
TESS
'A cracker of a mystery! I couldn't put it down'
SHARI LAPENA
THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
GERRITSEN
THE SUMMER GUESTS
DON'T TRUST ANY OF THEM . . .
WITH A BONUS FROM LEE CHILD & TESS GERRITSEN SHORT STORY

THE SUMMER GUESTS

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BY TESS GERRITSEN

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Body Double
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The Mephisto Club
Keeping the Dead
The Killing Place
The Silent Girl
Last to Die
Die Again
I Know a Secret
Listen to Me

THE MARTINI CLUB

The Spy Coast

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To Jacob

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CHAPTER 1

Purity, Maine, 1972

On the last day of his life, Purity police officer Randy Pelletier ordered a cup of coffee and a blueberry muffin at the Marigold Café.

It was what he always ordered after getting off the night shift, his reward to himself for the lonely hours spent in his cruiser, keeping the streets and back roads of his town safe from drunk drivers, speeding tourists, and the occasional rabid raccoon. He sat at his usual corner table next to the window, where he could enjoy the warmth of the morning sun while keeping an eye on the activity on Main Street. A good cop never stopped being watchful, even while off duty. Just as important, people walking past the café could see him in the window, keeping an eye on things. Visibility was important to the community, and if any problems arose, the town knew exactly where to find their local peace officer: sitting right here, at the window table in the Marigold.

"Refill?" said the waitress, her coffeepot poised over his cup.

"Sure thing, Carla."

"How was it last night?" she asked, pouring her usual rich, black brew.

"Pretty quiet."

She laughed. "And we like it that way!"

"We sure do."

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"Why don't I bring you another muffin? Fresh batch just came out of the oven."

His waistline might not appreciate it, but his growling stomach would, so he didn't refuse her. Who could refuse Carla, who kept the town well supplied with gossip and baked goods? As she went back to the kitchen, he unfolded his copy of the latest *Purity Weekly* and scanned the headlines on the front page: Summer Reservations Hit Record High . . . Black Bear Sighted on Oak Street . . . Car Crash Sends Two to Hospital. He turned the page to the local police blotter, on page three. Not that he needed to read it; he already knew the details of just about every traffic citation, every 911 call, over the past week.

Cory, James, Boston, MA: speeding
Simpson, Richard, Purity, ME: expired registration
Allen, Jonathan, Augusta, ME: public drunkenness
Wiedemann, Scott, Albany, NY: public urination

All in all, a typical week in July, when half the people in town were tourists from away, here on vacation, uninhibited and often drunk. Every summer they invaded, from Massachusetts and New York and beyond, streaming into Maine to escape the heat and stink of their cities. It was Randy's job to keep them from hurting themselves or others and then to wave them back home, hopefully with their wallets a little lighter.

The doorbell tinkled. Randy looked up to see two of those out-of-towners walk into the Marigold. He knew the two men weren't locals because they were both wearing black leather jackets when it was almost seventy degrees outside. They paused inside the door and scanned the café as if casing the room. They spotted Randy and momentarily froze.

That's right, gentlemen. Law enforcement was watching.

"Table for you boys?" said Carla. A fellow could be eighty years old, and not only would Carla still call him a boy, she wouldn't be above whacking him on the behind for bad behavior.

"Um, yeah," one of the men finally said.

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Randy watched as Carla led them a few tables away, close enough for him to keep an eye on them. They both picked up plastic menus and studied the breakfast offerings a trifle too intently, as if trying to avoid Randy's gaze. Another detail that made him think these two bore closer watching. He was more accustomed to dealing with rowdy teenagers and drunk drivers, but he knew that big trouble sometimes found its way even to small towns, and he liked to think he was ready to handle it. He could even imagine the headline, splashed across the *Purity Weekly*. No, make that the *Boston Globe*:

> Maine Police Officer Single-Handedly Captures Wanted Duo

He didn't know if these men were armed, but it never hurt to be prepared, so he reached down and quietly unsnapped his holster. They were studying the menu, which was only a page long and offered nothing more exotic than French toast and fried eggs. It was yet another clue that something was not right about this pair.

The shorter man suddenly glanced over his menu at Randy. It was just a flick of his eyes, but in that instant, their gazes connected. Held. In the periphery of his vision, Randy saw Carla walking back toward their table, coffeepot in hand. Heard the roar of an engine on Main Street.

He was so focused on the two men that he did not see the white van streak past the window.

He heard the screech of tires, the sickening bang of metal slamming into metal, and he turned to the window. Saw shattered glass littering the street, and—sweet Jesus, was that a *body*?

"Oh my God!" cried Carla, still clutching the coffeepot as she stared out the window.

Randy scrambled to his feet and ran out of the Marigold. The first body lay only a few yards away in a spreading pool of blood. It was a man, his spine so grotesquely twisted that he looked like he'd been taken

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apart and reconstructed all wrong, his feet pointing backward. Across the street was another body, a woman, her pink blouse shorn open, one ripe breast indecently exposed for all to see. Randy dragged his attention away from the bodies and looked down the street, toward the sound of a blaring horn. A third body was splayed across the road—another woman, this one with her chest cage crushed almost flat, oranges and apples spilling from her shopping bag.

At the end of the block was a white van, its front end embedded in the side of a parked blue sedan.

The world around him seemed to halt on its axis. He moved past horrified pedestrians, their hands clapped over their mouths, past the two men in leather jackets, who'd followed him out of the café and now stood with mouths agape in horror. Through the freeze-frame of carnage, across shattered glass and blood-spattered pavement, Randy alone seemed to be in motion. As he drew closer to the crashed vehicles, he saw **Tarkin Fine Carpentry** printed on the white van. He knew this van. He knew the driver. Black smoke was rising from the engine, a terrifying harbinger of more disaster.

Through the driver's window, he saw Sam Tarkin tilted forward, face down against the steering wheel. Randy yanked open the door. He couldn't see any blood, any obvious injuries, but Sam was moaning, shaking.

Randy reached across Sam's lap and released the seat belt. "You need to get out!" Randy yelled. "Sam? Sam!"

Suddenly Sam's head snapped up, and Randy stared at a man who *looked* like Sam Tarkin, with Sam's dark hair, Sam's angular face, but the eyes . . . what was wrong with his eyes? The pupils were dilated to black, bottomless pools. An alien's eyes. No, this sweating, shaking creature looked like someone else. *Something* else.

Randy glanced at the black smoke billowing out. He had to get him out, now. He grabbed Sam's arm and pulled.

"Get away!" Sam shrieked. "Get away from me!" He clawed at Randy, and his fingernails gouged flesh.

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Face throbbing, Randy jerked away and felt blood trickle down his cheek. *What the hell, man?* Enraged now, he wrenched Sam out of the van, and they both went sprawling onto the pavement. Even then, Sam kept fighting him, thrashing. Desperate to control the man, Randy grabbed Sam's throat with both hands and squeezed. He squeezed so hard that Sam's eyes bugged out and his face darkened to a horrifying shade of purple.

"Stop it!" Randy yelled. "Stop fighting me!"

He did not feel Sam reach for his holster—the holster he'd already unsnapped. Suddenly there it was, staring at him: the barrel of his own gun.

"Don't," he said. "Sam, don't."

But it was not Sam Tarkin looking back at him.

And it was not Sam Tarkin who pulled the trigger.

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CHAPTER 2

MAGGIE

The present

It was the perfect summer evening: Maggie and her friends gathered around her picnic table, sipping martinis and bird-watching. Peering through binoculars as barn swallows dipped and swirled like bits of blue confetti over her freshly mowed field. Everyone relaxed and laughing and unarmed.

Although Maggie wasn't *entirely* certain about that last detail. She just assumed no one had felt the need to pack a firearm tonight, and really, what would be the point? They were all perfectly capable of unleashing mayhem with merely a shard of broken glass, and at the moment, they were each holding an easily shattered martini glass as they discussed this month's chosen title for their book group: *The Genius of Birds*. The book had been Maggie's selection, so it was her turn to host tonight's meeting of the Martini Club, the name they'd adopted for their pleasantly boozy get-togethers. Serving as host was not an onerous task, because dinner was always potluck, and Maggie's primary responsibility—indeed, the most important responsibility of these evenings—was having a sufficient selection of liquor on hand. For this group, *sufficient* meant three different brands of vodka, two brands of gin, dry vermouth, red and white wine, and, for after dinner, a selection of single-malt whiskys.

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Today's weather was gloriously warm, so they'd carried the gin and vodka, vermouth and ice bucket outside to Maggie's picnic table to enjoy the view over her rolling fields. Three years ago, when Maggie had first come to Purity, this view was what had convinced her to buy Blackberry Farm and finally put down roots. Here, she'd found a measure of peace. During the summers, she collected fresh eggs from her flock of layer hens and sold them at the local farmers' market. During the winters, she shoveled snow and nurtured her newly hatched chicks and perused the seed catalogs for her vegetable garden.

But no matter the season, these evenings with her four friends carried on. She'd known them for decades, since long before they'd all migrated to Purity, Maine, where they now quietly blended in with other retirees. Where people asked few questions about their previous careers and left them to their secrets. Secrets they felt free to share only among themselves.

Tonight, Ingrid Slocum had appointed herself the bartender, and she was already at work mixing a second batch of martinis, vigorously shaking ice cubes in the stainless steel cocktail shaker. The merry clatter brought back Maggie's days at Camp Peary, otherwise known as the Farm, where four of them—Maggie and Declan, Ben and Ingrid—had first bonded as clandestine officer trainees. Looking around at their faces, Maggie could still see them as they'd looked in their younger years: Ben Diamond, bull necked and muscular, with a glare that could freeze an assailant in his tracks. Eagle-eyed Ingrid Slocum, always the quickest to think her way out of any locked room. And Declan Rose, the dashing diplomat's son who could charm a stranger with just his smile. Four decades later, their hair was grayer—or, in Ben's case, shaved off entirely—and along with the passage of time had come the inevitable wrinkles and stiff joints and more than a few extra pounds. But the Farm veterans were still the Four Musketeers, undaunted by the encroaching years, eager for any challenge.

And a well-made martini.

"It's a shame they're dying off," said Declan as birds swooped overhead. "In another generation, there'll be no more barn swallows left in Maine." He handed his binoculars to Ben. "Here, these are better than yours. Take a look."

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Ben, who was clearly not as much of an avian fan, halfheartedly peered up at the swallows. With his shaved head and faintly menacing scowl, he didn't much *look* like a bird-watcher either. "Where did you hear that? About the barn swallows dying off?"

"It was in last month's *Purity Weekly*. The bird-watching column."

"You actually read that column?"

"Bird-watching's an excellent cover for surveillance. If you're caught and need to bluff your way out, it's good to know the basics of the subject."

"Anyone else, another round?" asked Ingrid. "Lloyd's bringing out his antipasti tray, and it's all rather salty. You'll want to keep your whistles wet."

Ben raised his hand. "Hendrick's, please, no vermouth. With all this talk about birds, my whistle's already gone dry."

"Snacks incoming!" Ingrid's husband, Lloyd, announced cheerily as he came out of the house bearing one of the antipasti extravaganzas that he was so famous for: feta skewers and artichoke hearts, marinated mushrooms and paper-thin slices of salami. "Just don't fill up on these," he warned. "My braciole's warming up in the oven, and *that* deserves your hearty appetites."

Ben looked at Ingrid as she handed him his freshly shaken martini. "With that man cooking for you, how are you not three hundred pounds?"

"Sheer discipline," Ingrid said, and she settled into an Adirondack chair with her own drink.

"So are we all ready to discuss this month's book selection?" said Declan.

Ben grunted. "If we have to."

"Because I thought the book was absolutely brilliant." Declan waved his new ZEISS binoculars. "It inspired me to upgrade to these beauties."

"The book was far better than that ridiculous spy thriller we read last month," added Lloyd, settling his generous bulk in the chair next to Ingrid's. "Novelists never get it right."

"What was everyone's favorite chapter?" Declan asked.

"The chapter on sparrows," said Maggie. "I love how most people ignore them because they seem so common, so ordinary. Yet sparrows have cleverly managed to infiltrate almost the entire globe."

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Ben snorted. "Are you talking about birds, or about us?"

"Well, there are parallels, don't you think?" said Ingrid. "Sparrows are like the covert operatives of the avian world. Unobtrusive. Unnoticeable. They slip in everywhere yet rouse no attention."

"Wait," said Ben. "Could this be a first? Did we all actually *read* the book?"

They looked at each other.

"This *is* supposed to be a book group," said Ingrid. "Even if we really come for the martinis."

"And dinner," added Lloyd. "Which, by the way, should be ready now."

But no one moved. They were all too comfortable sitting in their Adirondack chairs, sipping their drinks and admiring the view. In the distance, bells tinkled as Maggie's fourteen-year-old neighbor, Callie, just a twig of a girl in blue overalls, led her goats and her Jersey cow across the field, back to their barn. Callie waved at them; they all waved back. Crickets chirped and the swallows continued their aerobatic show overhead, flitting and swooping.

Ingrid sighed. "Does life get any better than this?"

No. It does not, thought Maggie. This was one of those rare perfect moments, with the tingle of vodka in her mouth and the scent of freshly mowed hay on the breeze. And dear Declan, sitting beside her, smiling. His once-black hair was now half-silver, but age had only deepened his Irish good looks, something she'd come to appreciate now, in the autumn of their lives.

She had spent her career on the edge of crises, never certain when everything might fall apart, so she knew how ephemeral moments like these could be, with everyone healthy and safe and no calamity in sight. But disaster could strike at any time, against any one of them: A car crash. A heart attack. A suspicious spot on an x-ray. Even on this perfect evening, surrounded by friends and with twilight settling gently over her fields, she knew that trouble was coming.

She just did not know when.

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CHAPTER 3

SUSAN

They drove north to Maine with George Conover packed in the trunk.

Susan thought it more than a little disrespectful having her late father-in-law's cremated remains wedged in alongside their suitcases, but no one else in the family had objected, so why should she be bothered? She had scarcely known the man, had met him only three years ago, when Ethan first introduced Susan and her daughter, Zoe, to his parents. George had been polite enough, but he'd also been coolly distant, a blazer-and-boat-shoes Bostonian who seemed to be reserving judgment on these two new additions to his family until they could prove themselves worthy of the Conover name. When he'd died of a stroke three months ago, Susan felt no particular sense of grief. It might as well have been a stranger's burned bones and ashes in the urn—that's how little she'd known the man. Still, it struck her as unseemly to treat him like the rest of the luggage.

A sentiment that George's widow didn't seem to share. When they'd stopped in Brookline to pick up Ethan's mother, it was Elizabeth herself who wedged her late husband's remains in with her suitcase, Elizabeth who matter-of-factly closed the trunk. When Elizabeth decided an issue was settled, no discussion was needed.

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Susan glanced over her shoulder at Zoe and Elizabeth in the back seat. Although they sat side by side, the two were not at all engaged with each other. Fifteen-year-old Zoe was focused on her smartphone, just a typical teenage girl isolated in her own virtual bubble where conversations consisted of clicks and swipes. Elizabeth, too, seemed to be in her own bubble, staring out the window at the scenery as they drove north up the Maine coast, through a chain of oddly named villages. Wiscasset. Damariscotta. Waldoboro. Thinking, perhaps, of past summers when she and George had driven this same highway to their summer home on Maiden Pond. After fifty-five years of marriage, this would be their last journey to Maine together, yet her face betrayed no grief. She sat ramrod straight, a silver-haired stoic of a woman. That was Elizabeth, practical and unsentimental.

"Hey, Ethan?" Zoe said. "You told me the house is on Maiden Pond. Why is it called that?" *Ethan,* she still called him. How long would it take for Zoe to finally think of him as *Dad*? Susan looked at her husband, wondering if it bothered him, but Ethan seemed unperturbed, calmly gazing through his glasses at the traffic ahead.

"It's called Maiden Pond because some girl drowned there ages ago," Ethan said.

"Really? How long ago was that?"

"Um, Mom? Do you know?"

Elizabeth stirred from her reverie. "It was at least a hundred years ago. There was a group of schoolgirls who went out on a rowboat, and it capsized. That's what I was told, anyway."

"And the girl couldn't swim?"

Susan glanced back at her daughter. "Not everyone's a mermaid like you, sweetie."

"And girls wore a lot more clothes back then," said Elizabeth. "Petticoats, long dresses. Maybe boots. That may have dragged her down."

"This website says Maiden Pond has a maximum depth of forty-two feet," said Zoe, scrolling through her phone. "Does that sound right?"

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"I have no idea," Ethan said.

"But doesn't your family go there every summer?"

"Mom and Colin do. I haven't been back in a long time." He glanced in the rearview mirror. "Mom, how deep is the pond?"

Elizabeth sighed. "Does it really matter?"

"As long as it's deep enough," said Zoe. "Is there anything in the water that bites?"

"Absolutely," said Ethan. "You might get nibbled to death by ducks."

"Ethan."

"Seriously, there's nothing in the pond that will hurt you, Zoe. Maine doesn't even have any poisonous snakes."

"That's good, 'cause snakes are the one thing that *would* freak me out."

"But I warn you, the water's going to be cold. The lakes up here don't really heat up till August."

"Cold water doesn't bother me. I want to do a polar bear plunge someday."

"Better you than me."

"I'm going to go swimming ten times a day here. I can't *wait* to jump in!"

Ethan laughed. "And I can't wait to hear you screech when you hit that cold water."

It was good to hear Ethan laugh again. Susan hadn't heard him laugh very much these last few months as he'd sat staring at his computer screen, waiting for inspiration. If only inspiration were something a novelist could just conjure up, he'd told her. If only there were a magic pill or an incantation that would make words appear on the page. Five years after his first novel was published, he had yet to deliver his second, and as the months passed, he'd grown more and more afraid that there never would be a second novel, that the words would never flow again. That he was merely an impostor, someone with the audacity to call himself an author. How could he tell his writing students at Boston College

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that he was any sort of authority on the craft when he himself could not produce a single satisfactory page? She'd watched defeat reshape his face, had watched the shadows deepen under his eyes and a perpetual frown etch its way into permanence. At night, she'd feel him tossing beside her, and she knew that it was the book keeping him awake. The book that refused to be written. She had no idea how a writer's mind worked, but she imagined it was like a dozen different voices shouting in your head, demanding you tell their story *their* way. It seemed like a form of madness.

Maybe this would be good for him, being dragged away from his computer to attend his father's memorial service, away from those constantly clamoring characters in his head. Even now, as Boston fell farther and farther behind them, she could see his neck muscles relax and his mouth tilt up as, mile by mile, he was shedding the layers of tension. He needed this trip to Maine. They both did. *Two weeks of vacation in a house on the water is exactly what we need.*

She turned to look at her mother-in-law, who was once again staring out the car window. "Everything okay back there, Elizabeth?"

"I'm just thinking about how much I'll need to do when we get there."

"Mom, it's all taken care of," said Ethan. "Colin texted me this morning. He and Brooke say the bedrooms are ready, so you won't have to lift a finger. They've put Kit up in the attic, so Zoe can sleep in the bedroom next to ours. Oh, and Arthur and Hannah will join us tonight for cocktails." He looked at Susan. "You remember my parents' friends, Hannah Greene and Arthur Fox, right? From the wedding. They have cottages on the pond too."

"Yes, of course," Susan said, although her memory of them was almost lost among all the other memories from their wedding day: Ethan beaming at her as they stood at the altar. Zoe, aglow in her yellow bridesmaid dress. And then the sudden thunderstorm that sent their drenched and laughing guests fleeing inside. She remembered Arthur, a tall and patrician man in his eighties, swapping stories at the bar

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with his old friend George. Similarly hazy was her memory of Hannah Greene, a buxom woman in her sixties, burbling stories about her misadventures while babysitting Ethan and his older brother Colin at the pond.

"There'll be a few people you don't know at the memorial service," said Ethan. "The local minister's presiding, and some of Dad's buddies from the yacht club said they'd be there." He glanced in the rearview mirror at Elizabeth. "It'll be like old times, Mom!"

"Ethan, watch out!" said Susan.

Ethan suddenly slammed on the brakes, and their car screeched to a halt, jerking them all forward against their seat belts. "Jesus," he muttered, staring at the line of cars that had abruptly stopped ahead of them. "You okay back there, Mom?"

"It'd be nice if we got there in one piece."

"I didn't count on all this traffic."

"Well, you haven't been back here in years. It's changed." Elizabeth sighed and said, softly: "Everything's changed."

The traffic was at a standstill. A long line of cars snaked ahead of them, curving around the bend and out of sight.

"There must be an accident," said Susan.

The whine of a siren confirmed it. Susan turned and saw flashing lights moving toward them; then an ambulance swooped past the paralyzed traffic.

"I hope it's nothing serious," said Ethan.

The flashing lights vanished over the crest of the hill, and Susan thought of smashed cars and broken bodies. She'd trained as a nurse, and even though she no longer worked in a hospital but as a school nurse, she had not forgotten the panic of trying to save a life, and all the things that could go wrong. She looked back at her daughter, who was once again staring at her phone, oblivious to anything else. Elizabeth, too, seemed lost in her own thoughts. Whatever drama was now playing out on the road ahead seemed to hold no interest for either of them.

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Traffic began to move again. They crested the hill, and two crumpled cars came into view. Suitcases had been flung from a rooftop rack, and clothes were scattered across the road in a bright confetti of holiday wear. Lying in the ditch were an ice chest and a purple tennis shoe. *You came to Maine on vacation, never imagining this was what awaited you,* thought Susan. But who thought about such things when they were packing their shorts and sunscreen? They expected lazy days on a lake and lobster rolls on the seashore. They didn't imagine they would instead end up in a hospital bed.

Or never go home again.

*

Her first glimpse of Maiden Pond was little more than flickers of gold through the tree branches, the reflection of sunlit water penetrating the smothering wall of spruce and pine. As they curved down Shoreline Road, she caught more glimpses but never a full view, only tantalizing flashes, bright as Christmas tinsel.

"Is that the pond down there?" said Zoe. At last, she'd set aside her phone and was looking out the window.

"Yep, that's Maiden Pond," said Ethan.

"I'm going to change straight into my bathing suit."

"How about waiting till morning, hmm?" said Susan. "We need to spend time with Colin's family first. You haven't seen Kit since the wedding."

"He didn't want to talk to me much, then."

"Oh, that's just Kit," said Ethan. "Your cousin's shy."

That would be one word for it, thought Susan, remembering the silent and slouching teenager who'd spent her entire wedding reception in tight orbit around his mother, Brooke. This year he'd be seventeen, old enough to start college in a few months. Maybe he'd acquired a few more social skills since then.

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They bumped along a gravel road and stopped at a wooden sign nailed to a tree:

Moonview
Absolutely No Trespassing

The forbidding sign was carved in simple block letters, unadorned by any flourishes, and it offered no hint of what waited at the bottom of the driveway.

"You need to get someone to cut back these trees, Mom," said Ethan as they descended the narrow driveway, tree branches scraping the sides of their car.

"Your father let it go for too long. We've had other things to think about."

"I'll call around town, find out if we can hire someone to—"

"I'm sure your brother will take care of it."

There was a silence. "Of course," Ethan muttered. "Colin will take care of it."

Suddenly the woods opened up, and a view of Maiden Pond bloomed into sight, its surface gilded by the afternoon sun. And there, looming above the water, was Moonview, the Conovers' summer home. Elizabeth had called it *the cottage*, so Susan had expected something rustic, but this was no mere cottage. It was a sprawling house with multiple gables, four chimneys, and a wide deck with steps descending to a sweeping lawn. They pulled to a stop behind Colin's parked BMW, and as Susan stepped out of the car, she took in a deep breath, inhaling the delicious scent of pine trees and grass and damp soil. Except for a bird that chittered in a tree branch overhead, it was utterly silent here, the pond as flat as glass, its surface undisturbed by a single ripple.

A screen door squealed open and banged shut. "Well, here you are at last!" called out Ethan's older brother, Colin.

She turned to see Colin and his family come down the steps from the deck to greet them. *The golden couple,* Ethan had once called Colin

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and Brooke, not just because of their blond good looks, but also because of how easily they seemed to glide through life. Even here, in this rustic corner of Maine, Brooke looked as stylish as ever, her blond hair clipped in a gleaming pageboy, a pink sweater twinset hugging her slim waist. Behind them lurked their son Kit, his face half-hidden beneath shaggy blond hair, his shoulders slouched, as if he was trying to blend into the background. As everyone else shared hugs and hellos, Kit kept his distance, managing only an awkward wave of greeting.

"We expected you here hours ago," said Colin as the two brothers pulled suitcases from the trunk.

"Traffic was bad," said Ethan. "Plus, there was an accident."

Colin paused, frowning into the trunk. "Is this box, um . . . Dad?"

"Oh, just give him to me," Elizabeth said, and calmly plucked the box containing her husband's ceramic urn out of the trunk. "I'll be glad when I don't have to worry about this anymore."

Colin and Ethan watched as their mother carried their father's remains into the house. The screen door slapped shut behind her.

"Well," Colin said dryly, "Mom seems to be handling the loss very well."

"It *has* been three months," said Ethan.

"It's not *that* long."

Brooke said, "Everyone handles grief in their own way, Colin. And your mom's never been the sentimental type."

"I suppose." He shut the trunk of the car. "As long as she doesn't plant him on top of the toilet."

They followed Elizabeth into the house, and two steps inside, Susan halted, staring in wonder at the spacious living room. Sunlight streamed in through the floor-to-ceiling windows and gleamed on polished hardwood floors. Open beams arched overhead in a cathedral ceiling. A gallery of family photographs covered one entire wall, documenting the Conover family through the decades.

Brooke leaned in and whispered to Susan: "And they call this place *just* a cottage."

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"It's not at all what I expected," said Susan.

"What *did* you expect?"

"I don't know. A cabin on the lake. Bunk beds."

Brooke laughed. "Trust me, the Conovers don't do bunk beds. Thank God, or I wouldn't have been coming here all these years."

Susan turned her attention to the family photos on the wall. It was a pictorial history of the Conovers in Maine, dating back to an image of a young Elizabeth and George, standing beside the pond with a group of friends.

"These were all taken here?" said Susan.

"Right next to the same pine tree. The tree's out there, by the canoes. You can see how much it's grown over the years. Every summer, Elizabeth makes us stand under that tree for a photo. Here, that's right after Colin was born." Brooke pointed to the cherubic blond baby in Elizabeth's arms. She moved on to a different photo, of Elizabeth holding a different infant, this one with dark hair. Colin, now a sturdy toddler, scowled up at his new brother. "And here Ethan makes his first appearance."

Even as babies, the brothers were different, thought Susan. As the years passed, the differences grew more apparent. She could already see her future husband in the lanky child with the glasses and the serious face. Even then, he had a book in his hand, while Colin, the taller and blonder brother, projected robust confidence. A confidence that no doubt served him well on Wall Street.

Footsteps pattered down the stairs. Susan turned to see her daughter, already dressed in her purple bathing suit, scampering through the living room. "Zoe?"

"Just a dip, Mom! Come on, come out with me!"

"We have to unpack!"

But Zoe had already pushed out through the screen door and was dashing down the deck stairs and across the lawn, toward the water. Of course she was; if there was a body of water nearby, Zoe could not resist plunging in.

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Susan followed her daughter out of the house and was only halfway down the lawn when Zoe splashed into the pond and shrieked in delight.

"It's like having a humongous swimming pool all to myself!" yelled Zoe.

Susan stepped onto the private dock and smiled down at her daughter, who was effortlessly treading water. "Not too cold?"

"Not for me!"

The water's never too cold for a mermaid, Susan thought as she watched Zoe glide away across a surface that gleamed a brilliant red gold. Except for the haunting cry of a loon and the soft splash of Zoe's strokes in the silky water, the afternoon was magically silent. There was only one other person in sight, a man gliding past in a kayak.

She waved to him, expecting him to wave back. That's what people did in Maine, wasn't it? They waved to each other.

The man did not return the wave. He merely stared back at her, his face a black cutout against the glare of the sunlit pond, then he paddled away.

"She just couldn't wait, could she?" said Ethan, chuckling as he came down the lawn to join his family.

"Can you blame her? She's been cooped up in the car all day."

He wrapped his arm around Susan's waist, and for a moment they just stood together, watching Zoe's head bob in and out of the water, her dark hair slick and gleaming like a seal's.

"It's beautiful here," Susan sighed, leaning against her husband. "I'm surprised you waited so long to come back."

He shrugged. "It's a nice spot, I suppose."

"Not exactly a ringing endorsement."

"It's my parents' house. Not mine."

"But I thought the whole family was welcome here. Brooke and Colin come every summer, don't they?"

"Yeah."

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She looked at him, but he was staring across the water, as if looking into a past that she could not see. One that had clearly not been happy. "You never told me much about this place. Is there a reason you haven't been back?"

He sighed and pointed up the slope to a tree with a massive trunk and spreading branches. "See that maple there?"

"What about it?"

"When I was seven, I spent most of an afternoon trapped up in that tree, afraid to come down because Colin was waiting below, throwing rocks. Hannah Greene had to come out and rescue me."

"My God, what a jerk."

"It's a stupid memory. You'd think I'd outgrow it, but that's how I remember all my summers here. Colin, king of the hill. Eventually, I just stopped joining them. It's been years since I was here. Now I feel like I'm just a summer guest."

"You're not just a guest. You're *family*."

"I know. I know."

"How about we make this summer different, okay?"

He smiled down at her. "It already is. I have you and Zoe."

"I think it's going to be good for us, being out of the city for a few weeks. This trip could actually be a gift from your father, making us all come to Maine to scatter his ashes. It's forced you to step away from your desk and take a deep breath. And maybe something about this place will inspire you. You'll see or hear something you can use. I'll never forget what you said when we met at your book signing. 'If you're a writer, no experience, good or bad, goes to waste.'"

"Ah, yes. I have the best pickup lines."

"Well, it worked on me."

He pulled her into a hug. "I'm sorry," he said.

"For what?"

"For not being much fun lately. For being so distracted by this *stupid* novel and these *stupid* characters. I'm starting to hate them for taking me away from you."

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"As long as you come back to us."

He smiled and pressed his lips to hers. "We should go unpack," he murmured.

"We should."

"The neighbors will show up any minute for cocktails . . ."

"And I promised to help with dinner," she added.

But neither of them moved. It was too beautiful here, just the two of them, the pond agleam like liquid fire, their daughter gliding across the water.

A perfect summer evening, she thought. *Let's make it last a little longer.*

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CHAPTER 4

REUBEN

The summer people were back.

As Reuben Tarkin paddled his kayak on Maiden Pond, he surveyed which of the seasonal cottages were now occupied and which still stood empty, awaiting the annual return of their owners. He had lived all his life on this pond, through sixty-five years of ice storms and mud seasons, through hot summer nights so suffocating he'd lie sweating and sleepless next to his rattling fan. He knew the rhythms and the seasons of the pond so well that he could predict when the first red-breasted robins would arrive in the spring, when the annual chorus of spring peepers would be succeeded by the croaks of bullfrogs, and when the newly hatched loon chicks would make their first appearance as bits of dark fluff, piggybacking atop their mothers.

He also knew, just as intimately, the annual comings and goings of Maiden Pond's human population.

Arthur Fox was usually the first to arrive for the season, sometimes as early as May, when the weather was still unsettled and the water far too cold to swim in. This year, Arthur had shown up the second week of June, pulling up at his cottage in a sleek blue Mercedes with New York plates. He'd wasted no time hauling out his deck furniture and dragging his canoe out of storage and down to the water's edge. Arthur was

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eighty-two years old, but he was still fit enough to haul his own wooden float into the pond, a strenuous task that summer people usually hired local muscle to attend to. He seemed to exult in the challenge of physical labor. The wealthy often liked to masquerade as common folk, and Maine was where they came to indulge that fantasy. This afternoon, Arthur had stripped off his shirt to play the part of rustic gardener as he enthusiastically lopped off the low-hanging branches that blocked his water view. As Reuben glided past in his kayak, Arthur spotted him and abruptly stopped cutting branches. He didn't say a word to Reuben, didn't smile or wave; no one ever waved at Reuben Tarkin. Instead, Arthur just glared at him with a look that said: *I'm watching you.*

Reuben paddled toward the next cottage. Hannah Greene's.

Hannah was stretched out on a lounge chair, sunning herself on her back deck. At sixty-one, Hannah had grown plump, and with her winter-white skin she looked like a lump of bread dough left to rise in the heat. She'd inherited the cottage from her parents, the late Dr. and Mrs. Greene of Bethesda, and along with the cottage, she'd also inherited her parents' antipathy toward Reuben. Perhaps she sensed his gaze as he paddled closer, or perhaps she heard the splash of his paddle in the water, because she suddenly sat up in her lounge chair and looked at him. Like Arthur Fox, Hannah did not smile or wave. Instead, she got up from the chair, went into her house, and closed the door.

Reuben paddled on.

At the next cottage, he stopped paddling and simply let his kayak drift, past the private dock, past the wide lawn where two canoes rested on the grass. This was the largest house on Maiden Pond, the house they called Moonview because it faced east toward both the rising sun and the rising moon. Even before the Conovers arrived, he'd known they were coming because he'd seen the housekeepers and gardeners and the caretaker at work, preparing the house for their return. Reuben's modest little shack sat directly across the pond from Moonview, and over the years, through his living room window, he'd observed the comings and goings of the Conover family. He'd been nine years old when

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Elizabeth and George Conover, young marrieds then, bought the house on Maiden Pond. He'd watched as they'd expanded and updated the sprawling cottage to accommodate their growing family. He'd tangled more than once with their older son, Colin, a golden-haired, strapping boy who liked to stand with his arms crossed, always spoiling for a fight, unlike the younger boy, Ethan, who was forever hiding behind a book.

As the years passed, the house continued to expand to accommodate Colin and his ice-blond princess of a wife, and then their baby boy and their nanny. Of the entire Conover clan, the nanny was the only one who ever looked at Reuben as if he were human. As if he was worthy of a smile, a wave.

Until the family turned the nanny against Reuben too.

He dipped his paddle and stopped the kayak dead in the water. For a moment he merely bobbed in place, eyeing Moonview. A table and six chairs were outside on the deck, and upstairs, all the windows were open, airing out winter's stale air. He'd heard George Conover passed away a few months ago, but George's widow, Elizabeth, was back, as was her older son, Colin, and his family. Her younger son, Ethan, had not visited in years, which made Reuben think there'd been a falling-out, a rift in the family.

So he was surprised to see Ethan emerge from the house and walk down the lawn, toward Moonview's dock, where a woman was standing. He'd never seen this woman before. She was slim, with brown hair, and she waved at Reuben, a friendly gesture that so startled him that he was too paralyzed to wave back. *She doesn't know yet,* he thought. *She doesn't know she should be afraid of me.*

There was a teenage girl, too, a sprite in a purple bathing suit who was gliding through the pond like some water creature, half nymph, half fish. Another visitor he'd never seen before. He'd heard that Ethan Conover finally married, and when he saw Ethan put his arm around the woman, he realized this must be the new wife and stepdaughter. So the whole Conover family was back in Maine, presumably for George Conover's memorial service.

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May the bastard rot in hell.

Reuben turned his kayak away from Moonview and began paddling toward the opposite shore. His sister would be awake from her nap by now, and she needed his help transferring from the bed to her wheelchair. She needed to be bathed; then there was dinner to prepare and the kitchen to tidy up and Abigail's pills to dispense. An evening of duties stretched before him, but this moment on the pond was his to savor, his kayak gliding across the sunset-gilded water, the dragonflies flitting on the surface.

Then he glanced back at Moonview, looming across the water, its chimneys like talons clawing the sky, and he shuddered. *Everything is about to change,* he thought. *The Conovers are back in town.*

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CHAPTER 5

SUSAN

Susan woke up to the melody of a house finch singing its heart out. She was usually the first in the family to get up in the morning, so she was surprised to look at Ethan's side of the bed and find it was empty. In Boston, it wasn't birdsong that normally roused her awake but the early-morning roar of buses and trash trucks outside their apartment building. How luxurious it was to be lazing in bed at nine thirty, with nothing on her schedule except perhaps a swim in the pond, or a drive into the village of Purity. This was how every holiday *should* be, waking up late every morning to the tantalizing smell of coffee. Made, for once, by someone else in the household.

She pulled on jeans and a button-down shirt and followed the delicious scent downstairs to the kitchen. There she found Ethan sitting at the breakfast table, papers spread out in front of him, his pen scribbling furiously. He didn't even glance up as she walked barefoot into the room. Oh, she recognized that look of fierce concentration on his face. She didn't want to interrupt him, so she went to the coffeepot and quietly poured herself a cup. Only when she took out the cream and closed the refrigerator door did Ethan snap straight, suddenly aware that she was in the room.

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"Hey," he said, pulling off his glasses.

"Hey, back. What's all this?" She nodded at the pages, which were covered with his hastily scribbled words.

"It's coming." He laughed and shook his head in disbelief. "It's finally coming!"

"That story you've been working on?"

"No, this is something entirely new. I don't know what happened. I woke up this morning, and it all just *clicked*. Like a switch suddenly got turned on, and the words started flowing. Maybe it's being back on the pond again after all these years. Remembering all the things that happened here, all the stories I heard as a kid. Or maybe I just needed to get the hell out of Boston."

Where a cloud of failure had hung over him like a depressing miasma, choking off his words. For the first time in months, she saw the Ethan she'd married, the happy Ethan, sitting before her.

"Now I wish I'd brought my laptop," he said.

"You seem to be turning out pages just fine without it." She picked up his empty coffee cup and refilled it for him. "Where *is* everyone?"

"Mom and Arthur went to meet the minister who'll be leading the service. Colin and Brooke are off shopping, I think. Kit's still in bed." He shrugged. "Teenagers."

"And Zoe?"

"Where else?"

She went to the kitchen window and looked out at the pond. Yes, that's exactly where their daughter was, laughing and chattering with another girl as they treaded water together, their wet heads gleaming in the morning light.

"Who's that girl with her?" she asked.

"Someone she just met. Local, I think."

"That's wonderful. I'm glad she's found a new friend here. I was worried she'd have no one to talk to."

"There's always Kit."

She turned to look at him. "Seriously? That boy hardly said 'boo' to her last night. He spent the whole evening glued to Brooke."

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"You know how shy he is. Only child."

"He's almost seventeen. He should have grown out of it by now." She paused. "Is there something else going on with him?"

Ethan reached for a fresh sheet of paper. "He was really sick as a baby, in and out of the hospital. It's no surprise Brooke went a little overboard, protecting him. If there's a problem, I think it might be *her*." He looked up. "Oh, I almost forgot to tell you. Hannah's driving to Bar Harbor to do some shopping. She wondered if you'd like to go with her."

"What are you going to do all day?"

He gestured to the pages on the table. "It's going so well, I don't want to stop now."

"No, of course not. You stay here and write." She turned to the window and looked at her daughter, so happily splashing in the pond with the other girl. Zoe had a new friend, and Ethan was writing again. Could she ask for a better start to the day?

"I'd like to see Bar Harbor," she said. "I'll give Hannah a call."

*

Hannah Greene liked to talk. She talked all the way to Bar Harbor, talked over their lunch of crab cakes and salad, talked as they browsed through the souvenir shops on Main Street. Not that Susan minded all the chatter. Hannah, who had never married and lived alone, seemed delighted to share her wealth of anecdotes about the Conover boys.

"Oh, they were a pair, those two!" Hannah said as they drove back to Purity. "Colin, he's the one who caused most of the trouble. Always getting into scrapes with the local boys, and then refusing to apologize. Colin *never* apologizes for anything, because it's *never* his fault. George had to pay more than a few visits to the other parents, just to smooth things over. But your Ethan, he was never in trouble. Always the quiet one. The daydreamer."

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Susan smiled. "He's still the daydreamer. I think that's why he ended up being a writer."

"The thing is, I didn't really *want* to babysit those boys, but Elizabeth talked me into it. Money was involved, of course." Hannah winked. "Rather a lot, too, because I double-dipped. Elizabeth paid me, and so did my dad, just to get me out of the house. Grown-ups those days, they couldn't be bothered with their kids. They'd just set us loose and go about their own lives. I was only eight years old, and the six of them would go off for cocktails every evening. Can you imagine?"

"Leaving you at home alone?"

"Well, I was right next door, but still. They always were a hard-drinking bunch. I suppose that's where *I* got it from. And Colin. Wine at noon, highballs at five." She looked at Susan. "Ethan never did, though. You married the sober one."

"Was Arthur married then?"

"Arthur?" Hannah snorted. "No, he's a confirmed bachelor. What woman would put up with him?"

"You said the six adults met for cocktails every evening. Who was the sixth person?"

"Oh, that was my father's secretary."

"He had a secretary here?"

"We were living here year round then, before Dad's work got us transferred to Maryland. I *hated* leaving Maine, going to that school in Bethesda, where I didn't know anyone. Every year, I couldn't wait till August rolled around and we'd come back to the pond. It was like coming home again. And every year, those Conover boys would be taller and more handsome. Then Ethan went off to college, and I hardly saw him after that." She looked at Susan. "I liked his novel, by the way. I read it right after it came out. I don't think I ever told him."

"You should definitely tell him. He'd be thrilled to hear it from you."

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