

The
LONDON
HOUSE

*A
Novel*

KATHERINE REAY



HARPER MUSE

The London House

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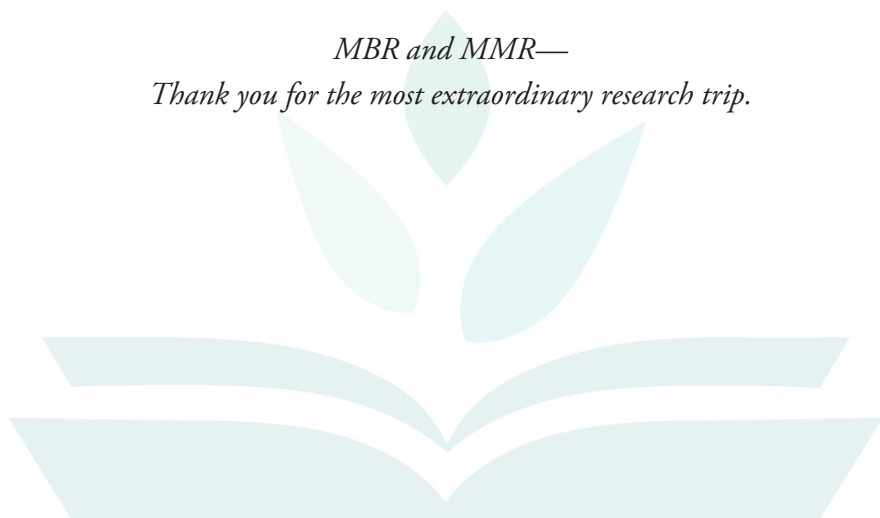
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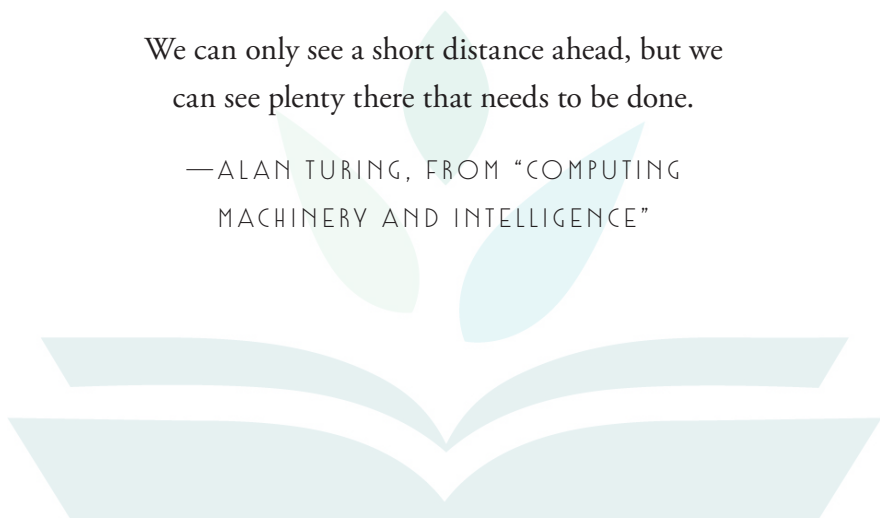
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Thank you for the most extraordinary research trip.*



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We can only see a short distance ahead, but we
can see plenty there that needs to be done.

—ALAN TURING, FROM “COMPUTING
MACHINERY AND INTELLIGENCE”



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PROLOGUE

17 OCTOBER 1941

Caro hugged Martine, whispering close to her ear. “I won’t be back. It’s too dangerous. Christophe is a threat to you now. You must see that. He’ll take his chance when he needs the money or the protection. He will turn you in.”

“Schiap keeps me safe.”

Martine had grown thin in the months since Caro left France. Her light auburn hair, usually pulled back into a neat chignon, hung loose. Her eyes, usually assessing and sharp, looked worn and narrowed with suspicion and fear.

Caro sensed Martine didn’t believe the lie she offered. She also knew how hard it was to lay down those lies. She had once believed them as well—that because Elsa Schiaparelli controlled every design, button, stitch, and memo; dotted every *i* within her domain; and directed her growing empire with swift efficiency, she wielded the same control outside it—and that her power was good, fair, and honest.

“Schiap’s gone. Anything she offered you is gone. This place?” Caro gestured to the four walls of the small workroom and beyond them to encompass every inch of the ninety-eight-room mansion that held the House of Schiaparelli. “It’s open because the Germans allow it to be so. They are the ones offering protection because their wives shop here. And it won’t last. Don’t be naive.”

She shoved the pouch, a thick canvas sack filled with seventy-five

thousand francs, into Martine's shaking hands. "Take this money, pay your contacts, then use the rest to get out. I've given you names and now you have money. Hurry and get it done."

Tears filled Martine's gray eyes. She pushed out a whisper. "This is my home."

Caro gripped her shoulders hard. She could feel every bone. They'd grown more pronounced and Martine's thick wool dress no longer hid their sharp angles. "Not now. Maybe someday again, but you have to live to see it."

Martine cringed and tried to pull away.

Caro tightened her hold on her friend's fragile frame. "Get to Spain. Use my name as your sponsor for the British. Promise me?"

A light shifted outside Martine's workroom window. She clutched at Caro's arm. "You need to go. Christophe is on security tonight. He'll be back soon. That cut?" She looked to Caro's covered forearm. "He'll do worse now. Without thought."

Martine dropped her voice and moved closer to Caro as if needing to whisper, despite their being the only two in the small room. "He's open now. He flaunts their gifts, his new power. He—" Martine pressed her lips together, unable to finish her sentence.

"Collaborates." Caro supplied the final word.

"It's a dirty word, a dirty thing."

"You've made my point." Caro stepped even closer. "You're running out of time. He will turn you in to the Germans. The stories of what they are doing to Jew—"

Arrêtez. Martine stiffened and wrapped her arms around herself. Her dress looked to swallow her small frame. "Do you think I do not know?"

"I've stayed overlong." Caro studied her watch. "I've got to leave. I have somewhere I—" She stopped. "Use the money for your contacts, but save enough for you. Do you understand?"

“This is my home,” Martine repeated, shaking her head as if willing the changes in Paris and in life to disappear. Tears spilled down her cheeks. “I will try. I will—”

Caro hugged her friend tight. “Promise me, because I can’t come back. I need you to promise me.”

Martine nodded into her shoulder.

It was enough. It had to be.

Caro stepped out of Martine’s sewing room and into the salon’s back hall. The walls were covered with years of first draft sketches and photographs of gowns, workers, and opening shows. It was her favorite spot in the entire mansion.

For all the glitz and glamour encased within the House of Schiaparelli, this narrow hall, with original drawings pinned into the plaster and photographs of the seamstresses, designers, and mannequins who worked there, told the true story. It embodied the life of the House—Schiaparelli’s brilliance as well as the dedication and dogged determination of the team that supported her.

Caro stopped at her favorite drawing. Not the infamous Lobster Dress nor the design of Schiap’s famous perfume bottle. The Butterfly Dress. A soft, delicate creation from 1937 that embodied hope, life, and love in a whisper of pale-pink silk.

She slid the sketch from its pin. She had purchased one for Margo from the first batch stitched. Perhaps, she thought, Margo would like the drawing as well. Perhaps she’d wear the dress. Perhaps she’d believe in herself again and let in hope, life, and love once more. Perhaps . . .

Missing her twin . . . remembering . . . distractions dulled one’s senses. Caro blinked to focus her mind and bring herself back to the present.

A second late.

An unseen force hauled her to the ground.

Splayed on the cobblestones, palms cut by gravel, she looked up to

Christophe's cold, chiseled face. His eyes glinted like ice in the watery lamplight.

"I thought I got rid of you last time," he growled.

"You're rid of me now. I came to say goodbye to Martine. We were friends. Only friends." In her fear, Caro realized she was offering unnecessary information. She silently chastised herself as she scrabbled backward, out from beneath him. "You'll never see me again." She rose and stepped back.

He lunged for her. His hand completely encircled her bicep and sent tingles down the length of her arm, numbing her fingers.

"*Non.*" He pushed her toward the courtyard's entrance. "The Carlingue will get you this time. There's good money in traitors."

Caro pulled back. Her leather soles slipped on the cobblestones and she lost her footing. Christophe counterbalanced her move, hauling her upright and forward.

The French Gestapo, the Carlingue, was as brutish as the German iteration—perhaps more so in an effort to impress their occupiers. But what was worse, they would know her. Christophe would tell them exactly who she was and what she was. A prize.

This was why Dr. Hugh Dalton had not wanted her involved. This was why Sir Frank Nelson asked her to stop.

If she hurt the war effort . . . if her loss or death was used to promote anti-British propaganda . . . or worse, if she was tortured and the Germans publicized it for ransom, power, position, or trade concessions . . . To hurt the British effort and morale was more than she could bear.

Caro twisted in Christophe's grip again. He squeezed tighter, to the point she thought her arm might break.

What had she done?

ONE

A call came in. May I forward it to you?"

"Of course." I'd quit asking the receptionist who was calling months ago. Mednex had a main line, but as we each had company cell phones, the CEO hadn't put landline phones on our desks. She simply forwarded calls.

"Caroline Payne," I announced at the click.

"Caroline? It's Mat Hammond. I don't know if you remember me from college, but—"

"Mat? Of course." I felt myself straighten. "I remember you."

Three simple words accompanied a complex picture. *Mat Hammond*. The Greek boy with the electric smile and the soft, dark eyes. Funny. Determined. Brilliant. Challenging . . . A close friend. Somehow I'd forgotten that last part, and it struck me with an odd note of longing.

"I wondered . . . I mean, I thought you might not." He paused.

I waited, unsure how to step into the silence that followed his comment.

When it tipped toward uncomfortable, he rushed to fill it. "I'm working on a project for the *Atlantic*, and I need to ask you a few questions."

"Oh. I'm sorry." Oddly disappointed, I reached for a pen. Fielding questions about our company's new immunotherapy drug was above my pay grade. "You need Anika Patel, but she's unavailable today. Let me take your number and I'll have her call you."

"It's not about your company; it's about you. Well, about Caroline Waite."

"Who?" Surprise arched my voice. I recognized the name, but it could have no meaning to Mat or anyone outside my family.

"Your great-aunt? Twin sister to your grandmother, Margaret Waite Payne?"

"I know who my grandmother was, but why are you calling about her sister?"

"It might be easier if we met in person . . . I'm in the lobby."

"What?" I stood and looked over the cubical partitions as if, eight floors up, I'd somehow see Mat's lanky frame leaning against a doorjamb.

"I didn't even know we were both in Boston until earlier this week," he continued. "Please . . . this is no good over the phone and email is no better. It won't take long."

I dropped to my seat. "I'll be down in a minute."

Caroline Waite. That was a name I hadn't heard in years—twenty years, to be exact. I'd been named after my great-aunt. But once I'd learned that she died in childhood from polio, I'd lost interest in her. Even at a young age, I thought it felt wrong to be named after someone best known for dying young.

Mat Hammond was another name I hadn't heard in years—six, to be exact. He was the first boy I met on campus my freshman year. We bumped into each other entering the dorm. He, buried beneath a box of books. Me, swamped by a down comforter. We became friends, good friends—at least from his perspective. I'd always hoped . . .

I stepped off the elevator and scanned the lobby. Mat was momentarily forgotten as my chest filled with the same expansive feeling I got every time I stepped within it. I loved our building's lobby. My father always said it didn't matter where you lived or in what type of building you worked, but I disagreed. Buildings bore personalities. They held our secrets and carried the weight of our lives, our families, our work,

and our dreams. The grandeur and significance of Mednex's lobby had become symbolic of how I viewed Mednex's work and my place within it—something small participating in something grand.

Ours was the newest company fighting one of humanity's worst foes—cancer—with a groundbreaking protocol that supercharged the body's cells as our latest weapon. There was something so fundamental and old school, yet cutting edge, about the idea that we could equip our bodies to withstand and conquer this most invasive assault.

Our building's lobby embodied that synergy. Its 1920s art deco designs and lines, the pink marble-patterned floor and the dark wood and gold filigreed interior storefronts of the shops circling it gave it a dignity and gravitas missing from steel, glass, and concrete. It exuded history, stability, and solidity, while offering the latest amenities, including a security system that worked on a biometric scan . . . and the best coffee shop around.

It was next to this door I found Mat. He studied me rather than greeted me. I had anticipated a warm smile but banished the thought before my face reflected it. This was business. Friendship, it seemed, had died long ago.

Physically he looked the same, other than the slight curl to his hair around his ears. He certainly still had the same straight nose and jawline most women would die for—or pay thousands to obtain—and I knew full well his scruffy three-day shadow hid an equally chiseled chin.

That was one thing I hadn't inherited from my grandmother—twin sister to the Caroline in question—her square jaw. With her dark hair, bright blue eyes, and that gorgeous Grace Kelly jaw, I saw her as the most beautiful woman in the world.

The saddest too.

As I crossed the lobby, Mat—looking every bit the academic I always suspected he'd be—pushed off the wall and met me midway.

We stalled, side-shifted, then awkwardly stepped into a semi-hug and back-pat while our hands got stuck between us mid-handshake.

“You haven’t—”

“Wow. It’s been a lo—”

We stopped and started and sputtered to another stop. I opened my mouth to try again, but he stepped back and gestured first to my hand then to the coffee shop. “Your hand is freezing . . . Can I buy you a coffee?”

I nodded and rubbed my hands together, feeling both embarrassed and exposed. Within a few steps and no words, we stood in line. Two black drips later, we sat across from each other tucked next to a window.

“Okay . . . Where to begin.” He circled his cup with both hands.

It wasn’t a question, so I didn’t try to answer. It wasn’t congenial, so I didn’t start a round of “What have you been up to lately?” I simply sat and waited.

“I’m an adjunct instructor at BC, but I have a side job that, in the craziest of small world ways, leads me to you.”

He scrunched his nose. “That didn’t help . . . The humanities don’t pay much without tenure, so on the side I do research for families. I trace lineage, make albums, digital programs, anything they want to give Grandma for Christmas. It usually starts with 23andMe or something, and the wife discovers she’s German or English, and wouldn’t royalty be fun? Then a friend tells them about me because all these people seem to know each other, and I’ve been doing this for years. So I get hired to do a deep dive on the family and present their history with a big bright bow.”

Mat sucked in a gulp of air, as he hadn’t drawn a breath since “*I’m an adjunct . . .*,” and I choked on my coffee. “Someone in my family hired you? How? Who?”

There was no way that could be true.

“No.” Mat watched as I swiped at the table between us with my

napkin. “Your family name came up in my current project and . . . it’s an interesting story that, if I do it right, the *Atlantic* wants for a feature article. Not one about the Arnim family, who hired me, but about yours.”

His smile flattened into a vulnerable sheepish thing that made me wary.

“You’ve lost me. Can we start over?”

Mat took a sip of coffee. “A couple years ago, the *Atlantic* picked up some pieces I wrote on history and how we remember it. World War Two stories about all the monuments under construction at the time, both in England and here. My guess is that the look back was as commemorative as it was therapeutic . . . When people feel anxious about the future, and globally we’ve been through the wringer, they look to the past and tangible reminders that things ended well before and, therefore, can again. I—”

He pressed his lips shut as if realizing he’d gone off topic. “My current idea isn’t about the stories we want to remember. It’s a counterpoint perspective, featuring a story most—your family specifically—would rather forget. My belief is that those stories, your story, also provide a sense of hope. They assure us that when bad things happen, life continues, and that we humans are resilient and endure. Hope emerges from tragedy.”

He stalled and stared at me. Barely understanding, I stared back.

“In World War Two, no one can deny there was a real mix and mess of loyalties. It must have felt like the world was ending and life would never be the same. What’s more, the enemy was sometimes within your own home.” He dipped his hand toward me as if I could relate to that point. “In France, you’ve got Free France, Occupied France, brothers and sisters turning on each other. In England, you’ve got the Mitford sisters fawning over Hitler, Edward and Wallis Simpson, and even Edward’s agreement to the whole German plan to get him back

on the throne before he got shipped off to the Bahamas . . . There are lots of stories that show family life was real and messy and carried consequences.”

“Okay?” I drew the question long.

“Your great-aunt is one of those stories. A woman, daughter of an earl, no less, who worked as a secretary for the Special Operations Executive, then crossed the great divide and ran away with her Nazi lover? You have to admit, it’s compelling.”

He took another sip, assessing me over the rim of his cup. When I said nothing, he set it down. “I didn’t do that well . . . I practiced how to reach out to you a million times this past week because, while I could hand it in as is, I know you. I didn’t want this to surprise you or hurt you if you read my name on it. I also hoped you might comment.”

“Comment how?” I sat back. “You’ve found the wrong Caroline Waite, Mat. My aunt died from polio in childhood. I’m named after her. I should know.”

Mat mirrored my defensive cross-armed slouch. His eyes drew tight as he watched me. “Is that what you’ve been told?” He reached into his messenger bag, pulled out a standard manila file, and opened it. The top page was a photocopy of a short letter in Courier type, with the salutation handwritten in a large swirling script.

He slid it across the table.

20 October 1941

My dear John and Ethel,

It is with real sorrow that I write this letter, for it brings you, I am afraid, very bad news about your daughter, Caroline Amelia Waite.

Without permission, she boarded a transport boat to Normandy on 15 October and was identified

outside Paris two days later. She joined German Gruppenführer Paul Arnim, with whom we have confirmed she had a previous romantic connection.

I am beyond sorry, John and Ethel. I can only imagine how hard this news will sit with you. She did good work at the Inter Services Research Bureau and we did not anticipate this action. I want to reassure you she was not involved in anything delicate that should incite your concern for our efforts.

That said, I do not write these words without heartbreak for your loss.

I send this letter with consideration and sympathy.

Hugh

I slid it toward him. "Impossible. This is dated 1941."

"Do you know who Hugh Dalton was?" Mat tapped on the name. "He was the Minister of Economic Warfare, tasked to form the SOE, the Special Operations Executive. They called it the Inter Services Research Bureau, the ISRB, but that was a front."

His chair screeched as it scraped forward across the stone floor, closer to the table, closer to me. We hovered inches apart. I resisted the urge to shift back in retreat.

"It was a whole new idea, Caroline, set on espionage, sabotage, reconnaissance, and establishing guerrilla resistance groups. Rough and tough stuff, modeled on IRA training and tactics from the Irish War of Independence. It's incredible really . . . No gentleman, and back when it started in 1940, certainly no lady, was part of it. Women weren't actively recruited until 1942 as spies, so your aunt probably worked—"

He drew another slow breath. “The beginning,” he said more to himself than to me. He used to do that in college. He’d get carried away with a theory or an idea then need to remind himself to go back to the beginning and bring the rest of us along. Sometimes I sent us down conversational rabbit trails just for the fun of setting him off.

The memory brought a fleeting smile. Fleeting because Mat didn’t recognize it, reciprocate it, or make any gesture at all that we’d once been more than a cold call about a story.

With a frown, he continued. “The Arnim family hired me for a project. He’s the Gruppenführer mentioned in the note. His granddaughter owns all these famous dresses he bought for his wife from a salon in Paris, so after checking his German files, that’s where I headed to start building texture for their project. Two names popped up—your aunt’s and a Christophe Pelletier.

“Pelletier was the salon’s security guard and general bully, arrested and sent to Auschwitz in November 1941. He died in 1943. Your aunt, however, proved more interesting. She worked at the salon, knew Arnim there, then headed home when the Germans invaded France—almost a year after the declaration of war. Following her trail to England, I found her involved with the SOE and the Gruppenführer mentioned in the file. My guess is that she was his lover turned informant.”

Mat straightened the paper between us. “It’s beyond anything I could have imagined. Think about it—I get hired by a family in New York to trace their German lineage, and here we are with an incredible story, having coffee in Boston.”

“But it’s still wrong . . . It can’t be my aunt.”

Mat’s brown eyes lit a notch brighter. His excitement fueled the gold flecks along their edges before he caught something in mine. The light dimmed with a crinkle of concern. It was so swift, gentle, and kind, my breath caught. He was suddenly the boy I once knew.

“Do you really not know?” His gaze flickered. “It’s true, Caroline. This is your aunt.” He spread his hand across the paper. “And it’s not dangerous, if that’s what concerns you. This story can’t hurt your family. It was eighty years ago. But it does have a great angle and contemporary significance. How we deal with pain and adversity remains relevant no matter how long ago it happened.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but he cut me off with a raised hand. “I’ll be gentle with her, but I’m not wrong . . . I did some digging. Dr. Dalton and your great-grandfather knew each other well. I expect Dalton wrote this personally because they were friends.”

Mat opened the folder again. “I have this.” He handed me another page. “And this.” Another. “Your aunt met with Dalton and the SOE head, Sir Frank Nelson, a couple times. She worked there for over a year before this final note was sent to her family.”

He sat back and stared at me for a few moments before running his hands through his hair and leaning forward, as if ready to go into battle again. “Don’t you see? When she joined the Nazis, a lie had to be created. Even if she just typed memos, the truth would’ve hurt the narrative. If it had been made public that a peer’s daughter had worked for the SOE and defected that early in the war, it could have ended it right there. British morale was low and the country was vulnerable. That’s part of my point. Your family didn’t get to grieve her loss properly, because this hung over her . . . There’s a lot to say here.”

“There’s nothing to say, Mat.” I pushed at his paper pile. “That’s not my aunt.”

We sat at a stalemate for five seconds or five minutes. My head spun too fast to process time properly. All spinning stopped with his next sentence.

“Your father says I’m right.”

“What?” I tipped back so fast the legs of my chair snagged on the uneven stone floor.

Mat lunged for me, grabbing my arm. He let go the instant I was upright.

“You talked to my father?”

“Briefly. I thought that was the more direct connection, and you and I haven’t spoken in years. He threatened legal action.”

I felt my eyes widen. Threatening legal action did not sound like my dad at all. “That proves you’re right?”

“His tone did. A person doesn’t get that scared or stern over a lie, but over an unfortunate truth . . .” Mat started to replace each of his memos within his folder. “Look, Caroline, I don’t know why your dad got so upset or what you’ve been told, but your aunt knew Paul Arnim and she ran away with him.”

I gripped my coffee cup tight. The warmth felt good against my now freezing fingers. “How does the Arnim family feel about this? They’re paying you. They can’t want you to publicize that he was a Nazi.”

“No . . . He isn’t part of the article. They knew he was a German officer and I need to tell them about this, of course, but I’m not writing about him for publication.” Mat slid his chair back. “You know what? I’m sorry, Caroline. This was a mistake. I—I shouldn’t have called.”

He returned his folder to his bag and pushed up and out of his seat. This time I reached for his arm to stay the motion. His eyes locked, first on my hand clutching his arm, then on my face. He dropped back into his chair.

“Are you sure you’ve got this right?” I asked.

In college, we’d been friends—good friends—at least for our first two years. I had trusted him, relied on him . . . had a crush on him. And while there was a distance, a coolness between us now, I knew Mat was still trustworthy. He wouldn’t lie.

“I’m sure.”

I let go of his arm and spread my fingers across the wood table. I

needed something firm, something real to hold. "You can't put anything in your article about us meeting here, and that I knew nothing about this." I bit my lip. "Please."

"Why not?"

"Because I can't learn this . . . here . . . from you. I get that it fits. I mean, you want to know how three generations dealt with pain, and turning a blind eye is certainly one way, but you can't understand what we've been through."

My mind raced with memories, questions, implications, and consequences. Each felt as empty and dark as the thought before it, bringing an instant swirling headache and a sense of weightlessness—perhaps a little like Alice felt careening down that hole.

"No one has told me any of this. Ever."

Mat's lips parted in silent disbelief.

"Can you wait? A couple days?" A plan formed as I spoke, my brain barely able to keep up with its delivery. "I'll talk to my dad, find out what is true and what is not, and in exchange for the time, I'll comment."

He raised a brow. "You'd do that? For a couple days' time?"

"Today's Friday. We can meet Monday?" I felt my voice rise into the territory of pleading and dropped it with a short cough. "When's it due?"

"Next Friday. One week. But, Caroline, I don't want to give you the weekend just so you can think up ways to change my mind or stop me. Marketable work like this is the difference between a tenure track hire or creating puff documentaries for rich families while babysitting undergrads. I can't risk losing this."

"I just want time. I promise. We'll sit down Monday and talk it through. And I want to read the article."

Mat ran his hand over his hair again. His dark bangs stuck up with the motion. "I'm not doing a hatchet job and you know it. You

know me. The whole point of this is to do something good, to examine how history is real and messy, but that it isn't objective or defining."

"I need to read it, Mat, because that's where you are wrong. If what you say is true, then it has been defining. And I can't let it hurt my father more, not now." This time my voice did betray me.

"What's wrong?" Mat stilled. "Is he okay?"

I shook my head.

"I'm sorry."

"Not your fault." I shrugged, feeling embarrassed and exposed all over again. I pointed to Mat's bag. "Can I have that letter? The Dalton one?"

"It's a copy. Keep it." He pulled it from his folder.

I tore off a corner of the page and reached for his pen. "Here's my email and cell. Send me the article and your number. I promise to call you Monday morning, if not before."

"I'm not agreeing to change anything, Caroline, and in the end, I don't need your permission or a quote."

"Fair enough." I pushed my chair back. "You won't submit until you hear from me?"

"Agreed. If you call before Friday." Mat glanced up as he tapped my information into his phone. "You haven't changed a bit, you know."

My heart skipped, then stopped.

His head shake told me that wasn't a good thing.

TWO

Coming up from the Charles/MGH stop, I stalled. Right would take me home—an airy, light, and bright two-bedroom apartment off Charles Street. Left, a couple blocks east, and a few streets up Beacon Hill, and I'd be at my dad's house. Not my childhood home. My dad's house.

I was so tempted to turn right. I was tired and, regardless of whatever the truth proved to be, seeing Mat again was messing with my head, and the conversation with my dad was going to be rough. Nothing was ever easy between us.

I crossed the street and headed up Beacon Hill.

As a kid, I always loved Acorn Street. True to my belief that buildings have personalities, those houses exuded love. Dad once commented the houses were “diminutive” because it was where the trade workers who serviced the larger houses on Chestnut Street, one block over, lived. I didn't care who had once built or lived in them—I just knew they were special. I dreamt I lived on that tiny stone street, too narrow for cars, with its small houses tucked tight. Families within them must always bump into each other. Even a family of three, like my own the year I turned eight, would have to squeeze through narrow hallways, twist to pass each other in a tiny kitchen, and get tangled up on a single couch to share popcorn on movie night.

I grew up on Chestnut Street, with all the roominess, comfort, and coldness that implied. We had two stairwells. A sitting room that

Dad never entered. A study Mom never stepped foot in. And a third floor all for me. I was the envy of my friends.

It was desperately lonely.

I turned left onto Acorn Street and paused as I always did. To Dad, moving houses last year was a way of sorting his life, perhaps closing a door. To me, he moved into my dream home—only years after the dream had died and we'd all left home.

I walked up the sloped hill and rang the doorbell at number 9. A chill made me shift within my thin cardigan. The sun, nowhere near setting on this June evening, was cut early from this narrow street.

"Caroline?" Dad stood on the step above me. He looked taller in the shadows, thinner. His salt-and-pepper hair was ready for a cut. "I didn't expect to see you this weekend."

He stepped back, inviting me inside. I bumped into him squeezing past. I couldn't help but wonder—had we lived here before, would bumping into each other have forced us to relate and heal? Or would we have broken even faster?

As I continued down his short hallway toward the kitchen, I noted the subtle smell that followed me. Mint and the Acqua di Parma cologne I'd given him two Christmases past. It made me smile . . . and hope.

I called behind me, "I almost dropped by your office at lunch today, then remembered you're working from home Mondays and Fridays. How do you like it?"

"I'm still getting used to it." He sighed. "Ferdinand put out to pasture."

I laughed as I stepped into his bright white-marble kitchen. Dad didn't have a robust sense of humor, but he did have a deep well of literary allusions, and a surprising number came from my favorite children's stories.

"Ah . . . That's where Ferdinand wanted to be."

“True.” Dad flipped the switch and the kitchen glowed from a series of pencil-sized lights. “It was a bad analogy.” He looked down at his hands as if calculating his life’s wear and tear within each knuckle. “I am not where I want to be.”

Rather than console or chide, as neither was wanted, I shifted my attention from his kitchen to the office space next to it. The previous family had probably used it as a breakfast area, but Dad had separated the space with a set of glass French doors to create an office overlooking his walled garden. “Why reserve the best view for a meal I never eat?” had been his reasoning.

“Dad, you’ve still got unopened boxes.”

He looked past my outstretched hand to his office. “I’m getting there.”

“It’s been a year. This is not ‘getting there.’” I toggled my fingers in air quotes.

“Did you come to harp at me?” If his voice held any emotion, it was curiosity. Mild curiosity. In fact, if the last year proved anything, it was that mild was Dad’s dominant characteristic.

“No.” I wilted. I had come to ask tough questions and didn’t know how to begin and that made me nervous. Dad and I only had one constant conversation topic—my inconstancy or, better termed, my failures. He never pushed at me—that wasn’t his style. He simply asked enough questions, in just the right tones, to let me know I wasn’t measuring up.

Dad lifted his chin. “How’s work? Are you still liking it? You’ve been there . . . almost a year now?”

And so we began.

I perched on one of his high stools and spread my hands across the marble island. I recognized the gesture from earlier that morning at the coffee shop and saw it for what it was—a reach for understanding, connection. At the very least, I found the marble refreshingly cool and slightly bracing.

“Eleven months.” I added a shade of perky to my tone. “All that patent work I’ve been doing? Well, the FDA approved Xyantrix and we’re going to market in December.”

“In six months? That’s fast.”

“It’s a good protocol, Dad.” I stretched my arms farther across the counter. There was no hiding the significance of the action, my reaching out for relationship. I pulled them back. “It will really help people. It’s a huge advance in immunotherapy. It gives support so the body can fight cancer rather than relying on a drug to kill it and, unfortunately, all the good cells with it.”

The word *cancer* hovered between us, a specter always in our periphery now. Dad fidgeted with several loose papers resting on his counter.

“I handled all the FDA filings.” My voice rose in a shameless beg for approval.

“You did?” He looked at me, hands still. “Shouldn’t the company’s lawyer have handled that? It’s complicated stuff.”

“She signed off on everything, but I did the legwork. I had the courses my second year. I’ve learned a ton, both about the law and about cancer. Did you know—”

He raised a hand. “You still have a chance to finish. If you’d get through your last year of law school, you could direct and manage that work yourself. It’s foolish to—”

“Stop.” I raised a hand in reply. “Leaving law school was the right decision and I don’t regret it . . . I came back. I came back to be here . . .” I pressed my lips together, unable to walk that road any farther. The *with you* hovered between us.

He wasn’t looking at me regardless.

“It’s good work. I’m helping people. At least, I hope I am.”

He smiled. It was small and fleeting, but it was there. “You have a good heart, Caroline. You always have.” Then, as quickly as the connection formed, it evaporated.

Dad straightened. Time to get to business. “Now, to what do I owe this pleasure? I’m sure you didn’t come to sign me up for Xyantrix or ask advice about your life.”

I looked around. I wasn’t ready for a serious conversation. We’d already skirted several in the five minutes I’d been there. I certainly wasn’t ready to ask if he’d lied to me my whole life. I wasn’t ready to ask what was true and what was fiction.

I pointed to the boxes in his office. “I’ve got nothing going on tonight. Why don’t we order a pizza and I’ll help unpack the rest of those.”

Dad dismissed the suggestion with a wave of his long fingers. “If I haven’t needed what’s in them by now, perhaps I’ll simply give them away.”

“Don’t say that. There could be important things you don’t want to lose.”

Dad blinked, but his bland expression didn’t change. “You’re right.” He reached into a drawer and handed me a pair of scissors. “You begin and I’ll call Florina for a large sausage and olive.”

I sliced open a box and was pulling out the last flat object wrapped in cream moving paper when Dad joined me. I unwrapped a picture of our family taken when I was about two and placed it on Dad’s desk next to the six I had already unpacked. I’d been right—and not surprised—to find the box filled with a collection of family pictures he hadn’t missed.

Dad glanced at the seven pictures propped on his desk before sliding the scissors off a copy of the *Harvard Law Review* and slicing into another box. “So . . . ?”

It was easier to work than look at him. I hauled another box from the corner. “I saw Mat Hammond today. He said he spoke with you.”

Dad worked his way into the box for a few beats before answering. “He did. He said you were friends in college. That, of course, didn’t

change the conversation. If he prints his story, I said I'd pursue legal action. I should have guessed he'd contact you. What did you say?"

"What was there to say? He claimed Aunt Caroline was a Nazi and I told him she died when she was seven. But he had a letter from 1941. I brought it with me." I stepped over the mess of packing paper to grab my bag from the kitchen.

Dad followed me.

I handed him the sheet.

"I don't understand." He glanced between the sheet and me.

I pointed to the page. "Me neither, but those are your grandparents' names and there—"

"No, I don't understand why you told him that. The childhood polio story isn't going to put him off, Caroline." I pulled back as Dad shoved the paper into my hands. It crumpled between us. "He's right and you, of all people, know that. I hoped a bluff would stop him, because if he goes to print, there's nothing I can do." Dad's hands dropped to his sides. "You can't sue over the truth, but lying only makes it worse."

"I didn't know I was lying."

Dad stared at me and I'd never felt less like his daughter. His stare was blank—I was a conundrum or a mystery he'd never encountered.

"Are you serious?" he finally asked. "How can you not remember that day? We only found out because of you."

"Me?" I perched on the stool again. Something dark and shapeless crept into the corners of my mind. A rainy day. A stiff conversation. Shock and hurt.

Dad lowered himself onto the stool next to me. His eyes never left mine and I struggled not to look away or even blink.

"We were at the London House. You were eight. I remember because it was our first trip after . . ." He ran out of words. We always did when confronted with my sister. "Jason couldn't come, and you

went digging about in that infernal attic. You found a trunk full of diaries and letters, papers and books. It spilled out from there.”

“What spilled out from there?” I felt like I was leading a witness in a law school evidence class.

Dad straightened his neck. Every time he made that gesture, a sharp retreat of his chin, he reminded me of a turtle. There was so much we avoided. So much we never said. I was more familiar with that gesture than I was with anything else about my father.

He pushed off the stool and stepped back into his study. I followed.

He unwrapped the object he’d left lying on top of the box. A stapler. “I’ve been missing this.”

“What spilled out from there?” I repeated the question, slowly with perfect diction. That got his attention.

“I don’t want to talk about it. It’s in the past and it will remain there, at least for us.” He busied himself digging through packing paper. He straightened, another cream paper-wrapped mystery in his hands. “We don’t need to comment on his article or even read it. I won’t tread that ground again. I can’t. I—”

Dad stopped, and it felt as if he’d started to fall into memories before he recalled I was standing there to witness it. He looked straight at me. “I’ve tried and tried to believe that what one does in this life matters, that what came before doesn’t have to taint it, but I was wrong. This betrayal has followed me my whole life, and now its publication will bookend my entire existence.” He blew out a long, measured breath. “Please, Caroline. Don’t make it worse. Don’t speak to that man again.”

“I have to.” I felt my face warm. “In exchange for time to talk to you and to read his article in advance, I agreed to comment.” I rushed on. “It’s important to know what he’s going to say before it comes out.”

“No, it’s not. Beyond the event itself, there’s a narrative that plays here. What did Shakespeare say? ‘The evil that men do lives after

them; the good is oft interred with their bones.’ I’m sure there was some good to my aunt. Even my mother couldn’t disguise how much she loved her, but . . . What she did? I somehow doubt eighty years has made us more forgiving or less interested in the misfortunes of others. There is no point in engaging with any of this. Ever.”

Dad swept a hand over his face, pulling at his eyes, his cheeks, and his neck with the downward motion. He looked a lifetime older than his seventy-two years. I wondered if the cancer was changing him faster than he was letting on. But again, that was something he’d never tell me.

He sighed. “How do you think it felt growing up in that . . . in that choking blackness and never understanding why? Until that day, I never understood what was different about us, why there was no light or peace in our home.”

My lips parted. In describing his childhood, he had described mine.

He pulled the paper from the object he held in his hands. He gripped it tight and I noticed his nails whiten with the pressure.

He placed the picture on his desk with all the others. It was one of our family, the last photo in which we were whole, taken in the summer of 2002 right before Jason left for college. Amelia had her arm wrapped around me tight in a protective posture. Only one year older, but she always looked after me. Our matching grins formed the picture’s focal point.

“When is enough enough?” Dad sighed.

I nodded, but not in agreement.

T H R E E

*W*e only found out because of you.”

I rolled over and watched the first strands of day creep through the crack in my curtains. The light was just enough that I could discern the scattering of purple tulips across the cream fabric. I had been so excited to hang those last year.

I left law school to be near my dad, to help him bear and navigate a cancer diagnosis that arrived only weeks before. He didn't need me, perhaps didn't want me, but I felt a compulsion to be near, to help, to . . . I didn't even know anymore what I'd hoped to accomplish. The irony of it was that I had loved law school. Despite my dad's constant chirping about my inability to finish anything, until Jason's call last June, finishing was never in question.

Days after my arrival, Dad secured a sale on the Chestnut house and paid the movers to deliver everything I wanted to my new apartment. It felt like a new beginning with boxes full of my books and treasures, and a few I'd asked to be saved from Amelia's room. It was her small chair that now sat in the corner of my bedroom. Her old dresser that held my clothes.

I huffed in the approaching dawn. A therapist would have a field day with these thoughts and this room—with my whole life actually.

I opted not to stay last night to help Dad unpack, and left before the pizza arrived. He had set his jaw against talking about the only subject that mattered to me. He'd done it so many times—about school, my jobs, his diagnosis, his treatments, that I recognized it

more swiftly this time—and I lied. I claimed forgotten dinner plans with friends and fled.

Rather than make plans with friends and redeem the lie, I came home, ordered my own Florina pizza, and ruminated over endless questions with no answers. I also checked my email every five minutes. Mat hadn't sent his article.

Then it happened . . .

Around three in the morning, I was either too curious to throw up barriers or too tired to keep them standing strong, and answers emerged. They played out slowly in that netherworld between cognizant thought and subconscious dreams.

I'd been wearing a new pair of jeans. They'd been a November birthday gift I'd saved for our early Christmas trip to London. After all, my jeans were the latest cut and "London is so cool," my friends said. They had all either visited themselves or pretended well. Oddly, I had never traveled there, despite my dad being British and his family descending from the "peerage," as Mom called them.

And bangs. I had just cut a full set of bangs. Stress haircutting, one would call it today. It was the same then—we just didn't have a name for it. What a mistake! My new bangs shot to the sides of my forehead, never laid flat, and never looked right. Two tufted horns pointed downward at my temples, the left side curling up and out.

It also rained our entire trip. We hardly left the London House, as I gather the great monstrosity had been called for generations, and no one came in. Grandmother was quiet and seemed heavy with sadness. I remembered how that surprised me. She wasn't the same grandmother who had come to Boston only six months earlier for a summer visit, or even three months before for my sister's funeral. She had talked to me then, played games, and even helped me bake cookies.

In London, she moved slowly, as if through water. She seemed shadowed, as if only a memory of her walked those halls and sat in the

front sitting room. Oddly, she reminded me of my dad. Sometimes, even back then, I wondered how to react to him. He never gave me anything to push against—to challenge, to confront, to love.

I hardly recalled my grandfather at all. He was there, I know. In the shadows. Stern. Unyielding. Disappointed. He said a terse good morning at breakfast then ventured out to his club each day. I believed his “club” to be a place where men read, talked, sat, and smoked pipes. The same things my father did every day in Grandfather’s wood-paneled study at the house—minus the pipe.

Mom sat with Grandmother. She stayed by her side, asked and answered questions, met her every request, and when the silence pressed down like a weighted blanket, she read. In many ways, I recognized how alike they looked and acted—despite not being related. That had not occurred to me before that trip and wasn’t remembered until this morning.

I explored.

The London House filled me with awe. Its personality was dark and foreboding as it rose up four floors before me that first morning. Mom rushed me out of the back seat while the limousine driver unloaded our bags. When I tried to follow him to the side of the house and a door at street level, he shook his head and gestured to the front door, bright blue and five steps up from the sidewalk. Mom and Dad had already climbed the stairs.

The plaster and painted white-brick house sat perched at the end of a long street filled with identical houses, each one adjoined to its neighbors in a pristine row. Upon entering, I knew it was full of history and that old glamour Mom always raved about in the black-and-white movies we watched.

The front entry reached two floors high with a curved staircase flowing up to the right. There were indents in the plastered walls set with sculptures. The windows reached floor to ceiling. And there were

countless rooms. I spent a day racing through them all—closets, pantries, sitting rooms, antechambers—and days exploring them fully. I was thankful for the endless opportunities to get lost, and the infinite ways to avoid the oppressive silence of the front sitting room.

Stories and secrets lay hidden in each room and I was desperate to discover them. I remembered that—I was hungry to understand something, anything, about who I was and where I came from. Although my mom had been welcoming and open when I was young, my dad was always more remote, and somehow, perhaps because I was named after his side of the family and looked very much like his mother, I felt a yearning to be close to him. Amelia had looked like Mom.

I found snippets of life in each and every room. Leather-bound books with cracked spines. Old coloring pages. Silver brushes. Dolls. Pens, letters, clothing, games, tiny boxes . . . chests cleared out except for the occasional treasure tucked deep in the back. A fan, a lipstick, a comb, a glove. Tiny items that told me nothing but made me feel not so alone.

I was alone because Jason wasn't there. I was alone because Amelia was gone.

I wouldn't have been in the attic that day if either of them had been with us. Amelia and I never needed anything more than each other to occupy us. We made up games, puzzles, and challenges. There wasn't a riddle we couldn't solve together. But Amelia had been killed by a car running a red light three months earlier. I was a few feet ahead of her and, turning back at precisely that instant, saw the whole thing.

We had created a massive Rube Goldberg machine the day before. It spanned across our two bedrooms, and I wanted to see if the change I'd thought up during math class might make it work. So when the "Walk" light flashed, I ran. Over halfway across the street, I spun around to call, "Hurry up!"

That moment stopped me this morning, as it always did. It

brought its usual slowed-time and high-def visuals, along with a hot flash of panic. Everything in those split seconds was magnified into a lifetime and I saw it all again. I felt it all again.

It took—I have no idea how long it took . . . But eventually my mind settled and drifted back to the London House.

Jason was a college freshman that fall and had a couple weeks of classes before winter break. Had he been with us, he would have taken me to the shops, the sites, the parks, and the museums. Who goes to London and doesn't see the Tower, the London Eye, Buckingham Palace, the Princess Diana Playground, Piccadilly Circus, or take in a West End show and eat dim sum for lunch in Chinatown? At eighteen, Mom and Dad would have let him go and they would have trusted him to take me. It would have relieved them of the burden.

Alone, I explored—and on day four, I found the attic.

The narrow stairs opened into a large room. On day one, Mom called it the nursery and said kids, including my dad, played, learned, lived, and slept up there with a nanny until they were about five years old. Then, also according to Mom, they got sent away to school.

Behind this front room was a short hallway with doors on either side. Maids' quarters, she told me, and bedrooms for the family's children. She said my grandmother and her twin sister had slept there when they were girls, and their father and his siblings before them. I felt sad as I realized that without siblings, my dad would have stayed up there all by himself.

Mom hadn't taken me through the small door at the end of the hallway that first day, and that was where I headed that fourth afternoon.

It was a storage room, wood-paneled like Grandfather's study, but the similarity ended there. The wood lining his room was smooth and polished. The mahogany so dark and shiny you could see your reflection, and so smooth that when I ran my hand down the wall I was reminded of Mom's silk dresses. I did the same here and came away

with a fine coating of splinters as if I'd rubbed the cactus that sat in Jason's window well. I brushed my hand against my jeans and most of them fell away. A few dug deeper.

There was a series of dormer windows along both sides of the room that let in the low afternoon sun on one side and the gray of evening on the other. I walked to one and stepped up on something to see outside. Looking down I surveyed the gravel courtyard behind the house and the side garden. Looking across I could see where the buildings ended at the entrance to Kensington Gardens. Mom promised we'd walk there, but we hadn't yet.

That's when I felt my breath hitch—both then and now. Back then I realized I'd never visited the gardens, at least not on that trip.

At three o'clock this morning, I realized I was headed toward a moment I had never allowed myself to revisit. A moment I had willfully forgotten.

I smoothed out my breath and exhaled long and slow. It was time . . .

The room overflowed with furniture, boxes, knickknacks, and who knows what else. Lifetimes were stored in that dark space, much of which was draped in white sheets. The object that served as my perch was covered as well. I stepped down and pulled away the sheet and watched the dust dance like fairies in the slanted sunlight as it sank again to the floor. A large trunk sat before me. It had gleaming brass corners and the leather was scratched and worn smooth.

The lock was loose. I jiggled it and it released. The lid tipped far enough to rest against the window ledge, allowing me to dig through books, sets of white gloves, dried flowers, pictures, letters tied with ribbon, two dolls—one with creepy glass eyes that opened when I held her upright—and jewelry. There was a leather sleeve with a large gold

locket inside. I opened it and found two girls. Beautiful girls. I knew I was looking at my grandmother and her twin sister, Caroline. The one who'd died young. The one for whom I was named.

Something was wrong with the picture and I dropped cross-legged onto the floor to study it. They didn't look like girls. They looked Jason's age or older. And even though the pictures were black-and-white, I could tell one of the girls wore dark eyeliner and her lips were a deeper tone than her sister's. *Makeup*, I thought. She was glamorous and, again, I was reminded of those old movies with Greta Garbo, Grace Kelly, and Myrna Loy that Amelia, Mom, and I had watched together.

I rested the locket beside the trunk and reached for a packet of letters. They were tied with a black ribbon, frayed thin and soft by time and use. I pulled one letter from the center and shifted to the light to read. The writing swirled in loops and dips. Whoever had written it had much to say and I couldn't read a word of it. The letters crashed into each other and danced across the page in tight lines. But three things were clear—then and early this morning.

The date . . .

October 7, 1941

My grandmother's name . . .

Dear Margaret,

And my great-aunt's signature . . .

Love,

Caro

Having recalled that, the rest washed over me. I couldn't have stopped the onslaught of remembrance if I wanted to. It wasn't

distant. It was yesterday. It was now. And Dad was right—it changed everything.

I had raced down and down and down again before sliding across the marble hall and into the front room. Dad and Grandfather were there and I remember being surprised, then worried I was late for dinner.

“Look, Grandmother. I found a letter to you.” I held out the page. “It’s from your sister, Caroline.”

Mom laughed. It was light and clear and indulgent. “Sweetheart, I hardly think a little girl wrote a letter that long. Why don’t you . . .”

Her words drifted away as I handed her the open locket. Confused, she looked to my grandmother, but Grandmother was focused on me.

She reached for me and her hand trembled as she wrapped it around mine. It was cold. Icy like my hands get today when I’m anxious or nervous. Although hers were bone thin and gnarled at the knuckles, she gripped me tight and I couldn’t pull away.

“Margaret?” Mom shifted toward her. “What is this? You’re both much older in this picture and the letter is dated 1941.”

“I wouldn’t go to Paris with her. Maybe if I had . . . or lived with her here . . .”

“What do you mean? In 1941? Paris?” Dad towered over us. Grandmother stared at him, almost through me, as if Mom and I had vanished.

“She betrayed us . . . I had to lie. I loved her”—she glanced to my grandfather then back to her son—“more than anyone, and we shared everything. But in the end, it seems, we both had our secrets.”

Grandmother’s voice softened with a faraway quality. “I was bold and fearless, until I wasn’t. Then she was. We were always opposites, from the very beginning. As we grew she became the brightest spot in any room. Me the wallflower, no one noticed. Then she left.”

“Left? But, Grandmother—”

Mom wrapped an arm around me to signal silence.

Grandmother sat looking at my dad. “I told you she died as a child, but she grew, and she joined the Nazis in France. She had a lover we never knew about and we never saw her again.”

“Impossible. You used to tell me stories of your childhood. You had adventures before she died. I named our daughters after her because . . . because you loved her.”

“I did . . . I still do.”

Dad shifted his attention to his father, who sat in an armchair near the window. Not part of the cluster near the fireplace.

“Your mother never should have told you those stories.” Grandfather’s voice fell heavy. “They served no purpose but to fill you with fantasies. There was nothing to do but forget and move on.”

“I could never do that.” Grandmother shuddered as if an unpleasant film was playing in front of her and she wanted it shut off. “But we weren’t to talk about her. Not once after that night. Father was very clear. Then after the war, the nation came together, but there was still fear. Among our friends. Everywhere. For years we said she died in the war, and everyone forgot.”

“Then why the polio story? You said she died as a child.”

She regarded my father again. “You were young. You saw her picture and started making a hero of her. She was magnetic and lovely and you wanted to know so much. I couldn’t have you hate her. Or what if you researched the war, found the truth, and tried to find her? So I lied. I said the pictures you found were of someone else and I packed every piece of her away again. I left her young and innocent so you could keep her and love her.”

Grandmother pressed her lips together as if fighting memories or tears, I wasn’t sure which. “I couldn’t survive otherwise.”

“Survive?” Grandfather cut in. “Margaret, is that what you

call this? If you had simply let her go, we could have done better than this.”

“I’m not the only one who held tight,” she barked at him. “Nine years. You waited nine years before you—”

“Before I what?”

“Married me.” She deflated into the armchair.

Grandfather’s glare was sharp and hard. It cut like steel. “I let her go and yet you still punished me.” He rose and dusted the knees of his trousers. It was a rote action and, once accomplished, he was at the door before he said anything more. “Please don’t wait on me for dinner this evening. I’ll dine at the club.”

Thinking back now, I didn’t see my grandfather again that trip. In fact, I never saw him again. The next time we traveled to London was eight years later, in 2010, for his funeral. We crossed the Atlantic on a Tuesday and flew back two days later.

My dad did not follow him out the door that evening—he wasn’t invited. He stared at his mother so long that Mom called his name three times before he registered her presence.

“Jack. Perhaps you should sit down.”

Without answering or sitting, he returned his attention to his mother. “So it was my fault? All my questions?”

“You found a picture of her from a visit home from Paris. She’d become so sophisticated. I told you the lie I wanted to believe, that none of it ever happened. I had only told you childhood stories, the golden ones before my illness, before her love story, before her treachery, so it was easy to end your questions there by saying the picture was of someone else.”

“What really happened?” Dad dropped to the settee.

“It doesn’t matter now. It doesn’t affect you.”

“How can you say that? We’re here, right now, because it does . . . this house . . . my whole childhood. Grandmother never left her room; you never smiled; Father hates everybody. You sent me away to the States.”

“I did what was best.” My grandmother’s conviction crumpled with her next breath.

“I was fifteen.”

“I was heartbroken.” She tried to reach for my dad’s hand, but he pulled it away. “I wanted you to be free. Your father, me, this house . . . It’s been so very heavy.”

Recalling how old and frail she looked in that moment surprised me anew this morning that she lived fourteen years after that evening.

Mom tugged at my arm then and slid her hand down until she reached my hand. Squeezing it tight, she led me from the room. “We should let them talk.”

We turned at the door as my dad called to me. “Not a word, Caroline. Do you understand me? We will not speak of this or share it with anyone.”

I could only nod. It wasn’t Dad’s request that kept my silence all these years—it was the lost look in his eyes. The hollowness of utter defeat.

I turned to my mom after the door closed behind us. “We can put the letter back. Wasn’t it long enough ago we could just put the letter back and no one would know?”

“That’s what we’ll do. Come on.” She started climbing the stairs. “We’ll put it away and everyone will feel better in the morning.”

Mom’s tone was soothing, but her eyes were wide with surprise and concern. “They just need to talk. Your dad and grandmother will sort it out. Don’t you worry.”

We did put the letter back. I retied the black ribbon myself. But Mom was wrong. Nothing got sorted. No one felt better.

And it didn’t stay secret.