

Versions

of

Her

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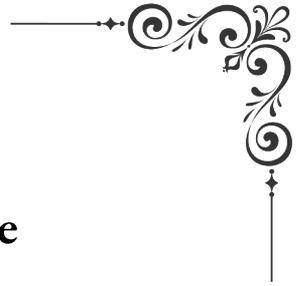
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Chapter One

Kelsey was running late, of course. She had planned on making the trip to their family summer home the previous week, as her sister had requested, to air it out and take stock of everything, but the seventy-five-minute drive to Lake Indigo had seemed excruciatingly long and unnecessary at the time, especially when she would be making the same trip the following week and could simply come early and kill two birds with one stone. But Kelsey didn't *do* early, particularly because she worked at Green Valley Pet Lodge, the most unpredictable and chaotic place on the planet. She'd spent the morning wrangling the meanest little Chihuahua and hadn't realized how late it was until Josh had called across the room, "Hey, K. K. Didn't you need to leave at eleven?"

Now it was twelve forty-five. The realtor was meeting her at one, and Kelsey was still at least thirty minutes away—even with her lead foot. At a stoplight, she peeked at her reflection in the rearview mirror, looking for any stray clumps of dog fur clinging to her—an occupational hazard. Finger-combing her long blond hair, she dislodged a wiry gray-and-black curl that looked like it belonged to a Kerry blue terrier. She pinched the errant fur between her fingers and let the breeze sweep it out the window.

Kelsey remembered what Melanie had said on the phone. "She's one of the premier agents in lakefront property, very sought after, very booked up, so if you don't think you can find the time to meet with her..." Melanie had drifted off as her true meaning became ap-

parent. If Kelsey didn't think she could *handle it* was what her sister meant and clearly thought. "I could try to get an earlier flight," Melanie had continued, "but I really need to submit these final grades soon, and I'd rather not bring student work with me..."

Kelsey had insisted she could "find the time" to take care of everything and was perfectly capable of opening up the house and showing a realtor around and that Melanie didn't need to worry and could wrap up her semester in peace. It had simultaneously irritated and saddened her that Melanie still viewed her as the flaky, flighty little sister, yet there Kelsey was, proving her right, as usual. She cursed as, up ahead, railway crossing lights started flashing and a gate lowered across the road. It seemed like the perfect metaphor for how her life was going.

The realtor wasn't answering her cell phone, so Kelsey left a message. "Hi, Charlene. This is your one o'clock appointment at Lake Indigo, Kelsey Kingstad." She paused a moment, hoping the agent would hear the clattering of the train in the background. "I'm just calling to say I'm running a tad late, but I will be there. Very soon. So sorry for the inconvenience. If you want to, in the meantime, there's a dock behind the house. You're welcome to check it out."

Is the dock still structurally sound? It had been a very long time since she'd been to the house, and she didn't know if the Holloways had maintained the property as well as her father had. She imagined Charlene, whom she'd never met before, in a bouclé dress suit and high heels, breaking through the rickety, rotting dock and plummeting into the brisk May waters. "Or maybe not," she amended. "Either way, I'll see you soon."

It had been fifteen years since the Kingstads had inhabited their summer home, four years since their mom had passed away, and over a year since the Holloways had given their notice that they were moving out and discontinuing their long-term lease, and *now*, for whatever reason, Melanie had a fire under her butt to sell the place. When

she'd called Kelsey two weeks earlier, out of the blue, she'd launched into her plan as if it were something that they had been discussing and ruminating on for years instead of a topic never broached before. Melanie had rambled on and on about how the housing market was finally improving, and Lake Indigo had recently been named one of the best summer vacation spots by *Midwest Living*, and since she had the summer off and could easily come visit, it would be the perfect time to prepare the house to put on the market. But Kelsey didn't have the summer off, and she couldn't imagine weeks or maybe even months of her perfectionist older sister breathing down her neck and scrutinizing every dusty corner of her life.

She turned onto the county road that led to the lake, densely thicketed by trees on both sides, and immediately felt a small stirring of nostalgia. It was twenty years ago. She was eight again, ensconced in the back seat of her parents' station wagon, dreamily watching the lacy patterns of the tree-branch shadows dance on the pavement. The prospect of the summer ahead—staying up past her regular bedtime, living in her bathing suit, skipping showers, picking raspberries, and playing with the Fletcher kids—glittered before her eyes like a yellow brick road. Now she rolled all the car windows down, letting in the crisp smell of lake water.

It was 1:20, but her urgency to meet Charlene had dissipated. It was a stunning house on a stunning lake. *Why* wouldn't *it* sell? And Kelsey suspected Charlene would stand to make a hefty commission off it. Kelsey should be the one with the upper hand, not the "premier agent of lakefront properties." And if Melanie were there, *she* wouldn't be all frazzled, apologetic, and kowtowing. She would tuck her already perfectly smooth, perfectly tidy hazelnut hair behind her ears before striding across the lawn to shake the realtor's hand. *Melanie Kingstad-Keyes*, she would say. *Thank you for meeting with me.*

The road curved sharply, and suddenly Kelsey could see it—the gravel driveway snaking through the trees, down toward Lake Indigo and their family summer home. She let out a small sigh as the smudge of violet blue came into view. The lake had been named factually instead of romantically. At certain times of the day, typically around dusk, the water turned the majestic shade of irises. Next appeared the peaked roof of the two-story gray-and-white Victorian. It was impressive even from that angle, though Kelsey knew the front with its turret and wraparound porch that faced the lake was considered the prettier approach. She could just make out the Fletchers' red-roofed bungalow next door then the shiny white sedan parked at the end of the driveway.

Her feeling of empowerment waned as the realtor got out of her car. Charlene wasn't the fussy, petite, gray-haired lady Kelsey had been expecting. Instead she was tall, thin, and young, maybe even only Kelsey's age. But her pulled-together aura, her manicured fingernails and huge diamond solitaire ring, and her expensive-looking car, which Kelsey could see up close was a BMW, made her instantly feel inferior. Maybe Melanie's inclination had been right—Kelsey wasn't up to handling the meeting.

"I just got your message." Charlene's smile was as polished as the rest of her. "I'm sorry I didn't answer. My cell phone reception has been spotty out here. But I've been enjoying the view." She picked her way across the gravel to warmly squeeze Kelsey's hand. "Lake Indigo is one of my favorite lakes," she said, as if confiding some great trade secret. Kelsey was sure she said this to all of her clients.

"Thanks so much for coming out," she said, dropping Charlene's hand. "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting." She fumbled with her key ring to find the set of keys her dad had mailed her over a year ago. She hadn't thought to dab them with a different shade of nail polish like she did for most of her other important keys, so she hoped they wouldn't be too hard to pick out. "Why don't I show you the house?"

“That would be wonderful. It’s been in your family for quite some time, hasn’t it?” Charlene pulled a sheaf of papers from her sleek tote bag. “I wasn’t able to find any past sales information on it, so I printed some comparables that I think we’ll find useful.”

Kelsey snagged a bronze key that seemed about right in size and shape. At least she hoped it was right, because she didn’t want to test out a bunch of keys like a dolt in front of the realtor. “My great-great-grandparents built it in 1900, I think. It’s been in my mom’s family ever since.”

Charlene was on Kelsey’s heels as they mounted the porch steps. From up close, Kelsey noticed the house was in desperate need of a fresh coat of paint. “But we’ve been renting it to some tenants, who lived here year-round for the last fifteen years,” she added. “An older couple.” Her palms felt slippery as she guided the key into the lock. *What else in the house is run-down and neglected?* She wished she hadn’t been so lazy last week and had inspected the house, like Melanie had asked. At least that way she wouldn’t be walking into the situation totally blind.

Fortunately, the key turned, and the door creaked open, revealing a foyer, a living room, and a twisting oak staircase that had all once been elegantly understated and gleaming but now looked deadened and ordinary in the dim light, under a thick layer of dust, with a few leftover pieces of the Holloways’ kitschy hunting-lodge-inspired décor. Kelsey hurried inside to start pulling back the curtains and opening the windows. As the stuffy air assaulted her nose, she suppressed a sneeze.

“Sorry,” she muttered as she hid an ugly longhorn cow skull behind a drape. “It hasn’t been aired out recently.”

But Charlene’s expression was unreadable as she methodically made her way around the first floor. She drifted from the living room to the dining room to the kitchen, jotting down notes on a legal pad and occasionally asking Kelsey questions to which she didn’t know

the answers. Charlene opened up closets and kitchen cupboards. She flicked light switches on and off. At one point, she stood gazing up at the ceiling and crown molding for so long, Kelsey thought she might have fallen catatonic.

The afternoon started to take on a surreal quality for Kelsey. It was the house she'd spent many of her childhood summers in, the house of her imagination, and therefore, so many years later, at twenty-eight, everything felt slightly off to her. The lake house seemed somehow both a little smaller and a little bigger than she remembered it. The touches the Holloways had left behind—the tribal-pattern kitchen curtains instead of her great-grandmother Montclare's hand-tatted lace valances; the succulents in the window boxes instead of her mom's petunias and impatiens; and the beige-and-brown walls, which had always been a clean, bright white—were off-putting and disorienting. In addition, she was trying to see it through Charlene's appraising eyes—*would it be a good property for the realtor to take on?*—as well as Melanie's. *I would've taken down that hideous antler chandelier, Kelsey could practically hear Melanie grumbling. At the very least, you could've used some glass cleaner on those windows. They're filthy!*

Upstairs, the Holloways had done little to modify the three bedrooms, the two bathrooms, and the turret reading room, and Charlene became a little more vocal. She delighted in the built-in bookcases and the window seats in the turret room and adored the art deco subway tile and claw-foot tub in the master bath. But most of all, she loved the spectacular views of Lake Indigo that almost every upstairs window afforded.

In the bedroom that had been Melanie's, and their mother's when she was a girl—Charlene asked about the furniture. "Would you be selling the house partially furnished?" She tipped her legal pad toward the antique bedroom set and the colorful tapestry hanging on the wall. "Some of these pieces might be quite valuable. You

should probably have them appraised. But if the right buyer for the house came along, you might consider including them. For a price.”

Though relieved by Charlene’s increasing enthusiasm, Kelsey was also starting to feel a little possessive and a teensy bit resentful. She studied the tapestry, which she’d always coveted. Her bedroom had had no tapestry and only the slimmest view of the lake—as well as the slimmest chance of a night breeze.

The wall hanging was a rich blue and depicted an elaborately branching tree with multicolored flowers budding all over it and had a garland of similar flowers as a border. Four different birds were roosted on opposing limbs, some with golden plumage, others with crimson breasts. Melanie had once said it was supposed to be the Garden of Eden, but Kelsey had doubted her sister’s knowledge. *If it’s the Garden of Eden, where are Adam and Eve? Where is the apple? The serpent?*

“No, we’d be keeping the furniture,” she heard herself saying to Charlene. “We want to keep at least that much in the family.” She glanced down at her feet then and noticed a clump of black dog hair stuck to the shin of her jeans. She attempted to brush it off without Charlene noticing, but Kelsey suspected the immaculately put-together woman had observed it from the get-go.

The realtor recorded something on her legal pad. “Well, it looks to me like this house has some really good bones and one-of-a-kind features. And though it hasn’t been updated, that might be appealing to some buyers who want to do their own renovations or prefer an authentic Victorian. At this point, I would say all it would need to show well is a really thorough top-to-bottom cleaning.”

Kelsey felt her cheeks flush at the implication—she hadn’t bothered to clean the place *at all*.

“Let’s check out the basement, the exterior, and the lake access then sit down for a chat, shall we? Fingers crossed we don’t run into any major problems out there.”



“SO HOW DID THINGS GO with Charlotte today?” Melanie asked that night.

“Who?” Kelsey replied, intentionally misunderstanding her. She tucked her phone between her chin and shoulder as she scrutinized the contents of her nearly empty refrigerator. Since she’d left the lake house, she’d been craving raspberries, her mom’s zucchini bread, and freshly squeezed lemonade. But no raspberries, zucchini, or lemons popped into view, let alone anything that bore a semblance to dinner. She’d have to squeeze in a trip to the grocery store soon, or she’d be sharing kibble with her schnauzer mix, Sprocket.

“The realtor, Charlotte Hallbeck?”

“Oh, you mean *Charlene*.” Kelsey bit her lip as she shut the fridge.

A few hours ago, she would’ve given almost anything to have Melanie by her side as the realtor had dropped the unexpected bombshell on her. Her older sister wasn’t fazed by anything. But now that she had Melanie on the phone, Kelsey was worried she would somehow think the bad news was Kelsey’s fault. Because Melanie was so capable, she tended to expect everyone else to operate on the same superhuman level as her. She thought strings could always be pulled or old-fashioned elbow grease could be applied to any conundrum. Other people tended to let her down, especially Kelsey, it seemed.

“Yes, Charlene. Whoever.” Melanie sighed in a huffy, teenage way, probably rolling her eyes on the other end of the line. They always seemed to bring out the immaturity in each other. It came with the territory of being sisters who were only two years apart, Kelsey guessed.

“So how did it go?” Melanie pressed. “Is she interested in representing us? Does she think the house is market ready?”

“Well...” She flopped onto the couch, and Sprocket jumped up and sat beside her in solidarity. “She said the house has ‘really good

bones,' and she was impressed with all of the original features and lake views. She said that since that article you were telling me about came out, Lake Indigo homes have been in high demand, and there aren't many of them for sale since it's such an old family community."

"That's great," Melanie said excitedly.

Sprocket dropped his head onto her knee, and Kelsey scratched his ears. She was about to employ the old "good news-bad news sandwich," as Beth, her boss, called it. "But then we went into the basement," she started, which sounded like a good opening for a horror story. "And apparently some serious water damage occurred—some flooding, probably—while the Holloways were living there, and they appear to have done nothing about it. I'm not sure why—maybe they didn't go in the basement much and didn't know it was there, or maybe they thought it would be too costly to fix. But whatever the case, Charlene says the damage is really bad. Rotted plaster and lathes and a terrible mold problem, and what's worse, the source of the flooding was never properly remedied—no new sump pump or drain tiles or whatever—so it could happen again."

Melanie was quiet for a few seconds. "Well, that sucks, but it's hardly a deal breaker, right? I'm sure a lot of old lake homes have atrocious basements and water damage. But if a buyer loved the house, they could just fix that before moving in, right? No big deal."

Kelsey nodded, reassured that she and her sister had shared the same faulty line of reasoning. "Not quite, I guess. According to Charlene, most lakefront-property buyers are going to be really put off by that amount of work, no matter how much they adore the place. Or they'll write us a really lowball offer, factoring in the costs. Either way, she says it would never pass inspection because it's a health risk. So we'd probably be ordered to do the repairs, regardless."

Again, Melanie was quiet, and Kelsey thought she could hear her sister's husband, Ben, talking in the background. "I'm on the phone,"

Melanie hissed, her hand not quite blocking out the speaker. “*Yes*. My sister. *No*.” She sounded short-tempered and cross, which was not how Kelsey was used to hearing lovebirds Melanie and Ben speak to one another. Melanie uncovered the mouthpiece. “So how much are the repairs?”

“Charlene wasn’t sure. She recommended a guy who could come out and do an estimate for us. But she implied it would be *a lot* of money.”

At another long pause, a breathy one, Kelsey wondered if her older sister was crying. But that was a stupid thought. *Crying about mold and a basement renovation?* Their dad had called her Melanie the General, joking that at the first sign of the apocalypse, he wanted his older daughter in his camp.

“If we’re smart about this sale, we can recoup our initial investment, I’m sure,” Melanie said without a hint of breathiness or tears, and Kelsey felt reassured. The problem of the basement had seemed so formidable, so out of her depth, that transferring it to Melanie’s shoulders made Kelsey instantly feel ten pounds lighter. “We just need to factor in Charlene’s commission and the other fees and hope we get our asking price. So have you called Charlene’s guy? When can he come out?”

Kelsey stood up from the couch and stretched her lower back. “I haven’t called him yet,” she admitted.

“You could probably still catch him tonight. These contractor types tend to answer their cell phones at all hours. Maybe he still has an opening for tomorrow.”

“I work tomorrow, Melanie.”

“All day?”

“All day.” Sometimes Kelsey got the sense that her sister thought her job was no more than a glorified dog-walker position for a couple of hours a day, or whenever she felt like it, perhaps.

“Well, Saturday, then.”

“I work Saturday too.”

“But you can still pick me up from the airport, right? My flight’s supposed to land at three forty-five.”

“Yes, of course.” Kelsey tried to sound indignant, but she had completely forgotten Melanie’s flight was coming in Saturday afternoon. She would have to ask to leave a few hours early again and maybe see if Josh could cover for her. If she kept that up, Beth was bound to get annoyed. The approaching summer, with families going away on vacation, was their busiest time of year, and everyone needed to pitch in. “Delta, right?”

“American Airlines, actually,” Melanie corrected her. “They were the only ones with a direct flight from Cleveland. Well, I would call him, anyway, and see if you can set something up for Monday. *I’ll* meet him then. We need to get the ball rolling here. It’s almost the end of May already, and the sooner we can get this house on the market, the better. I doubt a lot of buyers are looking for a lake house in the fall.”

“Fine. I’ll call him.” Kelsey hated how defensive she sounded. She had gone out of her way to meet with the realtor, and it still wasn’t enough for Melanie. She made Kelsey feel like a juvenile delinquent shirking her duties or a track runner who could never quite gain the lead.

“Great. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” She wanted to get off the phone so she could order a pizza or some other takeout for dinner. Her stomach was audibly growling. Sprocket cocked his head at the sound. Then she’d have to try to get ahold of that stupid mold mitigation guy. Kelsey didn’t even know what she was supposed to say to him. She didn’t want to come across like a dumb blonde who didn’t know the first thing about fixing the aftermath of a basement flood—even though she *was* a blonde who didn’t know the first thing about fixing the aftermath of a basement flood.

“You know I’m really looking forward to seeing you,” Melanie said. “Spending some quality time together.” Her voice had taken on that hopeful, maternal quality that Kelsey sometimes found comforting and sweet and other times downright patronizing.

“Me too,” she lied, bending down to rest her forehead against the back of the sofa. Her sister was still in a different time zone, and Kelsey already had a headache.