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NICHOLAS SPARKS

The WISH



SPHERE

SPHERE

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'TIS THE SEASON



Manhattan
December 2019

Whenever December rolled around, Manhattan transformed itself into a city that Maggie didn't always recognize. Tourists thronged the shows on Broadway and flooded the sidewalks outside department stores in Midtown, forming a slow-moving river of pedestrians. Boutiques and restaurants overflowed with shoppers clutching bags, Christmas music filtered from hidden speakers, and hotel lobbies sparkled with decorations. The Rockefeller Center Christmas tree was lit by multicolored bulbs and the flashes of thousands of iPhones, and crosstown traffic, never speedy in the best of times, became so jammed up that it was often quicker to walk than to take a cab. But walking had its own challenges; frigid wind frequently whipped between the buildings, necessitating thermal underwear, plentiful fleece, and jackets zipped to the collars.

Maggie Dawes, who considered herself a free spirit consumed by wanderlust, had always loved the *idea* of a New York Christmas, albeit in a *look how pretty* postcard kind of way. In reality, like a lot of New Yorkers, she did her best

to avoid Midtown during the holidays. Instead, she either stayed close to her home in Chelsea or, more commonly, fled to warmer climes. As a travel photographer, she sometimes thought of herself less as a New Yorker and more as a nomad who happened to have a permanent address in the city. In a notebook she kept in the drawer of her nightstand, she'd compiled a list of more than a hundred places she still wanted to visit, some of them so obscure or remote that even reaching them would be a challenge.

Since dropping out of college twenty years ago, she'd been adding to the list, noting places that sparked her imagination for one reason or another even as her travels enabled her to cross out other destinations. With a camera slung over her shoulder, she'd visited every continent, more than eighty-two countries, and forty-three of the fifty states. She'd taken tens of thousands of photographs, from images of wildlife in the Okavango Delta in Botswana to shots of the aurora borealis in Lapland. There were photographs taken as she'd hiked the Inca Trail, others from the Skeleton Coast in Namibia, still more among the ruins of Timbuktu. Twelve years ago, she'd learned to scuba dive and had spent ten days documenting marine life in Raja Ampat; four years ago, she'd hiked to the famous Paro Taktsang, or Tiger's Nest, a Buddhist monastery built into a cliffside in Bhutan with panoramic views of the Himalayas.

Others had often marveled at her adventures, but she'd learned that *adventure* is a word with many connotations, not all of them good. A case in point was the adventure she was on now—that's how she sometimes described it to her Instagram followers and YouTube subscribers—the one that kept her largely confined to either her gallery or her small two-bedroom apartment on West Nineteenth Street, instead

of venturing to more exotic locales. The same adventure that led to occasional thoughts of suicide.

Oh, she'd never actually do it. The thought terrified her, and she'd admitted as much in one of the many videos she'd created for YouTube. For almost ten years, her videos had been rather ordinary as far as photographers' posts went; she'd described her decision-making process when taking pictures, offered numerous Photoshop tutorials, and reviewed new cameras and their many accessories, usually posting two or three times a month. Those YouTube videos, in addition to her Instagram posts and Facebook pages and the blog on her website, had always been popular with photography geeks while also burnishing her professional reputation.

Three and a half years ago, however, on a whim, she'd posted a video to her YouTube channel about her recent diagnosis, one that had nothing to do with photography. The video, a rambling, unfiltered description of the fear and uncertainty she suddenly felt when she learned she had stage IV melanoma, probably shouldn't have been posted at all. But what she imagined would be a lonely voice echoing back at her from the empty reaches of the internet somehow managed to catch the attention of others. She wasn't sure why or how, but that video—of all the ones she'd ever posted—had attracted a trickle, then a steady stream, and finally a deluge of views, comments, questions, and upvotes from people who had never heard of her or her work as a photographer. Feeling as though she had to respond to those who'd been moved by her plight, she'd posted another video regarding her diagnosis that became even more popular. Since then, about once a month, she'd continued to post videos in the same vein, mainly because she felt she had no choice but to continue. In the past three years, she'd

discussed various treatments and how they'd made her feel, sometimes even displaying the scars from her surgery. She talked about radiation burns and nausea and hair loss and wondered openly about the meaning of life. She mused about her fear of dying and speculated on the possibility of an afterlife. They were serious issues, but maybe to stave off her own depression when discussing such a miserable subject, she did her best to keep the videos as light in tone as possible. She supposed that was part of the reason for their popularity, but who really knew? The only certainty was that somehow, almost reluctantly, she'd become the star of her own reality web series, one that had begun with hope but had slowly narrowed to focus on a single inevitable ending.

And—perhaps unsurprisingly—as the grand finale approached, her viewership exploded even more.



In the first *Cancer Video*—that's how she mentally referred to them, as opposed to her *Real Videos*—she stared into the camera with a wry grin and said, "Right off the bat, I hated it. Then it started growing on me."

She knew it was probably in poor taste to joke about her illness, but the whole thing struck her as absurd. *Why her?* At the time, she was thirty-six years old, she exercised regularly, and she followed a reasonably healthy diet. There was no history of cancer in her family. She'd grown up in cloudy Seattle and lived in Manhattan, which ruled out a history of sunbathing. She'd never visited a tanning salon. None of it made any sense, but that was the point about cancer, wasn't it? Cancer didn't discriminate; it just happened to

the unlucky, and after a while she'd finally accepted that the better question was really *Why NOT her?* She wasn't special; to that point in her life, there'd been times when she considered herself interesting or intelligent or even pretty, but the word *special* had never entered her mind.

When she'd received her diagnosis, she would have sworn she was in perfect health. A month earlier, she'd visited Vaadhoo Island in the Maldives, on a photo shoot for Condé Nast. She'd traveled there hoping to capture the bioluminescence just offshore that made ocean waves glow like starlight, as if lit from within. Sea plankton was responsible for the spectral, spectacular light, and she'd allotted extra time to shoot some images for personal use, perhaps for eventual sale in her gallery.

She was scouting a mostly empty beach near her hotel in midafternoon with a camera in hand, trying to envision the shot she aimed to take once evening descended. She wanted to capture a hint of the shoreline—with perhaps a boulder in the foreground—the sky, and, of course, the waves just as they were cresting. She'd spent more than an hour taking different shots from different angles and various locations on the beach when a couple strolled past her, holding hands. Lost in her work, she barely registered their presence.

A few moments later, while scanning the line where the waves were breaking offshore through her viewfinder, she heard the woman's voice behind her. She spoke English, but with a distinctly German accent.

"Excuse me," the woman said. "I can see that you're busy and I am sorry to bother you."

Maggie lowered her camera. "Yes?"

"It's a little difficult to say this, but have you had that dark spot on the back of your shoulder examined?"

Maggie frowned, trying without success to see the spot between the straps of her bathing suit that the woman was referring to. "I didn't know I had a dark spot there…" She squinted at the woman in confusion. "And why are you so interested?"

The woman, fiftyish with short gray hair, nodded. "I should perhaps introduce myself. I'm Dr. Sabine Kessel," she said. "I'm a dermatologist in Munich. The spot looks abnormal."

Maggie blinked. "You mean like cancer?"

"I don't know," the woman said, her expression cautious. "But if I were you, I'd have it examined as soon as possible. It could be nothing, of course."

Or it could be serious, Dr. Kessel didn't have to add.

Though it took five nights to achieve what she wanted from the shoot, Maggie was pleased with the raw files. She would work on them extensively in digital postproduction—the real art in photography these days almost always emerged in post—but she already knew the results would be spectacular. In the meantime, and though she tried not to worry about it, she also made an appointment with Dr. Snehal Khatri, a dermatologist on the Upper East Side, four days after her return to the city.

The spot was biopsied in early July 2016, and afterward she was sent for additional testing. She had MRI and PET scans done at Memorial Sloan Kettering hospital later that same month. After the results had come in, Dr. Khatri sat her down in the examination room, where he quietly and seriously informed her that she had stage IV melanoma. Later that day, she was introduced to an oncologist named Leslie Brodigan, who would oversee her care. In the aftermath of these meetings, Maggie did her own research on

the internet. Though Dr. Brodigan had told her that general statistics meant very little when it came to predicting outcomes for a particular individual, Maggie couldn't help fixating on the numbers. The survival rate after five years for those diagnosed with stage IV melanoma, she learned, was less than fifteen percent.

In stunned disbelief, Maggie made her first *Cancer Video* the following day.



At her second appointment, Dr. Brodigan—a vibrant blue-eyed blonde who seemed to personify the term *good health*—explained everything about her condition again, since the whole process had been so overwhelming that Maggie could remember only bits and pieces of their first meeting. Essentially, having stage IV melanoma meant that the cancer had metastasized not only to distant lymph nodes but to some of her other organs as well, in her case both her liver and her stomach. The MRI and PET scans had found the cancerous growths invading healthier parts of her body like an army of ants devouring food laid out on a picnic table.

Long story short: The next three and a half years were a blur of treatment and recovery, with occasional flashes of hope illuminating dark tunnels of anxiety. She had surgery to remove her infected lymph nodes and the metastases in her liver and stomach. The surgery was followed by radiation, which was excruciating, turning her skin black in places and leaving behind nasty scars to go with the ones she'd collected in the operating room. She also learned there were different kinds of melanoma, even for those with stage IV,

which led to different treatment options. In her case, that meant immunotherapy, which seemed to work for a couple of years, until it finally didn't. Then, last April, she had begun chemotherapy and continued it for months, hating how it made her feel but convinced that it had to be effective. How could it not work, she wondered, since it seemed to be killing every other part of her? These days, she barely recognized herself in the mirror. Food nearly always tasted too bitter or too salty, which made it hard to eat, and she'd dropped more than twenty pounds from her already petite frame. Her oval-shaped brown eyes now appeared sunken and oversize above her protruding cheekbones, her face more like skin stretched over a skull. She was always cold and wore thick sweaters even in her overheated apartment. She'd lost all her dark brown hair, only to see it slowly grow back in patches, lighter in color and as fine as a baby's; she'd taken to wearing a kerchief or hat almost all the time. Her neck had become so spindly and fragile-looking that she wrapped it in a scarf to avoid glimpsing it in mirrors.

A little more than a month ago, at the beginning of November, she had undergone another round of CAT and PET scans, and in December, she'd met again with Dr. Brodigan. The doctor had been more subdued than usual, although her eyes brimmed with compassion. There, she'd told Maggie that while more than three years of treatment had slowed the disease at times, its progression had never quite stopped. When Maggie asked what other treatment options were available, the doctor had gently turned her attention to the quality of the life Maggie had remaining.

It was her way of telling Maggie that she was going to die.



Maggie had opened the gallery more than nine years ago with another artist named Trinity, who used most of the space for his giant and eclectic sculptures. Trinity's real name was Fred Marshburn and they'd met at an opening for another artist's show, the kind of event Maggie seldom attended. Trinity was already wildly successful at that point and had long toyed with the idea of opening his own gallery; he didn't, however, have any desire to actually manage the gallery, nor did he want to spend any time there. Because they'd hit it off, and because her photographs in no way competed with his work, they'd eventually made a deal. In exchange for her managing the business of the gallery, she would earn a modest salary and could also display a selection of her own work. At the time, it was more about prestige—she could tell people she had her own gallery!—than it was about the money Trinity paid her. In the first year or two, she sold only a few prints of her own.

Because Maggie was still traveling extensively at the time—more than a hundred days a year, on average—the actual day-to-day running of the gallery fell to a woman named Luanne Sommers. When Maggie hired her, Luanne was a wealthy divorcée with grown children. Her experience was limited to an amateur's passion for collecting and an expert's eye for finding bargains at Neiman Marcus. On the plus side, she dressed well; she was responsible, conscientious, and willing to learn; and she had no qualms about the fact that she'd earn little more than minimum wage. As she put it, her alimony was enough to allow her to retire in

luxury, but there were only so many lunches a woman could do without going crazy.

Luanne turned out to be a natural at sales. In the beginning, Maggie had briefed her on the technical elements of all of her prints, as well as the story behind each particular shot, which was often as interesting to buyers as the image itself. Trinity's sculptures, which utilized assorted materials—canvas, metal, plastic, glue, and paint, in addition to items collected from junkyards, deer antlers, pickle jars, and cans—were original enough to inspire spirited discussion. He was already an established critical darling, and his pieces moved regularly despite their staggering prices. But the gallery didn't advertise or feature many guest artists, so the work itself was fairly low-key. There were days when only a handful of people entered the premises, and they were able to close the gallery the last three weeks of the year. It was—for Maggie, Trinity, and Luanne—an arrangement that worked well for a long time.

But two things happened to change all that. First, Maggie's *Cancer Videos* lured new people to the gallery. Not the usual seasoned contemporary art or photography enthusiasts, but tourists from places like Tennessee and Ohio, people who'd begun to follow Maggie on Instagram and YouTube because they felt a connection to her. Some of them had become actual fans of her photography, but a lot of them simply wanted to meet her or buy one of her signed prints as a keepsake. The phone began to ring off the hook with orders from random locations around the country, and additional orders poured in through the website. It was all Maggie and Luanne could do to keep up, and last year, they'd made the decision to keep the gallery open through the holidays because the crowds kept coming. Then Maggie learned she'd soon have

to begin chemotherapy, which meant she wouldn't be able to help at the gallery for months. It was clear that they needed to hire an additional employee, and when Maggie broached the subject with Trinity, he agreed on the spot. As fate would have it, the following day, a young man named Mark Price walked into the gallery and asked to speak with her, an event that at the time struck her as almost too good to be true.



Mark Price was a recent college graduate who could have passed for a high schooler. Maggie initially assumed he was another "cancer groupie," but she was only partially correct. He admitted he had become familiar with her work through her popular online presence—he was especially fond of her videos, he volunteered—but he'd also come in with a résumé. He explained that he was looking for employment and the idea of working in the art world strongly appealed to him. Art and photography, he'd added, allowed for the communication of new ideas, often in ways that words did not.

Despite her misgivings about hiring a fan, Maggie sat down with him the same day, and it became clear that he'd done his homework. He knew a great deal about Trinity and his work; he mentioned a specific installation that was currently on display at MoMA and another at the New School, drawing comparisons to some of Robert Rauschenberg's later work in a knowledgeable but unpretentious way. Though it didn't surprise her, he also had a deep and impressive familiarity with her own body of work. And yet, though he'd answered all her questions satisfactorily, she remained a little uneasy; she couldn't quite figure out whether he was serious

about his desire to work in a gallery, or just another person who wanted to witness her own tragedy up close.

As their meeting drew to a close, she told him that they weren't currently interviewing—though technically true, it was only a matter of time—to which he responded by asking politely whether she would nonetheless be willing to receive his résumé. It was, she thought in retrospect, the way he'd phrased his request that charmed her. *"Would you nonetheless be willing to receive my résumé?"* It struck her as old-fashioned and courtly and she couldn't help smiling as she held out her hand for the document.

Later that same week, Maggie had uploaded a job posting to some art-related industry sites and called several contacts at other galleries, letting them know she was hiring. Résumés and inquiries flooded the inbox and Luanne met with six candidates while Maggie, either nauseated or vomiting from her first infusion, recuperated at home. Only one candidate made it past the first interview, but when she didn't show up for the second, she was scratched as well. Frustrated, Luanne visited Maggie at home to update her. Maggie hadn't left her apartment in days and was lying on the couch, sipping the fruit-and-ice-cream smoothie Luanne had brought with her, one of the few things Maggie could still force down.

"It's hard to believe we can't find anyone qualified to work in the gallery." Maggie shook her head.

"They have no experience and don't know anything about art," Luanne huffed.

Neither did you, Maggie could have pointed out, but she remained silent, fully aware that Luanne had turned out to be a treasure as both a friend and an employee, the luckiest of breaks. Warm and unflappable, Luanne had long ago ceased being a mere colleague.

"I trust your judgment, Luanne. We'll just start over."

"Are you sure there wasn't anyone else in the pool worth meeting?" Luanne's tone was plaintive.

For whatever reason, Maggie's mind flashed to Mark Price, inquiring ever so politely whether she would be willing to receive his résumé.

"You're smiling," Luanne said.

"No, I'm not."

"I know a smile when I see one. What were you just thinking about?"

Maggie took another sip of the smoothie, buying time, until finally deciding to come out with it. "A young man came in before we listed the position," she admitted, before proceeding to describe the meeting. "I'm still not sure about him," she concluded, "but his résumé is probably somewhere on my desk in the office." She shrugged. "I don't know if he's even available at this point."

When Luanne probed the origins of Mark's interest in the job, she frowned. Luanne understood the makeup of the gallery crowds better than anyone and recognized that people who'd seen Maggie's videos often viewed her as their confidante, someone who would both empathize and sympathize. They frequently longed to share their own stories, the suffering they had endured, and the losses. And as much as Maggie wanted to offer them comfort, it was often too much to support them emotionally when she felt like she was barely holding it together herself. Luanne did her best to shield her from the more aggressive contact seekers.

"Let me review his résumé and I'll speak with him," she said. "After that, we'll take it one step at a time."

Luanne contacted Mark the following week. Their first conversation led to two more formal interviews, including

one with Trinity. When she later spoke with Maggie, her praise for Mark was effusive, but Maggie insisted on meeting with him again, just to be certain. It took four more days before she had the energy to make it to the gallery. Mark Price was on time, dressed in a suit and holding a slim binder as he stepped into her office. She felt sick as a dog as she studied his résumé, noting that he was from Elkhart, Indiana, and when she saw his graduation date from Northwestern, she did a quick mental calculation.

"You're twenty-two years old?"

"Yes."

With his neatly parted hair, blue eyes, and baby face, he looked like a well-groomed teenager, ready for the prom. "And you majored in theology?"

"I did," he said.

"Why theology?"

"My father is a pastor," he said. "Eventually I want to get a master's in divinity as well. To follow in his footsteps."

As soon as he said it, she realized it didn't surprise her in the slightest. "Then why the interest in art if you intend to go into the ministry?"

He brought his fingertips together, as though wanting to choose his words with care. "I've always believed that art and faith have much in common. Both allow people to explore the subtlety of their own emotions and to find their own answers as to what the art represents to them. Your work and Trinity's always make me *think*, and more importantly, they make me *feel* in ways that often lead to a sense of wonder. Just like faith."

It was a good answer, but she nonetheless suspected that Mark was leaving something out. Setting those thoughts aside, Maggie continued with the interview, asking more

standard questions about his work history and knowledge of photography and contemporary sculpture before finally leaning back in her chair.

"Why do you think you'd be a good fit for the gallery?"

He seemed unfazed by her grilling. "For starters, having met Ms. Sommers, I have the sense that she and I would work well together. With her permission, I spent some time in the gallery after our interview, and after a bit of additional research, I put together some of my thoughts about the work currently on display." He leaned forward, offering her the binder. "I've left a copy with Ms. Sommers as well."

Maggie thumbed through the binder. Stopping on a random page, she perused a couple of paragraphs he'd written concerning a photograph she'd taken in Djibouti in 2011, when the country was mired in one of the worst droughts in decades. In the foreground were the skeletal remains of a camel; in the background were three families dressed in brilliantly colorful garb, all of whom were laughing and smiling as they walked along a dried riverbed. Gathering storm clouds clotted a sky that had turned orange and red in the setting sun, a vivid contrast to the bleached bones of the skeleton and deep desiccation cracks that illustrated the lack of any recent rainfall.

Mark's comments showed a surprising technical sophistication and a mature appreciation for her artistic intentions; she'd been trying to show an improbable joy amid despair, to illustrate man's insignificance when faced with the capricious power of nature, and Mark had articulated those intentions well.

She closed the binder, knowing there was no need to look through the rest of it.

"You clearly prepared, and considering your age, you

seem surprisingly well qualified. But those aren't my major concerns. I still want to know the real reason you want to work here."

His brow furrowed. "I think your photographs are extraordinary. As are Trinity's sculptures."

"Is that all?"

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"I'll be frank," Maggie said, exhaling. She was too tired and too sick, with too little time, to be anything but frank. "You brought in your résumé before we'd even posted that we were hiring, and you admitted you're a fan of my videos. Those things concern me because sometimes people who have watched my videos about my illness feel a false sense of intimacy with me. I can't have someone like that working here." She raised her eyebrows. "Are you imagining that we'll become friends and have deep and meaningful conversations? Because that's unlikely. I doubt I'll be spending much time at the gallery."

"I understand," he said, pleasant and unflustered. "If I were you, I'd likely feel the same way. All I can do is assure you that my intention is to be an excellent employee."

She didn't make her decision right away. Instead, she slept on it and conferred with Luanne and Trinity the following day. Despite Maggie's continuing uncertainty, they wanted to take a chance on him, and Mark started at the beginning of May.

Fortunately, since then, Mark had given Maggie no reason to second-guess herself. With chemotherapy continuing to wipe her out all summer, she'd spent only a few hours a week at the gallery, but in the rare moments when she was there, Mark had been the consummate professional. He greeted her cheerfully, smiled easily, and always referred to her as Ms.

Dawes. He was never late for work, had never called in sick, and seldom disturbed her, knocking gently on her office door only when a bona fide buyer or collector had specifically asked for her and he deemed it important enough to intrude. Perhaps because he'd taken the interview to heart, he never referred to her recent video posts, nor did he ask her personal questions. Occasionally he expressed the hope that she was feeling well, but that was okay with her, because he didn't actually inquire about it, leaving it up to her to say anything more if she wanted to.

Moreover and most importantly, he excelled at the job. He treated customers with courtesy and charm, moved the cancer groupies gracefully toward the exits, and excelled at sales, probably because he wasn't pushy in the slightest. He answered the phone, usually by the second or third ring, and carefully wrapped the prints before shipping those ordered by mail. Usually, to complete all of his tasks, he would stay for an hour or more after the gallery had closed its doors. Luanne was so impressed by him that she had no worries about her monthlong holiday in Maui with her daughter and grandchildren in December, a trip she'd taken almost every year since she's started at the gallery.

None of that, Maggie realized, had been much of a surprise. What did surprise her was that in the last few months, her reservations about Mark had slowly given way to a growing sense of trust.



Maggie couldn't pinpoint exactly when that had happened. Like apartment neighbors regularly riding the same elevator,

their cordial relationship settled into a comfortable familiarity. In September, once she began to feel better after her last infusion, she had started spending more time at work. Simple greetings with Mark gave way to small talk before segueing to more personal subjects. Sometimes those conversations took place in the small break room down the hall from her office, other times in the gallery when it was devoid of visitors. Mostly they occurred after the doors had been locked, while the three of them processed and packaged the prints that had been ordered by phone or through the website. Usually Luanne dominated the conversation, chattering about her ex-husband's poor dating choices or her kids and grandkids. Maggie and Mark were content to listen—Luanne *was* entertaining. Every now and then, one of them would roll their eyes at something Luanne had said (*"I'm sure my ex is paying for all the plastic surgery on that tacky gold-digger"*) and the other would smile slightly, a private communication meant just for the two of them.

Sometimes, though, Luanne had to leave immediately after closing. Mark and Maggie would work together alone, and little by little, Maggie came to learn quite a bit about Mark, even as he refrained from asking personal questions of her. He told her about his parents and his childhood, which often struck her as something akin to an upbringing imagined by Norman Rockwell, complete with bedtime stories, hockey and baseball games, and his parents' attendance at every school event he could remember. He also spoke frequently about his girlfriend, Abigail, who'd just started working toward a master's degree in economics at the University of Chicago. Like Mark, she'd grown up in a small town—in her case, Waterloo, Iowa—and he had countless photographs of

the two of them on his iPhone. The photos showed a pretty young redhead with a sunny, midwestern affect, and Mark mentioned that he planned to propose after she received her degree. Maggie could remember laughing when he said it. Why get married when you're still so young? she'd asked. Why not wait a few years?

"Because," Mark had answered, "she's the one with whom I'd like to spend the rest of my life."

"How can you know that?"

"Sometimes you just know."

The more she learned about him, the more she came to believe that his parents had been as lucky with him as he'd been with them. He was an exemplary young man, responsible and kind—disproving the stereotype that millennials were lazy and entitled. Still, her growing fondness for him sometimes surprised her, if only because they shared so little in common. Her early life had been . . . *unusual*, at least for a time, and her relationship with her parents had often been strained. She herself had been nothing like Mark. While he'd been studious and had graduated with highest honors from a top university, she'd generally struggled in school and had finished less than three semesters at a community college. At his age, she had been content to live in the moment and figure things out on the fly, whereas he seemed to have a plan for everything. Had she met him when she was younger, she suspected that she wouldn't have given him the time of day; when she'd been in her twenties, she'd had a habit of choosing exactly the wrong kinds of men.

Nonetheless, he sometimes reminded her of someone she'd known long ago, someone who had once meant everything to her.



By the time Thanksgiving rolled around, Maggie considered Mark a definite member of the gallery family. She wasn't as close to him as she was to either Luanne or Trinity—they'd spent years together, after all—but he'd become something akin to a friend nonetheless, and two days after that holiday, all four of them had stayed late in the gallery after closing. It was Saturday night, and because Luanne planned to fly to Maui the following morning while Trinity left for the Caribbean, they opened a bottle of wine to go with the cheese and fruit tray Luanne had ordered. Maggie accepted a glass, even though she couldn't fathom the thought of either drinking or eating anything.

They toasted the gallery—it had been far and away their most successful year ever—and settled into easy conversation for another hour. Toward the end, Luanne offered Maggie a card.

"There's a gift inside," Luanne said. "Open it after I'm gone."

"I haven't had a chance to get yours yet."

"That's fine," Luanne said. "Seeing you back to your old self these past few months has been more than enough gift for me. Just make sure you open it well before Christmas, though."

After Maggie assured her that she would, Luanne stepped toward the platter and grabbed a couple of strawberries. A few feet away, Trinity was speaking to Mark. Because he visited the gallery even less frequently than Maggie did, she heard Trinity asking the same kinds of personal questions that she had over the last few months.

"I didn't know you played hockey," Trinity offered. "I'm a huge Islanders fan, even if they haven't won the Stanley Cup in what seems like forever."

"It's a great sport. I played every year until I got to Northwestern."

"Don't they have a team?"

"I wasn't good enough to play at the collegiate level," Mark admitted. "Not that it seemed to matter to my parents. I don't think either of them ever missed a game."

"Will they come out to see you for Christmas?"

"No," Mark said. "My dad set up a tour of the Holy Land with a couple dozen members of our church for the holidays. Nazareth, Bethlehem, the whole works."

"And you didn't want to go?"

"It's their dream, not mine. Besides, I have to be here."

Maggie saw Trinity glance in her direction before he turned his attention back to Mark. He leaned in, whispering something, and though Maggie couldn't hear him, she knew exactly what Trinity had said, because he'd expressed his own concerns to her a few minutes earlier.

"Make sure you keep an eye on Maggie while Luanne and I are gone. We're both a little worried about her."

In response, Mark simply nodded.



Trinity was more prescient than he probably realized, but then again, both Trinity and Luanne had known that Maggie had another appointment with Dr. Brodigan scheduled on December 10. And sure enough, at that appointment, Dr. Brodigan had urged Maggie to focus on her quality of life.

Now it was December 18. More than a week had passed since that awful day and Maggie still felt almost numb. Nor had she told anyone about her prognosis. Her parents had always believed that if they prayed hard enough, God would somehow heal her, and telling them the truth would take more energy than she could summon. Same thing in a different way with her sister; long story short, she didn't have the energy. Mark had texted a couple of times to check in on her, but saying anything about her situation via text struck her as absurd and she hadn't been ready to face anyone just yet. As for Luanne or even Trinity, she supposed she could call them, but what would be the point? Luanne deserved to enjoy the time she was spending with her own family without worrying about Maggie, and Trinity had his own life as well. Besides, there was nothing that either of them could really do.

Instead, dazed by her new reality, she'd spent much of the last eight days either in her apartment or on short, slow walks through her neighborhood. Sometimes she simply stared out the window, absently fondling the small pendant on the necklace she always wore; other times, she found herself people-watching. When she'd first moved to New York, she had been enthralled by the ceaseless activity around her, by seeing people rushing down into the subway or peering up into office towers at midnight with the knowledge that people were still at their desks. Following the hectic movements of pedestrians below her window brought back memories of her early adulthood in the city and the younger, healthier woman she once had been. It seemed like a lifetime had passed since then; it also felt as though the years had passed in the blink of an eye, and her inability to grasp that contradiction made her more self-reflective than usual. Time, she thought, would always be elusive.

She hadn't expected the miraculous—deep down, she'd always known a cure was out of the question—but wouldn't it have been great to learn that the chemotherapy had slowed the cancer a little and bought her an extra year or two? Or that some experimental treatment had become available? Would that have been too much to ask? To have been given one last intermission before the final act began?

That was the thing about battling cancer. The *waiting*. So much of the last few years had been about *waiting*. Waiting for the appointment with the doctor, waiting for treatment, waiting to feel better after the treatment, waiting to see whether the treatment had worked, waiting until she was well enough to try something new. Until her diagnosis, she'd viewed waiting for anything as an irritation, but waiting had slowly but surely become the defining reality of her life.

Even now, she suddenly thought. Here I am, *waiting* to die.

On the sidewalk, beyond the glass, she saw people bundled up in winter gear, their breath making clouds of steam as they hurried to unknown destinations; on the street, a long line of cars with glowing taillights crawled through narrow lanes lined by pretty brick town houses. They were people going about their daily lives, as though nothing out of the ordinary were happening. But nothing felt ordinary now, and she doubted things would ever feel ordinary again.

She envied them, these strangers she would never meet. They were living their lives without counting the days they had left, something she would never do again. And, as always, there were so many of them. She'd grown used to the fact that everything in the city was always crowded, no matter the time or the season, which added inconvenience to even the simplest things. If she needed ibuprofen from Duane Reade, there was a line to check out; if she was

in the mood to see a movie, there was a line at the box office, too. When it came time to cross the street, she was inevitably surrounded by others, people rushing and jostling at the curb.

But why the rush? She wondered about that now, just as she wondered about so many things. Like everyone, she had regrets, and now that time was running out, she couldn't help dwelling on them. There were actions she'd taken that she wished she could undo; there were opportunities she'd missed and now would never have the time to do. She'd spoken honestly about some of her regrets in one of her videos, admitting to feeling unreconciled to them, and no closer to answers than when she'd initially been diagnosed.

Nor had she cried since her last meeting with Dr. Brodigan. Instead, when she wasn't staring out the window or taking her walks, she'd focused on the mundane. She'd slept and slept—averaging fourteen hours a night—and had ordered Christmas gifts online. She'd recorded but hadn't yet posted another *Cancer Video* concerning her last appointment with Dr. Brodigan. She'd had smoothies delivered and tried to finish them as she sat in the living room. Recently she'd even tried to have lunch at Union Square Cafe. It had always been one of her favorite places to grab a delicious meal at the bar, but the visit ended up being a waste, since everything that crossed her lips still tasted wrong. Cancer, taking yet another joy from her life.

Now it was a week until Christmas, and with the afternoon sun beginning to wane, she felt the need to get out of the apartment. She dressed in multiple layers, assuming she would stroll aimlessly for a bit, but once she stepped outside, the mood to simply wander passed as quickly as it had come. Instead, she started toward the gallery. Though she wouldn't

do much work, it would be comforting to know that all was in order.

The gallery was several blocks away and she moved slowly, trying to avoid anyone who might bump into her. The wind was icy and by the time she pushed through the doors of the gallery a half hour before closing, she was shivering. It was unusually crowded; she'd expected that the holidays would diminish the number of visitors, but clearly she'd been wrong about that. Luckily, Mark seemed to have things under control.

As always when she entered, heads turned in her direction and she noted dawning looks of recognition on some faces. *Sorry. Not today, folks*, she suddenly thought, offering a quick wave before hurrying to her office. She shut the door behind her. Inside, there was a desk and an office chair, and one of the walls featured built-in bookcases piled high with photography books and keepsakes from her far-flung travels. Across from the desk was a small gray love seat, just big enough to curl up on if she needed to lie down. In the corner stood an ornately carved rocker with flowered cushions that Luanne had brought from her country house, lending a touch of warmth to the modern office.

After piling her gloves, hat, and jacket on the desk, Maggie readjusted her kerchief and collapsed into her office chair. Turning on the computer, she automatically checked the weekly sales figures, noting the spike in volume, but realized she wasn't in the mood to study the numbers in detail. Instead, she opened another folder and began clicking through her favorite photos, finally pausing at a series of images she'd taken in Ulan Bator, Mongolia, last January. At the time she'd had no idea it would be the last international trip she would ever take. The temperature had been well below zero

the entire time she was there, with biting winds that could freeze exposed skin in less than a minute; it had been an effort to keep her camera working because the components grew finicky in temperatures that low. She could remember repeatedly tucking the camera inside her jacket to warm it against her body, but the photographs were so important to her, she'd braved the elements for almost two hours.

She'd wanted to find ways to document the poisonous levels of air pollution and its visible effects on the population. In a city of a million and a half people, nearly every home and business burned coal throughout the winter, darkening the sky even in brightest daylight. It was a health crisis as well as an environmental one, and she'd wanted her images to spur people to action. She'd logged countless photographs of children covered in grime as a result of stepping outside to play. She'd caught an amazing black-and-white image of filthy cloth that had been used as drapery for an open window, dramatizing what was happening inside otherwise healthy lungs. She'd also sought out a stark panorama of the city and finally nailed the image she wanted: a brilliant blue sky that suddenly, *immediately* gave way to a pale, almost sickly yellow haze, as though God himself had drawn a perfectly straight line, dividing the sky in two. The effect was utterly arresting, especially after the hours she'd spent refining it in post.

As she stared at the image in the solace of her office, she knew she would never be able to do something like that again. She would likely never travel for work again; she might never even leave Manhattan, unless she gave in to her parents and returned to Seattle. Nor had anything in Mongolia changed. In addition to the photo essay that she'd contributed to the *New Yorker*, a number of media outlets, including *Scientific American* and the *Atlantic*, had also tried

to raise awareness regarding the dangerous levels of pollution in Ulan Bator, but the air, if anything, had grown even worse in the last eleven months. It was, she thought, yet another failure in her life, just like her battle with cancer.

The thoughts shouldn't have been connected, but in that instant, they were, and all at once she felt tears begin to form. She was dying, she was actually *dying*, and it dawned on her suddenly that she was about to experience her very last Christmas.

What should she be doing with these last precious weeks? And what did *quality of life* even mean when it came to the actuality of day-to-day living? She was already sleeping more than ever, but did quality mean getting more sleep to feel better, or less sleep so the days seemed longer? And what about her routines? Should she bother making an appointment to have her teeth cleaned? Should she pay off the minimum balance on her credit cards or go on a spending spree? Because what did it matter? What did anything really matter?

A hundred random thoughts and questions overran her; lost in all of it, she felt herself choke before letting go completely. She didn't know how long the outburst lasted; time slipped away. When she was finally spent, she stood and swiped at her eyes. Glancing through the one-way window above her desk, she noticed that the gallery floor was empty, and that the front door had been locked. Strangely, she didn't see Mark, even though the lights were still on. She wondered where he was until she heard a knock at the door. Even his knock was gentle.

She considered making an excuse until the evidence of her breakdown had subsided, but why bother? She'd long since stopped caring about her appearance; she knew she looked awful even at the best of times.

"Come on in," she said. Pulling a Kleenex from the box on her desk, she blew her nose as Mark stepped through the door.

"Hey," he said, his voice quiet.

"Hi."

"Bad time?"

"It's all right."

"I thought you might like this," he said, holding out a to-go cup. "It's a banana-and-strawberry smoothie with vanilla ice cream. Maybe it'll help."

She recognized the label on the cup—the eatery was two doors down from the gallery—and wondered how he'd known how she was feeling. Perhaps he'd divined something when she'd made a beeline for her office, or maybe he'd simply remembered what Trinity had told him.

"Thank you," she said, taking it.

"Are you okay?"

"I've been better." She took a sip, thankful it was sweet enough to override her messed-up taste buds. "How was it today?"

"Busy, but not as bad as last Friday. We sold eight prints, including a number three of *Rush*."

Each of her photographs was limited to twenty-five numbered prints; the lower the number, the higher the price. The photo Mark mentioned had been taken at rush hour in the Tokyo subway, the platform jammed with thousands of men dressed in what seemed to be identical black suits.

"Anything by Trinity?"

"Not today, but I think there's a good possibility of that in the near future. Jackie Bernstein came in with her consultant earlier."

Maggie nodded. Jackie had bought two other Trinity

pieces in the past, and Trinity would be pleased to know she was interested in another.

"How about on the website and phone-ins?"

"Six confirmed, two people wanted more information. It shouldn't take long to get the sales ready for shipment. If you want to head on home, I can handle it."

As soon as he said it, her mind floated additional questions: *Do I truly want to go home? To an otherwise empty apartment? To wallow in solitude?*

"No, I'll stay," she demurred, shaking her head. "For a while, anyway."

She sensed his curiosity but knew he wouldn't ask more. Again, she understood the interviews had left a lingering mark.

"I'm sure you've been following my social posts and videos," she began, "so you probably have a general sense of what's going on with my illness."

"Not really. I haven't watched any of your videos since I began working here."

She hadn't expected that. Even Luanne watched her videos. "Why not?"

"I assumed you would prefer that I didn't. And when I considered your initial concerns about my working here, it seemed like the right thing to do."

"But you did know I underwent chemotherapy, right?"

"Luanne mentioned it, but I don't know the details. And, of course, in the rare times you were at the gallery, you looked…"

When he trailed off, she finished for him. "Like death?"

"I was going to say you looked a bit tired."

Sure I did. If gaunt, green, shrinking, and balding could be explained by waking up too early. But she knew he was trying

to be kind. "Do you have a few minutes? Before you start getting the shipments ready?"

"Of course. I don't have anything planned for tonight."

On an impulse, she moved to the rocker, motioning for him to get comfortable on the love seat. "No going out with friends?"

"It's kind of expensive," he said. "And going out usually means drinking, but I don't drink."

"Ever?"

"No."

"Wow," she said. "I don't think I've ever met a twenty-two-year-old who's never had a drink."

"Actually, I'm twenty-three now."

"You had a birthday?"

"It wasn't a big deal."

Probably not, she thought. "Did Luanne know? She didn't say anything to me."

"I didn't mention it to her."

She leaned forward and raised her cup. "Happy belated birthday, then."

"Thank you."

"Did you do anything fun? For your birthday, I mean?"

"Abigail flew out for the weekend and we saw *Hamilton*. Have you seen it?"

"A while ago." *But I won't ever see it again*, she didn't bother to add. Which was another reason not to be alone. So that thoughts like those didn't precipitate yet another breakdown. With Mark here, it was somehow easier to keep herself together.

"I'd never seen a show on Broadway before," Mark went on. "The music was amazing and I loved the historical element and the dancing and…everything about it. Abigail

was electrified—she swore she'd never experienced anything like it."

"How is Abigail?"

"She's doing well. Her break just started, so she's probably on her way to Waterloo right now to see her family."

"She didn't want to come out here to see you?"

"It's sort of a mini family reunion. Unlike me, she has a big family. Five older brothers and sisters who live all over the country. Christmas is the only time of year they can all get together."

"And you didn't want to go out there?"

"I'm working. She understands that. Besides, she's coming out here on the twenty-eighth. We'll spend some time together, watch the ball drop on New Year's Eve, things like that."

"Will I get to meet her?"

"If you'd like."

"If you need time off, let me know. I'm sure I can manage on my own for a couple of days."

She wasn't sure she could, but it felt like she needed to offer.

"I'll let you know."

Maggie took another sip of her smoothie. "I don't know if I've mentioned it lately, but you're doing really well here."

"I enjoy it," he said. He waited, and she knew again that he'd made a choice not to ask personal questions. Which meant she would have to volunteer the information or keep it to herself.

"I met with my oncologist last week," she stated in what she hoped was an even voice. "She thinks another round of chemotherapy will do more harm than good."

His expression softened. "Can I ask what that means?"

"It means no more treatment and the clock is ticking."

He paled, registering what she hadn't said. "Oh . . . Ms. Dawes. That's terrible. I'm so sorry. I don't know what to say. Is there anything I can do?"

"I don't think there's anything anyone can do. But please, call me Maggie. I think you've worked here long enough for the two of us to use first names."

"Is the doctor certain?"

"The scans weren't good," she said. "Lots of spread, everywhere. Stomach. Pancreas. Kidneys. Lungs. And though you won't ask, I have less than six months. Most likely, it's somewhere around three to four, maybe even less."

Surprising her, his eyes began to well with tears. "Oh . . . Lord . . ." he said, his expression suddenly softening. "Would you mind if I pray for you? Not now, but when I get home, I mean."

She couldn't help smiling. Of course he would want to pray for her, future pastor that he was. She suspected he'd never uttered a profanity in his life. He was, she thought, a very sweet kid. Well, technically he was a young man, but . . .

"I'd like that."

For a few seconds, neither of them said anything. Then, with a soft shake of his head, he pressed his lips together. "It isn't fair," he said.

"When is life ever fair?"

"Can I ask how you're doing? I hope you'll forgive me if I'm overstepping . . ."

"It's okay," she said. "I guess I've been in a bit of a daze since I found out."

"It has to feel unbearable."

"At times it does. But then, other times, it doesn't. The strange thing is that physically, I feel better than I did earlier

in the year, during the chemo. Back then, there were times when I was sure dying would be easier. But now…"

She let her gaze wander over the shelves, noting the trinkets she'd collected, each one imbued with memories of a trip she'd taken. To Greece and Egypt, Rwanda and Nova Scotia, Patagonia and Easter Island, Vietnam and the Ivory Coast. So many places, so many adventures.

"It's a strange thing to know the end is so imminent," she admitted. "It gives rise to a lot of questions. Makes a person wonder what it's all about. Sometimes I feel that I've led a charmed life, but then, in the next instant, I find myself obsessing over the things I missed out on."

"Like what?"

"Marriage, for starters," she said. "You know I've never been married, right?" When he nodded, she went on. "Growing up, I couldn't imagine that I'd still be single at my age. It just wasn't the way I was raised. My parents were very traditional and I assumed I'd end up like them." She felt her thoughts drifting to the past, memories bubbling to the surface. "Of course, I didn't make it easy for them. Not like you, anyway."

"I wasn't always a perfect child," he protested. "I got in trouble."

"For what? Anything serious? Was it because you didn't clean your room or because you were a minute late for your curfew? Oh, wait. You were never late for your curfew, right?"

He opened his mouth, but when no words came out, she knew she was right. He must have been the kind of teenager who made things harder for the rest of his generation, simply because he was wired to be *easy*.

"The point is, I've been wondering how things would have

turned out had I chosen a different path. Not just marriage, though. What if I'd worked harder in school, or graduated from college, or had a job in an office, or moved to Miami or Los Angeles instead of New York? Things like that."

"You obviously didn't need college. Your career as a photographer has been remarkable, and your videos and posts about your illness have inspired a lot of people."

"That's very kind, but they don't really know me. And in the end, isn't that the most important thing in life? To be truly known and loved by someone you've chosen?"

"Maybe," he conceded. "But that doesn't negate what you've given people through your experience. It's a powerful act, even life-changing for some."

Perhaps it was his sincerity or his old-fashioned mannerisms, but she was struck again by how much he reminded her of someone she'd once known long ago. She hadn't thought about Bryce in years, not consciously anyway. For most of her adult life, she'd tried to keep her memories of him at a safe distance.

But there was no reason to do that any longer.

"Would you mind if I asked you a personal question?" she said, mirroring his curiously formal style of speech.

"Not at all."

"When did you first know that you were in love with Abigail?"

As soon as she said Abigail's name, a tenderness came over him. "Last year," he said, leaning back into the cushions of the love seat. "Not long after I graduated. We'd gone out four or five times, and she wanted me to meet her parents. Anyway, we were driving to Waterloo, just the two of us. We'd stopped for something to eat, and on the way out, she decided she wanted an ice cream cone. It was

scorching outside and unfortunately, the air-conditioning in the car wasn't working that well, so of course it started to melt all over her. A lot of people might have been upset by that, but she just started giggling like it was the funniest thing ever as she tried to eat it faster than it could melt. There was ice cream everywhere—on her nose and fingers, in her lap, even in her hair—and I remember thinking that I wanted to be around someone like that forever. Someone who could laugh at the inconveniences of life and find joy in any occasion. That's when I knew she was the one."

"Did you tell her then?"

"Oh, no. I wasn't brave enough. It took me until last fall before I could finally work up the courage to tell her."

"Did she say that she loved you, too?"

"She did. That was a relief."

"She sounds like a wonderful person."

"She is. I'm very lucky."

Though he smiled, she knew he was still troubled.

"I wish there was something I could do for you," he said, his voice soft.

"Working here is enough. Well, that and staying late."

"I'm glad to be here. I wonder, though…"

"Go ahead," she said, gesturing with the smoothie. "You can ask whatever question you'd like. I've got nothing to hide anymore."

"Why didn't you ever get married? If you thought you would, I mean?"

"There were a lot of reasons. When I was just starting out in my career, I wanted to concentrate on that until I established a foothold. Then I started traveling a lot, and then came the gallery and…I guess I was just too busy."

"And you never met someone who made you question all that?"

In the silence that followed, she unconsciously reached for the necklace, feeling for the small shell-shaped pendant, making sure it was still there. "I thought I did. I know I loved him, but the timing wasn't right."

"Because of work?"

"No," she said. "It happened long before then. But I'm pretty sure I wouldn't have been good for him. Not back then, anyway."

"I can't believe that."

"You don't know who I used to be." She put down her cup and folded her hands in her lap. "Do you want to hear the story?"

"I'd be honored."

"It's kind of long."

"Those are usually the best kind of stories."

Maggie bent her head, feeling the images begin to surface at the edge of her mind. With the images, the words would eventually come, she knew.

"In 1995, when I was sixteen years old, I began to lead a secret life," she started.