

“Can’t we maybe get Mrs. Carmichael to—”

“Alex.”

Like a condemned man walking to the gallows, he went upstairs, where she could hear him rummaging around. Then he returned with a rubber band and a pair of scissors. That was the thing about Alex. As her best friend, he did what she wanted him to do, even when he didn’t agree with her.

It felt like another adventure. She grabbed a towel and they went outside, Alex grumbling the whole way.

“Wait a minute,” she said. “I have to brush my hair and make a ponytail.”

He shook his head. “Have at it.”

Her thick, coarse hair was hopelessly tangled. She’d washed it that morning in anticipation of the shearing, but during the bike ride over, the wind had whipped it into a snarled mass. Alex watched her struggle for a few minutes. Finally he said, “Give me the brush.”

She felt that funny wave of bashfulness again as she handed it over. “Have at it,” she said, echoing him.

“Turn around.” His strokes were tentative at first, barely touching. “Jeez, you’ve got a lot of hair.”

“So sue me.”

“I’m just saying—Hold still. And be quiet for once.”

She decided to cooperate, since he hadn’t wanted to do this in the first place. She stood very still, and all on his own Alex figured out how to brush through the tangles without tugging or hurting. He started at the bottom and worked upward until the brush glided easily through her hair. His patience and the gentleness of his touch did something to her. Something strange and wonderful. When his fingers brushed her nape, she shut her eyes and bit her lip to stifle a startled gasp.

She could hear him breathing, and he sounded all right. She was always leery of setting off an asthma attack. But he was on some new medication that controlled his condition better than ever.

“Okay,” he said softly. “I think that’s got it pretty good.” He smoothed both hands down the length of her hair, gathering it into a ponytail. Then he stepped out from behind her. “Rosa.”

Her eyes flew open. “What?”

“You look weird. Are you sure you want me to do this?”

“Absolutely.”

“Your funeral.” A moment later he stood behind her, snipping away. It was nothing like the way Mamma used to do this, but she didn’t care. She was happy to get rid of all the long, thick hair. It took a mother to look after hair like this, and without one she might as well get rid of it. Besides, there was someone out there who needed it more than Rosa did.

She felt lighter with each decisive snip. The fat ponytail fell to the ground and Alex stared down at it. “I’m not too good at this,” he said.

She fluffed her hand at her bare neck. Her head felt absolutely weightless. “How does it look?”

He regarded her with solemn contemplation. “I don’t know.”

“Of course you know. You’re looking right at me.”

“You just look…like Rosa. But with less hair.”

What did a boy know, anyway? With the exception of her friend Vince, no boy ever had a clue about hair and clothes. She’d have to get Vince and Linda to tell her.

She picked up the long ponytail and held it out at arm’s length. Alex stepped back, as though it were roadkill.

“Well,” she said. “They ought to be able to make a wig out of this.”

“A really good wig,” he said, edging closer. “Maybe two.”

She put the hair into a large Ziploc bag, like the instructions said to do. At that moment, Pop rolled a wheelbarrow around the corner from the front yard. He was whistling a tune, but it turned to a strangled gasp when he saw Rosa.

“Che cosa nel nome del dio stai facendo?” he yelled, dropping the handles of the barrow and rushing to her side. Then he rounded on Alex, spotted the scissors in his hand and raised a fist in the air. “You. Raggazzo stupid. What in the name of God have you done?”

Alex turned even paler than usual and dropped the scissors into the grass. “I…I…I…”

“I made him do it,” Rosa piped up.

“Do what?” Mrs. Montgomery came out to see what all the ruckus was about. She took one look at Rosa and said, “Dear God.”

“It is the boy’s fault,” Pop sputtered. “He—he—”

“I said, I made him do it,” Rosa repeated, more loudly. She held out the clear plastic bag. “I’m donating my hair to…” Suddenly it was all too much—Alex’s sheepish expression, the horror on Pop’s face, Mrs. Montgomery’s disapproval, the bag of roadkill hair. The explanation that had made such perfect sense a few minutes ago suddenly stuck in her throat.

And then she did the unthinkable. Right in front of them all, she burst into tears. Her only thought was to get away as fast as possible, so she dropped the bag and ran, all but blinded by tears. She raced as though they were chasing her, but of course they weren’t. They were probably standing around shaking their heads saying, Poor Rosa and What would her mother think.

She ran instinctively toward the ocean, where she could be alone on the empty beach. Breathless, she flopped down and leaned against the weatherbeaten sand fence and hugged her knees up to her chest. Then she lost it for good, the sobs ripping from a place deep inside her she had foolishly thought had healed over. It would never heal, she knew that now. She would always be broken inside, a motherless daughter, a girl forced to raise herself all on her own, with no one to stop her from doing stupid things, or to tell her everything was going to be okay after she did them.

Her chest hurt with violent sobs, yet once she started, she couldn’t stop. It was as if she had to get out all the sadness she usually kept bottled up inside. The crashing surf eclipsed her voice, which was a good thing, because she was gasping and hiccupping like a drowning victim. After a few minutes of this, she felt weak and drained. The wind blew her chopped-off hair, and she brushed at it impatiently.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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