

Prologue

Life came back slowly, Kate realized. It didn't come flooding in with the reassurance that all was well. The light outside was no different; her daughter's body, the strength of her hug, was not necessarily more substantial. The delicate veil Kate had placed between herself and the world was not flung away. It clung.

But life is persistent, slipping into your consciousness sideways, catching you with a fleeting moment of color, the unexpected and comforting smell of a neighbor's dinner cooking as you walk on a winter evening, the feeling of warm water running between your fingers as you wash the dishes at night. There is nothing so seductive as reality.

THE WOMEN WERE due to arrive soon; it was quiet in the house, and Kate was glad of the impending company. She was still not used to being alone with her body. For the past eighteen months it had been the property of others—doctors certainly, but also friends, relatives, her daughter—its boundaries and capacities something they measured, gambled on, watched with loving or terrified or clinical eyes. Now the medical professionals had declared it hers again, handing it back like an overdue and slightly scuffed library book. In the weeks between the doctor's appointment and her daughter's departure to for college, Kate had filled the space around them with lists and plans, shopping trips for desk lamps and extra-long twin sheets for Robin's freshman dorm room. Now Robin was off and away and Kate felt sometimes as if she was living in two empty houses, one inside the other.

So it was nice to have the prospect of guests, even if they were hell-bent upon jubilation. Kate had heard the excitement in her friends' voices when she had invited them to dinner, a thank you for all they had done for her, she explained. But Marion had quickly renamed the evening a victory party and insisted that it should be a potluck.

"You wouldn't take the fun out of it for us, would you?" Marion had asked.

As Kate moved about the kitchen from stove to refrigerator to sink, she passed the bulletin board that served as a central hub for reminders and memories, its surface a collage of photographs, a calendar, old ticket stubs and coupons and take-out menus. The week before Robin had left for college, she had surreptitiously added a brochure. Kate had spotted it in the morning when she came into the kitchen to make coffee—the glossy photograph leaping out at her, an extravagantly yellow raft vaulting through churning

brown waves, water drops flying off its sides in rainbows. Kate's friend Hadley, who had once worked in marketing, always called those photos "adventure porn."

When Robin had come through the kitchen, Kate had pointed to the brochure with a raised eyebrow.

"They've got two openings for next summer," Robin had said. "Wouldn't it be fantastic?"

Kate had looked at her daughter's eyes, so full of anticipation and, deep underneath, a plea for normalcy. They had spent too much of the past year in a world full of exit doors, Kate thought. They could both use a promise that they would be here a year from now.

How could you say no? And yet, as Kate had looked at the raft, the water, the size of it all, that had been exactly, in fact the only thing she wanted to say.

THE DOORBELL RANG, ten minutes early. Caroline, guessed Kate with an inward smile, as she opened the door.

"I thought you might want some help," Caroline said as she entered, arms overflowing with a wooden salad bowl and a bottle of champagne. She put them down on the small table by the front door and gave Kate a quick, fierce hug.

"What needs doing?" she asked, as she headed toward the kitchen.

Kate followed her and gestured to the wrought iron table on the back patio. Caroline walked over to the silverware drawer, sidestepping around Kate, who had opened the refrigerator to get out the sour cream.

"Cloth napkins?" Caroline asked, a fistful of forks in her right hand.

"The green ones in the sideboard."

"How's the house without Robin?" Caroline called as she rummaged through the drawer in the dining room, pulling out seven napkins.

"Quiet. And yours?"

"Empty." Caroline laughed softly. "We're quite the pair, aren't we?"

The kitchen was quiet for a few minutes. Kate could hear the soft clink of forks against knives as Caroline set the table outside. Kate lifted the foil on the pan and the scent of melting cheese and roasted chicken, caramelized onions and a subtle undercurrent of salsa verde rose up from the pan. She inhaled memories.

The doorbell rang again.

“I’ll get it.” Caroline went through the house to the front door. “Marion’s here,” she called out.

“With the last tomatoes from my garden,” Marion said, standing in the doorway, her hair loose and silver. “Hello, darling Kate.” Marion took Kate in her arms and held her for a long moment.

Behind Marion came two younger women, one of them with a cake in her hands.

“Sara, did you bake that?” Kate asked, surprise in her voice.

“I wish—the only thing I’ve put in an oven since the twins were born is chicken fingers,” Sara replied, pushing her hair back from her face with her free hand.

“She wouldn’t have even made it out the front door if we hadn’t been carpooling,” Hadley commented and handed Caroline a loaf of bread.

“Last but not least,” a voice came from the bottom of the stairs. “I’m no cook,” Daria said as she entered, all red hair and curls, handing a bottle to Kate, “but I know a good wine when I see one. Now, can we start celebrating?”

THE PLATES WERE almost empty, the light gone early from the September sky. The edges of Kate’s patio were lost in the foliage beyond, its contours lit by the back porch light and the candles on the wrought iron table, around which the women sat, listening to each other with the ease of those who have settled into each others’ lives. Out on the road the occasional car drove by, the sound muffled by the laurel hedge that held the garden within its green walls. Everything felt softened, the garden more smells than sights, emitting the last scents of summer into the air.

Kate looked at the women around her. It was an incongruous group— it reminded Kate of a collection of beach rocks gathered over time by an unseen hand, the choices only making sense when they were finally all together. Daria and Marion were sisters, Sara and Hadley neighbors; Kate and Caroline had met when their children were in preschool – individual lives blending and moving apart, running parallel or intersecting for longer or shorter periods of time due to proximity or a natural affinity. It had taken the birth of Sara’s twins, and then Kate’s illness, to weave their dissimilar connections into a whole.

Kate heard a voice coming through the house.

“There you are...” a woman, dressed in a loose-fitting jacket and slim jeans came out onto the back porch. “I’m sorry I’m late; my flight was delayed.” She ran down the steps to the patio and hugged Kate.

“Ava,” Kate said, holding her.

“Did I smell my mother’s enchiladas?” Ava asked and Kate smiled.

“I saved you some.” She started for the kitchen.

“No, you don’t,” Caroline quickly interjected. “You’re the queen tonight. You shouldn’t have to wait on anybody.” She sent a pointed look in Ava’s direction.

“I’ll get more wine,” Daria added, following Caroline into the house.

Kate pulled a chair up next to her and motioned for Ava to sit down.

Now they were all here, Kate thought.

DARIA CAME OUT the back door, the glossy brochure in one hand. “Hey, what’s this?” she asked. “I found it tacked to the bulletin board.” Caroline looked over Daria’s shoulder.

“Robin wants the two of us to go rafting down the Grand Canyon,” Kate said.

“But...?” Caroline was watching Kate’s face.

“Have you seen those rapids?” Kate replied.

The women around the table nodded in understanding, although if they were to be honest none of them had ever experienced the Grand Canyon other than to stand on its rim and look down to the river below, which looked only green and far away from that distance. But that, of course, didn’t matter. The women ranged in age, but they were all old enough to know that in the currency of friendship, empathy is more valuable than accuracy.

“It’s scary,” Caroline agreed, coming down the steps and setting a plate in front of Ava.

“Which is exactly why she should do it,” Daria broke in. “Kate, you’re here; you’re alive. You should do something crazy to celebrate.”

Kate simply shook her head and sipped from her wine glass, her thoughts traveling far from them, underwater. It was dark there, cold, where the waves grabbed you and took your life where you didn’t expect it to go.

“Maybe we should give her some space,” Sara suggested.

The women shifted in their seats. Ava picked up her fork and took a bite of enchilada, closing her eyes in happiness. Kate smiled, watching her.

“Alright,” Marion said, leaning forward. “Here’s a thought. Kate, when is the trip?”

“Next August.” Kate regarded Marion suspiciously.

“Well, then,” Marion continued calmly. “I propose we make a pact. If Kate agrees to go down the Grand Canyon, we’ll each promise to do one thing in the next year that is scary or difficult or that we’ve always said we were going to do but haven’t.” She scanned the circle. “Everybody in?”

The women looked about at each other. One by one, they nodded in agreement.

Marion turned to Kate.

“Alright?” she asked.

It was still for a moment. On the other side of the hedge, a car door opened with an electronic beep, the jingle of a dog’s collar passed by.

“Alright,” Kate replied finally—and then she smiled. “But here’s the deal. I didn’t get to choose mine, so I get to choose yours.”