

Cliff House

Chapter 1 Sunday, December 1 Maura

Maura Bouchard glanced in the rear view mirror at her sleeping daughter. They'd been in the car for just a few minutes when Caitlynn's eyes had closed. She'd fallen fast asleep, bringing a smile to Maura's lips. Her four-year-old daughter's head was leaning against the booster seat she'd graduated to a few months ago. Perched atop her head was a bright green baseball cap with the logo of Rivermont Children's Hospital.

Just as she and Caitlynn had been leaving Gram's apartment in downtown Rivermont, snow had started to fall. Now, big flakes landed on the windshield and stayed there, fighting the efforts of the windshield wipers. Snow hadn't been in the forecast so the flakes were a surprise and not a welcome one, especially as the force of the snowstorm increased, covering the road

With a deep sigh, Maura thought about the past two months that her daughter had spent at Children's Hospital, undergoing an aggressive, cutting-edge treatment for leukemia. Maura had spent as much of her time as she could at the hospital with Caitlynn. Caitlynn had gone into remission just as Maura was considering asking for a family leave of absence from her job. She was the budget manager in the provost's office at Lyndhurst, a private university in Rivermont. She'd used up all her vacation and sick leave time from the university to be with Caitlynn during her treatments; family leave would give her more time to spend with her daughter while she underwent treatment.

In addition to working at the university, Maura was also enrolled in the master of fine arts program at Lyndhurst. She was in her last semester of her MFA major, creative writing, and was supposed to be finishing up her thesis. But that had gone by the wayside because of Caitlynn's illness. Maura had been ready to withdraw for the semester, to postpone the thesis and finishing her MFA when two unexpected things happened.

First, she'd learned that Caitlynn was in remission. Maura had broken down in sobs when Caitlynn's oncologist told her last week that Caitlynn's tests had come back positive. She felt as though she'd been holding her breath since Caitlynn's diagnosis, and now she could breathe again.

Then a few days later, she'd received a phone call from her former father-in-law, Caitlynn's grandfather. Maura had felt a shiver go up her spine at the sound of Matthew Bouchard's voice. He'd told her he'd heard from her grandmother that Caitlynn was in remission. "She wanted to share the good news with me," Matthew told Maura.

Then Matthew continued with what Maura later considered an unanticipated offer. "I understand that you've had to put aside work on your MFA while Caitlynn was undergoing treatment. The provost mentioned that you were planning to withdraw from the program for awhile."

Maura took a deep breath and tried to speak but nothing came out. She was always tongue-tied with Matthew Bouchard. He was now the chairman of the Lyndhurst Board of Trustees, having retired five years ago as chancellor of the university. She was in awe of the man, his intellect, his success in life, his status in the

community. She'd never shared with Linc the absolute terror she felt in Matthew Bouchard's presence but she was fairly certain her ex-husband was aware of her fear.

Breaking the silence over the phone line, Matthew said, "I'd like to propose something for your consideration. I'd like you and Caitlynn to come stay at Cliff House until you've finished your thesis and your MFA."

Maura had been so shocked at his suggestion that she was speechless.

Thinking that the connection might have been lost, Matthew said, "Maura? Are you still there? Have I lost you?"

Before answering, Maura thought, *"You certainly have lost me."* But instead of saying those words out loud, she said, "I'm still here. I'm just surprised at your offer."

"Well, it seems to me that you could use some help with Caitlynn. I have a housekeeper. Perhaps you remember her? Mrs. Grand?"

"Yes, I remember her," Maura said, thinking, *"How could I forget her? I always thought she thought I was a gold digger, after Linc's money."*

"Mrs. Grand could help out with Caitlynn's care, watching over her whenever you're working. You and Caitlynn could have the west wing of the house all to yourself. I've invited your grandmother to join you and Caitlynn at Cliff House. She refused but I'm hoping she'll reconsider."

Matthew paused, waiting for Maura's reaction. But there was none so he continued, "What do you think?" He paused again, then said in a softer voice, "I would like to continue to see Caitlynn as much as possible."

Now, fighting the snow as she drove up the winding road to Cliff House, Maura once again questioned her decision to take Matthew Bouchard up on his offer. Several considerations had persuaded her. First, Linc was halfway round the world, in Japan. So she wouldn't run the risk of seeing him at his father's home. Second had been the melancholy in Matthew Bouchard's voice when he said he'd like to see more of Caitlynn. Grandfather and granddaughter deserved a close relationship. Third, Gram had encouraged her to take Mr. Bouchard up on his offer. "It would be good for Caitlynn. And you would be able to finish your master's and get that teaching position you've always wanted," Gram said.

And Maura loved Cliff House. She and Linc had stayed there early in their marriage. Matthew and Linc's mother, world-renowned author Lane Carpenter, had been on a book tour for Lane's latest best-seller and had made the house available to them. Cliff House was magnificent, all glass and stone, jutting out from the vast cliffs overlooking the Mississippi. Built by Matthew Bouchard's father, the house had been designed decades before by a protege of an internationally acclaimed architect who headed a firm in nearby St. Louis. One of the stories Maura had heard was that the house was based on Frank Lloyd Wright's famed Fallingwater

in Pennsylvania. Maura preferred the other story, the more romantic one, that Cliff House was based on the iconic mountain home featured in the 50's movie *North by Northwest*.

The worsening snowstorm wrenched Maura's thoughts away from the past and back onto the here and now. *Thank heavens I have four-wheel drive*, Maura thought as her SUV inched its way up the curving road leading to Cliff House. *There's no way I could make my way up this road without it.*

The visibility was next to nothing, and Maura was grateful that there were no other cars on the road. That is, until she saw headlights coming at her from further up the road. "Rats," she muttered under her breath. She edged over to the right side of the road. The oncoming car was going too fast in this weather, on this road. Maura considered whether she should pull off to one side of the road until the car had passed her by. But before she could do that, the car hurtled past her, then seemed to pause. To her shock, the car went into a spin and ended up in a ditch beside the road.

Maura pulled to the side of the road and stopped. She debated what to do, then quickly called 911 to report the accident. When she'd finished telling the 911 operator what had happened and the location of the accident, she ended the call and turned to look at her daughter. Caitlynn was still fast asleep in her booster seat. Maura wound her long wool scarf around her head and pulled on her gloves. Leaving the engine running, she turned up the heater, then got out of the car. The snow battered against her, a combination of frigid winds and frozen pellets.

Carefully, slowly, she made her way down the road to the scene of the accident. The car lay wedged in the ditch. The crash had caused the driver's side door to open and Maura could see a man in the driver's seat. His head rested against the steering wheel, and he wasn't moving. She called out to him, but her voice trailed off in the howling wind. For a moment, Maura debated whether to try to climb down the ditch to see if she could do anything for the man in the car. But the side of the ditch was a sharp drop-off and was covered with snow, and she reconsidered. Caitlynn was up in the car and Maura didn't want to risk injuring herself and abandoning Caitlynn.

She stood there at the side of the road for a few minutes, waiting for the emergency vehicles to arrive. Then she decided to go back to her car and check on Caitlynn and warm up. She walked up the road, taking slow, careful steps, not wanting to slip and fall. Outside the car, she quickly brushed the snow off her coat, then got in. Fortunately, Caitlynn was still fast asleep in the warm car. Maura opened the driver's side window a couple of inches so she'd be able to hear the sirens as the emergency vehicles arrived. What was taking them so long? If she remembered correctly from when she and Linc lived here at the start of their marriage, a firehouse was located just off the highway, not that far from Cliff House.

She wondered if she should call the 911 operator again and find out when the emergency vehicles would arrive. Just as she'd started to tap in 911 into her phone, she heard sirens off in the distance and tucked her phone back in her coat pocket. A moment later, she saw the flashing red and blue lights coming up the winding road. With a look back at the still sleeping Caitlynn, Maura got out of the car, this time pointing a flashlight in front of her, and headed down toward the crashed vehicle.

The first emergency vehicle to arrive was a county police SUV. The SUV stopped near the crash and two county policemen got out. Maura walked down to them and pointed to the crashed vehicle, telling them there was a man in the driver's seat but that she couldn't tell if there was anyone else in the car.

A fire engine was the next to arrive, followed closely by an ambulance, presumably with EMTs or paramedics, Maura thought.

Maura told one of the policemen standing near her that her daughter was asleep in the car and that she was going back to the car. "Let me know if there's anything I can do," she told the policeman.

"Thanks, ma'am," the young officer said. "We'll need to get a statement from you about what happened."

Maura nodded and told him she was on her way to Mr. Bouchard's house, and they could contact her there for her statement.

Maura climbed back up the hill and stood outside for a few moments, watching the rescue efforts below. It was starting to get dark, and she could barely see what was going on. She got in the car, and smiled when she saw that Caitlynn was still fast asleep. The rest was good for the girl. She'd been through difficult times the past few months.

She put the SUV into drive and started up the road. She glanced back and saw the flashing lights of the ambulance disappearing around a bend in the road. The lights were a good sign, she thought. To her it meant there was hope for the man in the crash.

The road had gotten even more snow-packed in the past hour or so since the crash. It was slow going up the hill. Maura was relieved to see the lights of Cliff House up ahead. The house was lit with white Christmas lights, and it was a sight to behold. Caitlynn was going to love the lights.

Maura pulled into the circular drive, parked behind a Mercedes sedan and turned off the engine. She got out of the SUV and went around to the right rear door. She opened the car door and stood there in the snow, gazing down at her daughter. Caitlynn was still sleeping but Maura knew she had to wake her. She leaned down and kissed Caitlynn on the cheek, then patted her shoulder, whispering, "Honeybee, it's time to wake up. We're at Grandpa's house."

Caitlynn's eyes fluttered and then opened. She looked up at her mother and smiled. "Hi, Mama," she said. "I was sleeping."

"Yes, you were, sweetie," Maura said as she undid Caitlynn's seat belt. She lifted the girl out of the booster seat and set her down on the snow-covered driveway. "Let's go see Grandpa."

Taking Caitlynn's hand, they walked up the stone stairs leading to the front entrance of Cliff House. As Maura reached out to ring the door bell, she was surprised when the door burst open.

Coming through the door was Matthew Bouchard, fumbling to put on an overcoat. "Maura," he said. "I'm so sorry but I'm on my way to the hospital. Linc was in an auto accident down the road.:"

"Oh no," Maura said. "I saw the accident but I had no idea it was Linc. Is he okay?"

"I don't know," Matthew said. "They wouldn't tell me anything over the phone, just told me to get to the hospital."

"Then go, please. Caitlynn and I will be fine," Maura said.

Matthew bent down and hugged the little girl. "Hello, Caitlynn," he said. "Grandfather has to leave but I'll be back soon to see you." He turned to Maura and said, "Mrs. Grand will get you settled."

"Thank you. Now go. And please call me and let me know how Linc is," Maura said.

"Of course," Matthew said and hurried down to the Mercedes.

Maura stood in the doorway, watching him drive away. Her heart was pounding at the thought of her ex-husband in the hospital. He had to be all right. He mustn't die. He couldn't die. She could feel the smart of tears in her eyes but willed them away.

She bent down, picked up Caitlynn and walked through the still-open front door and into the house. Waiting in the entry way was the formidable Mrs. Grand.

Chapter 2

Sunday, December 1

Maura

An hour later, Maura and Caitlynn were settled in Cliff House. Mrs. Grand had conducted Maura to the master bedroom in the west wing, telling her that Caitlynn would be in the room across the hall. But Maura said she preferred that she and Caitlynn would share the room across the hall. No way would she sleep in the master bedroom where she and Linc had stayed at the beginning of their marriage. And she definitely couldn't sleep in the bed where Caitlynn had been conceived.

Mrs. Grand had glared at her, obviously upset that Maura disagreed with her plans. With a sigh, the housekeeper led Maura and Caitlynn across the hall. The room was a delight, Maura thought. Evidently, Mr. Bouchard had instructed Mrs. Grand to prepare a special room for Caitlynn. A queen-sized canopy bed covered with a poufy pink duvet was the centerpiece of the room. There was also a matching white chest and dresser. A love seat was positioned in front of the broad windows. Curtains matching the duvet hung at the windows. A dollhouse sat on a table near the loveseat. A toy box was overflowing with dolls and Legos and stuffed animals. A child sized easel and a paint box was in a corner of the room. On one wall was a white bookcase filled with children's books. A television was setting on a stand on a wall opposite the bed. In another corner was a round table with two chairs.

Caitlynn had been enchanted with the room. She'd examined the intricacies of the dollhouse, oohing and aahing over the furniture and the tiny dolls who occupied the house. The toy box had occupied her the longest. While Maura was putting their clothes away in the closet and the chest, Caitlynn carefully took each occupant of the toy box out and placed it on the floor next to her.

Maura was so pleased with what Mr. Bouchard had arranged for Caitlynn, and the girl seemed delighted with the treasures her grandfather had arranged for her.

"Now when we see Grandpa, please be sure to thank him for such a wonderful room," Maura said. She was sitting on the love seat watching Caitlynn arrange the dolls and stuffed animals around the toy box. Every few minutes, she checked her phone hoping for a message from Mr. Bouchard about Linc. But so far nothing. She heard a tap at the door and got up to see who it was.

Mrs. Grand stood at the door, saying, "A policeman is here to see you. He said he needs to take your statement about the accident you witnessed."

Maura looked back into the room at where Caitlynn was playing, then turned back to Mrs. Grand. "Would you mind staying with Caitlynn for a few minutes while I go downstairs and talk to the policeman.?"

"It would be my pleasure," Mrs. Grand said.

Waiting in the entry way was the same young policeman she'd spoken with at the scene of the accident who'd come to take her statement. She told him what little she'd seen: the vehicle coming down the hill, pausing and then crashing into the ditch. He took notes on a tablet, and Maura wondered what had happened to little black notebooks. When she'd finished with her description, the policeman thanked her for her time and left.

Maura went back upstairs and thanked Mrs. Grand for watching Caitlynn but got no response from the woman. Closing the door behind her, Maura shook her head, not knowing what to make of the housekeeper but dismissing her annoyance. She walked over and joined Caitlynn at the toy box where the little girl was still playing with the dolls and stuffed animals.

Half an hour later, Maura heard another tap on the door and went to answer it. Mrs. Grand stood outside the door with a cart covered with dishes. "I assumed you would prefer to eat in your room," the housekeeper said stiffly as she rolled the cart into the room and over next to the table in the corner. She put place mats on the table and then set silverware, plates of food and glasses at each place.

Maura felt her stomach rumble at the sight and smell of the food. Lunch had been a long time ago, and she was starving. Mrs. Grand walked over to the door, pushing the cart in front of her. She left the cart just inside the door and closed it firmly behind her.

Maura called Caitlynn over to the table, and they both sat down and examined their plates of food. The food smelled and looked delicious. Each plate contained fried chicken, mashed potatoes and green beans. Bowls of fruit, glasses of milk and water, and two pieces of chocolate cake finished off the spread.

"Mama, this looks yummy," Caitlynn said. "I'm really hungry. Can we eat now?"

"The correct way is to say 'May we eat,' sweetie, and the answer is a very definite yes," Maura said. As they ate, every few minutes Maura checked her phone for a message from Mr. Bouchard. But there was nothing.

Maura was pleased to see Caitlynn eating so well. During her leukemia treatments, the girl had little to no appetite. At times, she was overcome by nausea and vomiting. It had broken Maura's heart to see her baby girl in such distress.

"Mama, can -- I mean may I have my chocolate cake now?" Caitlynn asked in her sweet little girl voice.

"Yes, honeybee, it's time for our chocolate cake," Maura said.

Maura placed one piece of the cake in front of Caitlynn and the other piece in her own place. The two of them ate in silence, enjoying the deliciousness of the cake. Maura wondered if Mrs. Grand had baked the cake herself or bought it at a bakery. From her experience five years ago, she was fairly certain Mrs. Grand had baked it. Maura remembered the woman as a remarkable cook, no matter how badly she treated Maura.

Maura heard a light tap on the door and got up from the table. She walked across the room and opened the door. Mrs. Grand stood outside the door, surrounded by Maura and Caitlynn's luggage.

"Oh, Mrs. Grand, you didn't have to do that. I was going to get everything from the car in a few minutes," Maura said, her face flaming red from embarrassment

Mrs. Grand stared at her for a moment, then said, "Our handyman stopped by to shovel the snow off the drive and sidewalks, and I had him get your things out of the car and bring them upstairs on the elevator."

"Oh, well, thank you for doing that. And thank you for the delicious dinner. I was amazed at how much Caitlynn ate. She really liked everything, especially the chocolate cake," Maura said.

"Well, I would do anything for Mr. Bouchard's granddaughter," Mrs. Grand said, then turned to leave. At the door, she turned back and said, "Would you like breakfast served in your room or downstairs in the dining room?"

Maura turned to Caitlynn and asked, "Where would you like to have breakfast, honeybee?"

The girl cocked her head to the side, considering. "Downstations, Mama."

Maura chuckled at her daughter's invented word and to her surprise heard an answering chuckle from Mrs. Grand. *Perhaps there was hope for the woman yet*, she thought.

"Downstations it is, then, Mrs. Grand," Maura said.

"As you wish, ma'am," Mrs. Grand replied, opening the door.

So much for have a good evening or even good night, Maura thought.

"Mrs. Grand? A word in the hall, please?" Maura said, causing the housekeeper to pause at the door. Maura turned to Caitlynn and said, "Mama will be back in a jiff, baby."

Out in the hall, with the door to the bedroom closed, the two women stared at one another for a tense moment, then Maura said, "Mrs. Grand, have you heard from Mr. Bouchard about Linc's condition."

For a few seconds, Maura was sure Mrs. Grand was going to walk away without answering her. But then the older woman spoke, her voice soft and tentative.

"No, I haven't heard anything. I thought perhaps you had?" Her words trailed off.

"No, nothing," Maggie said, then added, "Thank you." She turned to go back in the room where Caitlynn waited for her, then stopped and turned back to Mrs. Grand.

"I thought Linc was in Japan. In fact, I was sure he was there. That was the only reason I agreed to take Mr. Bouchard up on his offer to stay here. Because I could count on not seeing Linc," Maura said, shaking her head as she spoke.

"Mr. Linc returned from Japan this morning." Mrs. Grand stopped, as if she'd said too much. Then, in a harsh voice, she continued. "Mr. Linc found out Mr. Bouchard had invited you and your daughter to stay. Mr. Linc was furious and came home to confront his father and to insist Mr. Bouchard retract his invitation."

Maura felt the words slam into her brain, as she tried to make sense of them. This was her fault. She should have never said yes to Mr. Bouchard's proposal.

Mrs. Grand gave her one last hate-filled look and left. Maura stood there at the door, feeling the guilt bearing down on her. Finally, she turned and went back into the room. Caitlynn had left the table and was sitting on the floor, holding one of the baby dolls from toy box in her arms.

When Caitlynn saw her mother, she said, "Mama, this baby wants to sleep with me tonight. Is that okay? Can -- may the baby sleep in the bed with you and me?"

Maura got down on the floor beside Caitlynn and cuddled her daughter in her arms. "That would be good.. I'd like you and the baby doll to sleep right next to me tonight."

Chapter 3

Sunday, December 1

Matthew Bouchard

Matthew Bouchard paced up and down the hospital corridor, unable to sit in the nearby waiting room any longer. He'd tried, but the inactivity had grated on his nerves. So he left the waiting room and began his pacing.

Why was it taking them so long to let him know how his son was doing. It seemed like hours since anyone had given him an update. One of the emergency room doctors had told him his son was in critical condition and was being taken to surgery. The doctor directed him to the eighth floor of the hospital where the operating rooms were located.

"You'll find the waiting room just opposite the bank of elevators," the ER doctor said. Matthew thanked him, thinking the doctor looked like he was still in high school. Taking the elevator up to the eighth floor, he found himself saying, "*Dear God, dear God,*" over and over in his mind. He'd never been much of a praying man, but talking to God seemed to be the only thing he could do.

At one point, he'd stopped his pacing and stood at one of the windows at the end of the hall. It was dark outside but in the lights on the parking lot, he could see the snow still coming down. The cars on the lot were covered in snow, and the hospital's maintenance staff was out plowing the lot. For a moment, he buried his head in his hands and fought back tears. His son was really his only family, and he couldn't bear the thought of losing him.

Then, taking a couple of deep breaths, Matthew headed back to the waiting room. He took a seat near the door and looked around the room. The same people were sitting in the same chairs as when he was here before. He thought he could feel the sorrow permeating the room.

What are we all waiting for? He thought. *For a miracle? Or for the worst news imaginable?*

Matthew leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes. He'd already had one unimaginable loss in his life. He couldn't go through another one. He couldn't.

Chapter 4

Sunday, December 1

Maura Bouchard

Maura lay awake, unable to fall asleep. Next to her, Caitlynn was deep in sleep, clutching the baby doll to her chest. Maura held her phone in her hand. She had silenced the phone so it wouldn't wake Caitlynn. But she intended to keep it close in case Mr. Bouchard called or texted.

What could be taking so long with Linc? Maura thought. Surely they knew his condition by now. Why wasn't Mr. Bouchard letting her know what was going on?

She reached out and put her arm around Caitlynn, giving her a gentle hug. Then slowly, carefully, so as not to wake the little girl, she climbed out of bed. A night light in the corner of the room gave her enough light to see without having to turn on a lamp. She went over to her briefcase and pulled out her iPad. Curling up on the love seat, she began swiping through the pages of her thesis.

She'd chosen as the topic of her thesis a biography of Lane Carpenter interwoven with a literary analysis of the author's writings. The topic had seemed inevitable to her. She'd taken a creative writing course with Lane six years ago and had only known her mother-in-law a few short months before her death but had been enormously impressed with the woman and her books.

Maura found what she was looking for on the iPad: the section that dealt with Lane's tragic drowning. It had happened five years ago, a few months after Maura and Linc's wedding. Lane and Matthew had just returned from Lane's book tour and had gone out on the Mississippi on their 45-foot cabin cruiser. Accompanying them was Lane's assistant Brad and Lane's younger sister Tess. The weather had unexpectedly taken a turn for the worse, and a severe thunderstorm inundated the cruiser with waves. Tragically, Lane and her assistant were swept overboard. Matthew and Tess were drenched but all right.

Matthew contacted the Coast Guard, and a massive search and rescue effort was initiated. Hours later, it turned into a search and recovery effort. At dawn, the Coast Guard recovered Lane's assistant's body. Despite a lengthy, intensive search, Lane's body was never recovered.

Following Lane's death, Linc changed. He withdrew, spent long hours walking alone on the Cliff House property. Maura tried everything she could think of to reach him, but nothing worked. The situation came to a head when Maura discovered that she was unexpectedly pregnant. She thought the news might snap Linc out of his depression but the opposite happened. He'd been furious, yelling that they couldn't have children, they mustn't have children.

Maura had been shocked at his violent reaction to her news. She'd been expecting joy and instead received rage. Maura had tried to reason with Linc, to no avail.

"You will have an abortion!" he'd shouted at her. "You will not have this child!"

Maura had broken down into tears, sobbing that she couldn't do that, wouldn't do that. Linc had stormed out of the house without a word.

With Linc gone and Lane dead, the place was like a morgue. Mr. Bouchard sequestered himself in his study, taking his meals there and never emerging. Mrs. Grand stomped around the house, a perpetual glare on her face.

After a few days, Maura couldn't take it anymore. She'd packed up her belongings and left Cliff House, hoping to go stay at her grandmother's apartment in downtown Rivermont.

Maura had been an only child, and her only close family was her maternal grandmother. Her father had died of a sudden heart attack right before her high school graduation, and her mother died of an aneurysm while Maura was in college. After she graduated from Lyndhurst University, she'd gone to live with her grandmother.

So her grandmother was the only one she could turn to now. She called Gram and asked if she could come stay with her for a few days. Gram said, "Of course you can, darling. Whatever you need." Maura knew her grandmother was surprised at the request but bless her heart, she didn't ask any questions.

Once she was settled in Gram's apartment, Maura shared a much-watered-down version of her story with her grandmother. Gram was as blown away by Linc's adverse reaction to the pregnancy as Maura had been. Neither woman could fathom why he would act that way.

Maura didn't hear from Linc directly again. A few weeks after she left Cliff House, she received divorce papers from his attorney. The papers provided a generous settlement for Maura and committed Linc to future child support payments if, in the words of the document, "the child was born." Maura assumed that meant Linc was still hoping she would change her mind and have an abortion.

That was never going to happen, Maura had thought.

At first, Maura had wanted to refuse the settlement, refuse the child support. But fortunately, Gram talked some sense into her.

"You have to think of the baby, sweetie. Don't let anything interfere with you giving him or her the best life possible," had been Gram's advice.

So Maura signed the divorce papers and accepted the settlement and the promise of future child support. She returned to the provost's office at Lyndhurst in a new position as budget manager.

When she and Linc married, she'd left her job so she'd be able to travel with Linc. As an investment banker with a firm based in Rivermont but with clients all over the world, he traveled a great deal, and they both wanted Maura to be able to travel with him.

For months after the end of her marriage, she'd walked around in a fog. It felt surreal to be back in her former department, as if the year and a half with Linc in her life had never happened. As the pregnancy progressed, she'd begun to get excited about the baby. When she'd found out she was having a girl, Gram had started knitting pink everything. Maura felt blessed to have Gram in her life and hoped her baby would feel the same way. Maura had felt guilty living with Gram and had offered to find her own place but Gram had protested, saying, "You can't imagine how much joy it gives me to have you back here with me. Please don't go."

For her daughter, Maura had chosen the name Caitlynn as a tribute to Gram's own grandmother who'd emigrated from Ireland when she was 15 years old. Caitlynn was an Irish name that meant pure, and Maura felt it would be perfect for her baby girl.

When baby Caitlynn was born, Maura took a maternity leave, then went back to work in the provost's office at Lyndhurst when the maternity leave ended. Gram became Caitlynn's "granny nanny" -- much to Gram's delight and Maura's relief. She knew Gram would care for Caitlynn ten times better than even the best child care. She'd made a pact with herself to set aside the money from Linc for Caitlynn. She'd placed the divorce settlement in an account for the Caitlynn's education and planned to do the same with any child support Linc might provide.

Shortly after Caitlynn's birth, Matthew Bouchard sent a gift for Caitlynn, an elegant baby blanket that looked handmade. He enclosed a note with it, asking if he could come meet the baby sometime, at her convenience. He included his cell phone number in the note.

Maura didn't respond to Matthew Bouchard's request, not wanting to have anything to do with any of the Bouchards. Then, one day at work, the provost, Arthur Connery, had asked her to come into his office. At first after hearing his request, she had worried she was going to lose her job.

But Arthur had realized what she must be thinking and had quickly put her mind at ease, telling her she was doing a great job. He said that her hard work was much appreciated by him and the rest of the staff.

He invited her to sit on the sofa, and he sat in a chair across from her. His voice was gentle when he said, "Maura, you know that Chancellor Bouchard and I are friends, quite close friends, in fact."

She'd nodded and thought, *Former Chancellor Bouchard*. But she knew Provost Connery would always use Mr. Bouchard's former title.

"He asked me to talk with you about his request to meet his granddaughter. He hoped I might be able to encourage you to introduce your daughter to her grandfather," Arthur said.

Maura felt a stab of guilt at his words. She'd been unable to grant Mr. Bouchard's request but hadn't felt good about it. As she sat there in the provost's office, she realized that Caitlynn should know her grandfather, and her grandfather should know Caitlynn.

Maura looked at the provost, and said, "Yes, sir, I know I should do that. It's just that--" she let her voice trail off, not knowing how to tell him why she hadn't replied to Mr. Bouchard's request.

"I know you've been through a difficult time, my dear, with your marriage ending and having the baby on your own. I know how hard all of that has been on you," the provost said.

Maura had sighed and said with a break in her voice and tears in her eyes, "But that doesn't mean I should keep Caitlynn from her grandfather. I shouldn't do that," Maura said,.

When she got home from work that night, she'd dug out the note from Mr. Bouchard and gathering up her courage, she'd called his cell number. The thought of speaking to the great Matthew Bouchard scared her but she pushed her way past the fear. She'd invited him over on Sunday to meet Caitlynn and to have dinner with her and her grandmother.

From then on, Matthew Bouchard visited Caitlynn every month or so, always on a weekday when Maura was at work at the university. Gram had been more than willing to host Mr. Bouchard's visits to his granddaughter, wanting Caitlynn to develop a relationship with the man.

"He's never said it directly but I think he knows how uncomfortable you feel around him," Gram told her. "I think he's trying to spare your feelings by visiting Caitlynn when you're not home.'

Maura had been grateful that she wasn't forced to interact with Matthew Bouchard. When Caitlynn was two years old, to Maura's surprise, Gram told her that Mr. Bouchard had installed a car seat in the back of his car and had asked permission to every once in awhile take Caitlynn to a nearby park. Gram had broached the possibility to Maura, and Maura had reluctantly agreed. She knew it was a positive thing for Caitlynn to have a male figure in her life, even if it was her grandfather and not her father.

Regular as clockwork, Linc deposited child support in an account for Caitlynn but he'd never asked to meet his daughter. Maura was also grateful for that. She could not have borne seeing Linc, having to talk to him. He had broken her heart beyond repair, and she wanted him out of her life forever.

When Caitlynn was diagnosed with leukemia, it was Gram who was tasked with sharing that news with Mr. Bouchard. Maura avoided speaking with him whenever possible. Gram said he had offered whatever help they might need with Caitlynn's treatment. Mr. Bouchard had offered the services of his brother, Dr. Paul Bouchard, who was head of the Lyndhurst Medical School and who was a world-renowned physician. Eventually, it was Dr. Bouchard who had arranged for Caitlynn's inclusion in the clinical trial that had resulted in her remission.

On his last visit to Caitlynn before she and her mother came to Cliff House, Mr. Bouchard had once again invited Gram to join Maura in her stay at Cliff House but Gram had graciously declined.

Now, sitting here on the love seat in Caitlynn's room at Cliff House, Maura still hoped to persuade her grandmother to change her mind. In fact, she'd give Gram a call in the morning and bring up the subject once more. She had an idea that might get her grandmother to reconsider.

Chapter 5

Monday, December 2

Maura Bouchard

The next morning, Maura awoke at dawn, craving more sleep because of her restless night, but unable to fall back asleep. Caitlynn slept on, still clutching the baby doll, her cheeks rosy, her breathing even and steady.

Maura fumbled around in the bed, looking for her phone. She'd gone to asleep holding the phone but during the night it must have fallen out of her hand. She finally found it, wedged under Caitlynn's warm little body. Maura climbed out of bed and went into the bathroom. She scrolled through the phone, looking for a message from Mr. Bouchard but couldn't find anything. Quietly, she headed downstairs hoping to find Mrs. Grand, to see if she'd heard anything.

In the entry hall, she looked out one of the side windows for Mr. Bouchard's Mercedes but saw only her snow-covered SUV. She went into the kitchen and found Mrs. Grand sitting at the kitchen counter drinking a cup of coffee.

"Good morning, Mrs. Grand," Maura said.

Mrs. Grand gave a brisk nod of her head but said nothing.

"Have you heard anything from Mr. Bouchard about Linc?" Maura asked.

Mrs. Grand frowned, sipped her coffee, then finally said, "He called this morning with an update. Mr. Linc had surgery, and now he's in intensive care."

"What is the doctor saying about his chances for recovery?" Maura asked, hating to say the words.

"Mr. B. didn't say anything about that. He's staying at the hospital. They found a room for him," Mrs. Grand said, not looking at Maura when she spoke. She stood up and walked over to the stove, saying, "Are you ready for breakfast?"

"No, thank you. I'll be back down later with Caitlynn for breakfast," Maura said, walking briskly out of the kitchen. As she walked up the front staircase, she gritted her teeth at the thought of Mrs. Grand's hostility. Even with Linc suffering life-threatening injuries, the woman couldn't or wouldn't behave civilly to Maura.

An hour later, Maura and Caitlynn descended the back staircase, which led directly to the kitchen. Caitlynn was excited about going 'downstation' to eat breakfast. The kitchen was empty when they walked in but Maura could smell coffee, bacon and something sweet. On the kitchen counter were covered dishes holding bacon and French toast. A full pot of coffee sat on one side of the counter. A note was positioned prominently in the middle of the counter. It read:

"Juice, chocolate milk and fruit in the refrigerator. Gone to take clothes, etc. to Mr. B."

Maura picked up the note, crumpled it into a ball and threw it in the trash can next to the sink. She looked around the kitchen and noticed that places were set for them in the dining alcove adjoining the kitchen. Two plates were on the kitchen counter, and Maura scooped food onto the plates. As she worked, she watched Caitlynn dancing around the huge kitchen, checking everything out. Maura smiled and thought, *It's been so long since I've seen her like this -- having fun, acting like a normal little girl.*

As Maura was putting their plates on the table in the dining alcove, she heard the outside kitchen door open. She turned, expecting to see Mrs. Grand walk through the door. Instead, she saw an older woman who looked vaguely familiar.

The two women stared at one another, neither speaking.

Chapter 6

Monday, December 2

Matthew Bouchard

At dawn, Matthew awoke and twisted uncomfortably in the chair next to Linc's bed in the ICU where he'd dozed off and on during the night. He woke each time the nurse came in the room to check on his son. He'd whispered his questions to her, not wanting to rouse Linc. Each time, the nurse had answered with the equivalent of, "He's holding his own."

Last night, while he was waiting for word on Linc's condition, Matthew had called his brother Paul and filled him in on what had happened. Paul had insisted on coming to the hospital, and Matthew had been grateful for his brother's presence, especially when they talked with Linc's doctor, Dr. Emil, about Linc's prognosis.

"We've put your son into a medically induced coma to allow the swelling in his brain to go down. He took quite a bump on the head in the accident. We did surgery on his crushed knee. Fortunately, tests don't reveal any other injuries but we'll keep him under close observation to make sure there's no internal bleeding."

Paul and the doctor had discussed more of the medical details of Linc's condition, and Matthew tried to keep up but finally decided that Paul would tell him what he needed to know. After Dr. Emil left, Paul had stayed with Matthew for another hour or so, reassuring his brother that Linc was in good hands. Matthew had reluctantly asked Paul to call his sister-in-law.

"Paul, I just can't deal with Tess. Would you do me the greatest favor and call let to her know about Linc?" Matthew had said.

"Of course, kid. I'll step out in the hall and call her," Paul said standing up, stretching and walking out of the waiting room.

Matthew watched his older brother walk out of the waiting room and into the hall. Thinking how he had depended on the wisdom of his brother all his life. Now here he was, depending on Paul again.

After Paul left for home, Matthew thought he felt more alone than he ever had in his life. He pulled out his phone and called Mrs. Grand to give her an update on Linc. He asked her to pass the information along to Maura, and Mrs. Grand hesitated before finally saying, "Of course, Mr. B."

After ending the call, he'd shaken his head in frustration. He'd never understood the hostility and obvious dislike that Mrs. Grand had shown to his former daughter-in-law from the first time Linc had brought Maura to Cliff House.

A few minutes later, one of the nurses had come into the waiting room where Matthew and Paul had talked with Dr. Emil and told him he could come sit at his son's bedside in the ICU.

Chapter 7

Monday, December 2

Maura Bouchard

"May I help you?" Maura said to the woman.

"Who are you?" the woman asked.

"My name is Maura Bouchard..." Maura said as the woman interrupted her.

"Of course, Maura," the woman said. "What are you doing here?"

Maura hesitated, not quite sure how to answer. Then she said, "Mr. Bouchard invited me and my daughter to stay here for awhile."

"Daughter? Oh, yes. Katherine, is it?" the woman asked.

"No, her name is Caitlynn." Caitlynn had come to stand by her mother and was looking curiously at the woman. "May I ask who you are?" Maura said.

"I'm Tess Carpenter. Don't you remember me?" the woman said.

Maura hesitated, looking intently at the woman. Finally, she said, "Yes, I do, I remember meeting you at my wedding. You're Lane Carpenter's sister, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm Lane's sister. Or I was until she died. Did you know she died?" Tess Carpenter asked.

"Yes, I knew she died," Maura said.

"Is Matthew here? I came to see him, to see if there's any news about Linc," Tess said.

"No, Mr. Bouchard isn't here. He's still at the hospital. You know about Linc?" Maura said.

"Yes," Tess said. "Matthew's brother Paul called to tell me. Evidently, Linc is in bad shape."

Maura felt a stab of pain in her heart at the thought of Linc in bad shape. She looked at Tess, trying to remember what she knew about the woman. As best she could recall, Tess hadn't been a close member of the

family. Linc called her his bizarre aunt but had never expanded on that description. Tess was at the wedding and the reception, and Maura thought those were the only times she'd seen the woman.

Tess looked around the kitchen and asked, "Where's Mrs. Grand? She usually guards this kitchen like it's Fort Knox."

"She took some things to Mr. Bouchard, at the hospital," Maura said.

"Of course she did. She lives to serve that man," Tess said, a disdainful tone in her voice.

"Well, my daughter and I were about to have breakfast. If you'll excuse us...", Maura let her voice trail off and with her arm around Caitlynn's shoulder, headed to the dining alcove.

"I'll be back later, when Matthew returns home," Tess said and went out the back door.

As Maura and Caitlynn ate breakfast, Maura tried to remember anything more about Tess Carpenter. She'd gotten strange vibrations from the woman and wondered again what would cause Linc to call his aunt bizarre.

Breakfast over, Maura put the dishes in the dishwasher, then took Caitlynn's hand and led her up the back staircase, just off the kitchen.

Chapter 8

Monday, December 2

Matthew Bouchard

That morning, Mrs. Grand brought a change of clothes and some toiletries for Matthew. They sat together in the waiting room, and Matthew thanked her for coming. She'd also brought a thermos of coffee and several of her homemade muffins.

"You're too kind to me," Matthew said, biting into one of the muffins, then taking a sip of coffee.

"How is Mr. Linc doing, sir? Has there been any improvement in his condition?" Mrs. Grand asked.

"I spoke with Linc's doctor a few minutes before you arrived," Matthew said. "Linc continues to improve, he says. The swelling in the brain is subsiding, and the doctor thinks they may be able to bring him out of the coma tomorrow. So that's really great news."

"Yes, it is. Mr. Linc is such a dear man, and he must get better," Mrs. Grand said.

"How are Maura and Caitlynn doing?" Matthew asked.

"I didn't see Caitlynn this morning, sir. I saw Maura quite early. I left breakfast for them before coming here to the hospital," Mrs. Grand said.

Matthew tried to think of a way he could ease things between Mrs. Grand and Maura but decided it was hopeless. Mrs. Grand was never going to accept Maura. But at least the woman seemed to have a soft spot for Caitlynn so he'd go with that.

"How are other things?" Matthew asked.

"Everything's fine, still the same, of course, but fine. I'll stop by on my way home and give Tess a break," Mrs. Grand said.

"Thank you, as always. When you go back to the house, please give Caitlynn my love," he said.

"Certainly, sir. She seems to be a delightful little girl. And it's such a miracle that she's now in remission," Mrs. Grand said, a seldom-heard softness in her voice.

Mrs. Grand stood and said, "Well, I'll be on my way. Thank you for the good news about Mr. Linc."

"And thank you for bringing me clothes and muffins. I appreciate it," Matthew said. He walked Mrs. Grand to the elevator, then went to the rest room to change into clean clothes and shave. Fifteen minutes later, he headed back to his post by his boy's bedside.

Chapter 9

Monday, December 2

Maura Bouchard

Upstairs in the bedroom, Caitlynn settled herself in the middle of the room with the dollhouse and began playing with the tiny dolls and furniture.

Maura pulled her laptop out of her briefcase and set it up on the table where she and Caitlynn had dinner last night. She was curious about Tess Carpenter and was going to see what she could find online. Also, she thought Tess Carpenter might be a good source on information about Lane Carpenter's childhood, her formative years.

She typed Tess's name into Google and started scrolling through the results. Maura was surprised to see that the results for Tess seemed to always include some connection to Lane Carpenter. It was as though Tess didn't have much of a life or any life, actually, apart from her celebrity sister. Tess seemed to have been some kind of permanent companion to Lane. Tess's name was included in feature articles about Lane and in various news articles about Lane's book signings.

Maura checked LinkedIn but Tess didn't have an entry. Lane's was quite extensive, including information on her books, her charitable activities and her educational background. Maura bookmarked the entry for future use.

At the table, Maura leaned back in the chair, closed her eyes and tried to remember whatever information she knew about Tess Carpenter. At first, the only thing she could recall was Linc referring to her as his bizarre aunt. At the time, Maura hadn't thought anything of his comment. Most families had their unusual members, and evidently the Bouchards, at least according to Linc, had his Aunt Tess.

Maura was about to put away her laptop when she had an idea. Was it possible that Lane Carpenter's novels contained a character similar to Lane's sister Tess. Maura turned back to her laptop and pulled up the detailed bibliography she'd compiled of Lane's novels. As she refreshed her memory of the novels' plots and characters, she was surprised to see that several of the novels, three at first glance, had sisters as main characters and that in all cases, one of the sisters was a disturbed individual who was somewhat supported by the stronger sister.

She looked up from the laptop to check on Caitlynn and saw she was still absorbed in the dollhouse. "Is there anything I can get you, sweetie?" she asked.

Caitlynn thought for a moment, then said, "No, Mama. I have everything I need."

Caitlynn's words brought a lump to her throat. *What a dear sweet girl she is*, Maura thought, turning back to her laptop. Then, deciding to take a look at the actual novels, she picked up her tablet and began skimming through the first of the three books that featured sisters. The problematic sister in this novel was

clearly a narcissistic sociopath who cared for no one and nothing but herself. Maura remembered when she first read the book how much disliked the sociopathic sister and couldn't understand why the supportive sister had put up with her behavior. She supposed it was because the supportive sister felt guilty at having a successful career, a loving husband and good children.

She turned to the second book on her tablet and found a similar situation, although in this book, the sociopathic sister had a nervous breakdown and was institutionalized. The supportive sister visited frequently, then brought her sister home to live with her and her family. That didn't work out well. The sociopathic sister tried to seduce the husband. When that failed, she tried to alienate the children from their mother. That too, failed. The supportive sister finally had enough and asked her sister to leave.

Turning to the third book, she found quite a different situation. The two sisters were at each others' throats from childhood on. The supportive sister refused to be taken advantage of by her sociopathic sister. She only allowed her sister on the periphery of her life and made sure the sister had little contact with her family.

Maura started making notes, interested in the progression of the supportive sister's approach in the three books. She wondered where Lane Carpenter herself had been on that progression before her death.

She felt the vibration of her phone in her pocket and pulled it out. Gram was calling. All of sudden, Maura realized she hadn't called or texted her grandmother since she got here. So Gram didn't know about Linc. She had intended to call her grandmother first thing this morning and update her about Linc. She was also going to play the Caitlynn card with Gram in an effort to get her to change her mind and come stay at Cliff House.

Maura answered the call and said, "Gram, hold on for a minute. I want to go out in the hall." She walked over to the middle of the room where Caitlynn was still absorbed in the dollhouse and said, "I'm going out in the hall for a minute to talk to Gram. Will you be all right?"

"Yes, Mama. Can - may I talk to Gram when you're done?" Caitlynn asked.

"Yes, sweetie. You sure may. I'll be right back." Maura leaned down and kissed the top of Caitlynn's head, then went out in the hall, closing the door tightly behind her.

"I'm back, Gram," she said.

"I was starting to get worried about you, Mimi," Gram said, using the childhood name Maura had called herself.

"Caitlynn and I are fine," Maura said, then added, "But Linc was in an accident."

"An accident? Overseas?" Gram asked.

"No, here, on the Cliff House road. I saw the accident as I was coming up the road but I didn't know it was him till I got to Cliff House. He's in the hospital," Maura said, trying to keep her voice steady.

"Oh dear, that's awful. Matthew must be beside himself," Gram said. It gave Maura a start to hear Gram refer to Mr. Bouchard as Matthew. But it made sense since Gram had known the Bouchards even before Maura and Linc's marriage. Prior to retiring to take care of Caitlynn, Gram had been an English lecturer at Lyndhurst University and knew the Bouchards from the university.

Gram added, "But didn't you tell me Linc was in Japan?"

"That's what I thought. I didn't know he'd returned. I'd never have accepted Mr. Bouchard's offer if I'd known Linc was back."

Gram said, "Hmmm," knowing full well how Maura avoided her ex-husband whenever possible.

Without quite realizing what she was saying, Maura said slowly, "Gram, I've been thinking. Could you please reconsider joining us here at Cliff House? I don't like to say this but Mrs. Grand is just as hateful as ever to me. I don't want her spending time with Caitlynn if I can help it. Please, Gram. It would mean so much to me, and Caitlynn would love it."

"Let me think about it, okay? Linc's accident certainly changes things. I'll let you know in a little bit," Gram said.

"Thank you, thank you, dear sweet Gram. Now, your great-granddaughter would like to talk to her Gram," Maura said. She walked back into the bedroom and said to Caitlynn, "Here's your Gram." She handed the phone to the little girl.

When Caitlynn had finished talking to Gram, Maura put in one last plug for Gram joining them at Cliff House, then said a quick good-bye and ended the call. As she went back to her laptop, she wondered if Gram had known Tess Carpenter or knew anything about her. She'd be sure to ask the next time they talked.

Chapter 10

Monday, December 16

Matthew Bouchard

Two weeks later, Matthew brought Linc home from the hospital. Linc's doctor had recommended a stint at a rehab facility for Linc but Matthew had said they'd bring in the necessary personnel and equipment to have Linc do rehab at Cliff House.

Linc was situated in the west wing of Cliff House, in the spacious room next to the equally spacious master bedroom where his father slept. Linc's room was outfitted with a top of the line hospital bed, stretching equipment, weight lifting equipment, two computers on rolling desks, and a huge television. Off in one corner was a treadmill for use later, when Linc's crushed kneecap was healed. In another corner was a motorized wheelchair that looked like it could win the Gran Prix

Matthew arranged for two well-known Rivermont physical therapists to rotate coming to Cliff House in the next few weeks for daily therapy sessions. Linc's doctor had told them that as the kneecap healed, Linc's best exercise options would be low-impact and non-weight-bearing, like a stationary bike and certain weightlifting programs where the knees don't have to absorb the weights.

Matthew also hired two nurses on rotating shifts to keep an eye on Linc and help him with whatever he needed. Matthew didn't want to overburden Mrs. Grand with Linc's care. That decision hadn't gone over well with Mrs. Grand. She doted on Mr. Linc and wanted to be the one taking care of him. But despite her protests, she had no choice but to accept Mr. Bouchard's decision.

Linc's doctor had agreed to turn Linc's case over to his uncle, Paul Bouchard. And Paul was insisting on daily visits to his nephew. Linc had protested all of his father's over-the-top arrangements but Matthew had just smiled and patted his son on the shoulder, saying, "Everything will be just fine, son."

On Linc's first day at Cliff House, Matthew asked Maura if he could take Caitlynn to visit her father in his new quarters. Maura had hesitated a split second before saying, "Of course, Mr. Bouchard, please do."

Maura knew that every once in awhile, Linc had joined his father in his park visits with Caitlynn. When the weather was too cold outside for the park, Matthew would take Caitlynn to a nearby ice cream shop, and a few times, Linc joined them there. But his travel schedule prevented him from seeing his daughter as often as his father did.

At lunch the day of Linc's homecoming, Matthew asked Caitlynn if she would like to come with him to visit her father. Caitlynn had replied, Yes, Pop Pop!" with great enthusiasm, using her name for Matthew.

In Linc's room, Caitlynn hesitated before walking slowly over to the bed where her father lay propped up. Linc smiled and said, "Hi, Caitlynn."

Caitlynn stood by the bed, staring at her father. One of his legs was in a cast, and he still had a bandage on his head from his head injury. She finally said, "Hi, Daddy." She paused a moment, then asked, "Are you okay? Does your head hurt?"

"I'm good," Linc said. "My head used to hurt but not now. I'm just glad to be home. And I'm really glad that you're here."

"Me, too," Caitlynn said. "You have to see my room with all the toys. It's super!"

"I would like that," Linc said. "You like staying here?"

"Yes! It's great."

Matthew walked over to where Caitlynn was standing and took hold of her hand. "We'll let your Daddy rest now, okay?"

"Okay, Pop Pop. I'll come back and see you later, Daddy," Caitlynn said. Linc reached out and patted Caitlynn's hand, then she and her grandfather walked out of the room.

Chapter 11

Monday, December 16

Linc Bouchard

Linc was going crazy being in the same house as Maura and knowing how much she detested him. At least she was letting him see Caitlynn. For that, he would be forever grateful.

When Caitlynn was born, Linc swore he could never let her into his life or his heart. He thought that because of all that had happened, he couldn't get close to Caitlynn. He knew his father visited Caitlynn, always when Maura was at work. Matthew would share stories of Caitlynn's antics with Linc, and Linc would try not to listen. Try was the operative word there. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't prevent thoughts of Caitlynn from creeping into his consciousness and making themselves at home there.

Finally, one day shortly before Caitlynn's first birthday, Matthew told Linc he was meeting Emily Price, Caitlynn's great-grandmother at the indoor playground at the mall. Matthew invited his son to come along but Linc refused, as he always did. Then, just as Matthew was about to walk out the front door, Linc unexpectedly changed his mind and followed his father out the door.

He remembered vividly that first time he met his daughter. She'd been almost a year old then. Linc fell in love at first sight with Caitlynn, just as he'd fallen in love at first sight with her mother. From then on, whenever he was in town, Linc accompanied his father on visits to Caitlynn.

Now, sitting in the wheelchair by the windows in his bedroom, he let the regrets of his life spill over him. His biggest regret was, of course, destroying his marriage to Maura. He'd been so sure he was doing the right thing, the only thing possible, in insisting that Maura have an abortion. How could he have done anything else under the circumstances? He pushed the thoughts away, knowing that what was done was done.

Chapter 12

Monday, December 16

Maura Bouchard

Gram's decision a couple of weeks ago to join her daughter and granddaughter at Cliff House had raised Maura's spirits. She felt less alone and out of place, and Caitlynn had been over the moon that Gram was there.

Gram had taken up residence in the master bedroom across the hall from Maura and Caitlynn. In the evenings, after Caitlynn was tucked in for the night, Maura would join Gram in her room. Sometimes they would watch TV or a movie. Gram always had her crocheting near at hand, as she worked on one of her afghans. Currently she was making baby afghans for the children's home in Rivermont. Caitlynn was anxiously awaiting the time when Gram would teach her to crochet. Gram had promised crocheting lessons to Caitlynn for her fifth birthday, this coming June, thinking the girl would be ready by then.

As Maura and Gram were sitting in Gram's room in front of the fireplace, waiting for Caitlynn's return from her visit with her father, Gram asked, "You haven't seen Linc yet, have you, sweetie?"

"No. I don't think could handle that. We're not exactly friendly exes," Maura said.

Gram reached out and patted her granddaughter's hand. "I know. But I keep hoping you two can reach some kind of détente."

Maura laughed, then said, "So now we're speaking French?"

"It's good to hear you laugh. It's been awhile," Gram said. She gave Maura a speculative look, then reached in her crochet bag and pulled out another crochet hook and a skein of baby yarn and handed them to Maura.

"Let's get you crocheting again. It will be good for what ails you," Gram said. "It's better and more productive than meditation."

"Oh, Gram, it's been such a long time since I've crocheted. I don't think..." Maura stopped talking and fingered the pale pink yarn in her lap. She thought for a moment, then said, "Okay, it's for a good cause. I can stop being so self-centered. I'll give it a go."

Gram shook her head at the words pouring out of Maura's mouth. "We'll start with a simple pattern."

The two women had their heads buried in crocheting when Caitlynn appeared at the door to Gram's room. She giggled as she walked toward her mother and said, "Mama, I didn't know you could cricket!" Gram and Maura both laughed at the word Caitlynn used for crochet.

Gram put aside the afghan she was working on and pulled Caitlynn onto her lap. "How was your visit with Daddy?" she said.

"It was good. He has this white thing on his leg. I can't remember what he called it," Caitlynn said.

"He probably called it a cast," Gram said.

"Yes, I think that's it." Caitlynn said. Then softly, she said, "Gram, do you think I could learn to cricket before I'm five? It would be fun to do it with you and Mama here, by the fire."

Gram looked at Maura, and Maura nodded her assent. Gram moved Caitlynn off her lap and onto the love seat next to her. She pulled another crochet hook and skein of yarn from her bag and set about showing Caitlynn a beginning crochet stitch. "We call it crochet, not cricket, sweetie. Can you say crochet?" Gram said.

Caitlynn tried but the word still came out cricket so Gram let it go.

After awhile, Caitlynn began to yawn, and Maura stood up from the chair where she'd been sitting and came over to her daughter. "Hey, pumpkin, how about a very short nap on Gram's big comfy bed here?"

Caitlynn considered her mother's suggestion, then said, "Okay, Mama. Will you come lie down with me?"

"Of course, sweetie," Maura said. Then she turned to Gram and said, "Is it okay if we girls nap on your bed?"

"Yes, it's okay," Gram said, with a grin on her face. "I'd join you but I want to finish up this little afghan."

Half an hour later, with Caitlynn fast asleep, Maura got out of bed and went back to the chair across from the love seat where Gram was still crocheting. Maura picked up the piece she'd been working on and looked at it. Then she started unraveling the stitches.

"What are you doing?" Gram asked.

"Starting over," had been Maura's response. "I made too many mistakes so I'm going to do it again."

For a few minutes, both women concentrated on their busy hands. As she slowly repeated the stitches she'd unraveled, Maura thought back to when she'd brought up the subject of Tess Carpenter to her grandmother.

Gram had said, "Yes, I remember Tess Carpenter. She was kind of an odd duck, you might say."

"In what way?" Maura had asked.

"She was always with her sister Lane. She acted like Lane's assistant even though Lane had an actual assistant. Lane was such a sweetheart that I never could tell what she thought about her sister's actions."

Gram had paused a moment, then continued. "I don't like to say or even think bad things about people. I always try to see the best in them. But I must say, I got weird vibrations from Tess Carpenter. I felt such negativity from her. I can't explain it but she rather frightened me. Sometimes I saw her glaring at Lane with what looked like hatred. It was really unnerving."

"Linc once called her his bizarre aunt. I didn't follow up on his comment but I wish I had," Maura said. She told Gram about her encounter with Tess in the kitchen on her second day at Cliff House. "I know what you mean by weird vibrations. I felt the same thing. I couldn't wait to get away from her."

Now, Maura asked, "Gram, have you remembered anything else about Tess Carpenter?"

"Well, actually, I was planning to tell you something I found out. I called Dr. Bouchard's wife Molly. She and I volunteer at the children's home together. I told her I was staying at Cliff House with you and Caitlynn and that you had run into Tess Carpenter. I asked Molly about her, and boy did I get an earful from Molly about Tess."

"What did she say?" Maura asked.

"Well, Molly has known her for years, even before Lane and Matthew were married. Molly and Tess are the same age and went to school together here in Rivermont. They went to Claredale, that private school on the west side of the city," Gram said. She glanced over at Caitlynn, who was fast asleep on the king-sized bed.

"Mimi, let's go out in the hall for a minute. I don't feel comfortable talking about this around Caitlynn," Gram said. The two women stood up and walked out into the hall. Gram quietly pulled the door almost shut, leaving it open enough so they could easily hear Caitlynn if she woke up while they were talking.

"So?" Maura asked impatiently.

"So, it seems that Molly and Tess were never really friends. Molly said Tess was always a strange one. She came from a wealthy family. The Carpenters have been an integral part of the power structure in Rivermont for generations. Lane was a year younger than Molly and Tess, and Molly had nothing but praise for Lane. But for Tess, she had nothing good to say. According to Molly, Tess was a bully, picking on the younger girls at Claredale. Evidently, she got away with the bullying by staying off the radar of the school administration. Molly said Lane knew what was going on and tried to rein in her sister but had no luck at that." Gram paused for a moment, then continued.

"Molly said that when she was a senior at Claredale, Tess's behavior got so bad that it finally attracted the attention of the school's headmistress. After an investigation, Tess was quietly asked to leave the school. Her parents protested the decision but the headmistress presented them with the evidence from the investigation, and they finally accepted Tess's expulsion. Molly said that rather than trying to find another school for Tess, they hired a private tutor to help her get her GED. She never enrolled in college. Her father found or made up a job for her in the family foundation. I don't think it was a real job, just some place for her to go." Gram said.

"That must have been quite a contrast to Lane," Maura said.

"Definitely. Lane was beloved by everyone. She was class president every year at Claredale and valedictorian of her graduating class. For college, she went east to one of the Ivy League schools. She studied English and creative writing and got her undergraduate degree and then a master's in American literature. She had a couple of short stories published in literary magazines while she was in graduate school. She came back to Rivermont after graduate school and started writing her first novel. Molly says she thinks that's when Tess latched onto her sister," Gram said.

"What did she mean? Latched onto her sister?" Maura asked.

"According to what Molly could figure out, Tess convinced her father to have the family foundation fund an assistant for Lane. This was when Lane was just getting started with her writing. Molly said she got the impression that Tess forced herself into Lane's life, and Lane was too good a person to protest," Gram said.

"What did Tess do for Lane?" Maura asked.

"I asked Molly that same question, and she said various things, like typing up Lane's notes, keeping Lane's calendar, running errands, driving Lane around the city, things like that," Gram said.

"I wonder what Lane thought of the whole Tess thing," Maura said.

"Molly said Lane just accepted it and lived with it. When Lane and Matthew got married, that lessened the time that Tess spent with Lane. Then when Lincoln was born, Lane took a hiatus from writing. Tess still hung around but there was hardly anything for her to do. Molly said Lane was a saint when it came to Tess. Almost no one really liked Tess, according to Molly -- they just tolerated her for Lane's sake and for the sake of Tess's parents," Gram said.

"That sounds like a really unpleasant situation," Maura said.

"Yes, that's what it was, according to Molly. One interesting thing was that Lane would never let Tess take care of Linc or even spend much time around him. It was like Linc was off-limits for Tess. Molly wondered whether Lane was protecting her son from her sister," Gram said.

"I didn't know any of this," Maura said. "Linc never talked about his aunt. It was as if she barely existed."

"Well, the story gets more interesting. Molly said when Linc was about two years old, Lane and Matthew enrolled him in the local Montessori pre-school, and Lane started writing again. Her books really took off, and she became one of those rarities in publishing -- a literary writer who wrote best-sellers," Gram said.

"You know, Gram, this information would be really useful for my thesis. Do you think Molly would be willing for me to interview her about Lane?" Maura said.

Gram hesitated for a moment, then said, "I don't know. I assumed she was talking to me in confidence, just as I'm assuming I'm talking to you in confidence," Gram said.

"Of course," Maura said. "I would never use what Molly told you without her permission."

"Well, let me ask her. She might be willing to tell you what she told me. But I'm assuming there would be certain conditions." Gram said.

"Sure, whatever she wants," Maura said.

Then the two women heard a rustling noise from inside the bedroom, followed by a small voice calling out, "Mama, Mama,"

"Well, it sounds like our little one is awake from her nap," Gram said, pulling open the bedroom door and walking inside, with Maura close behind.

Chapter 13

Monday, December 16

Matthew Bouchard

Matthew sat in a recliner he'd had the handyman bring into Linc's room and place next to his son's bed. It was late afternoon, and Linc was sleeping. Matthew could feel himself drifting off and wondered if he should just give in to sleep. But as soon as he started to let go of consciousness, worrisome thoughts danced in his head, and he was wide awake again.

He wondered if Maura was ever going to come say hello to Linc. He'd never understood what had derailed his son's marriage. One moment Linc and Maura were newlyweds, head over heels in love. The next moment, following what happened to Lane, Linc was filing for divorce and refusing to discuss the situation. And when Matthew learned that Maura was pregnant, he was even more shell-shocked. Why would Linc divorce the mother of his unborn child? The only reason Matthew could come up with was that the child wasn't Linc's. But that was absurd. Maura's love for his son was written all over her face every time she looked at Linc. She would not have been unfaithful to him. Matthew knew that.

Matthew had finally given up asking Linc what went wrong. Reluctantly, he'd accepted the divorce. But Matthew had refused to not be a part of his grandchild's life. He knew Maura would not want to see him so he'd arranged with Maura's grandmother, Emily Price, with Maura's permission, to visit with the baby when Maura was at work.

For the first year of Caitlynn's life, Linc had totally ignored the girl except for the regular child support checks he deposited in an account in Maura's and Caitlynn's names. Then one summer afternoon when Matthew was going to take Caitlynn to the indoor playground at the mall near Emily Price's home, he'd invited Linc to join them. He fully expected his son to refuse, as he always did. But to Matthew's shock, Linc had said he'd come for a few minutes. Those few minutes had turned into an hour of Linc being fascinated with the curly-haired little blond who was his daughter.

From then on, whenever he was in town, Linc would join his father on his visits with Caitlynn. Matthew had made sure to tell Emily about Linc's visits and to ask her to inform Maura. Matthew had feared that Maura would forbid Linc to visit with Caitlynn but she didn't. Matthew never heard what Maura thought about Linc's visits but was grateful she didn't prohibit them.

Last year, when Caitlynn was diagnosed with a rare form of leukemia, Matthew had been devastated. He'd turned to his brother Paul, and with Maura's blessing, Paul had become involved in Caitlynn's course of treatment. The months of her treatment were a nightmare for Maura, Matthew and Linc. They couldn't bear the idea that the little girl might not survive. It would be a gross understatement to say they were relieved at her remission from the disease.

Now, at his son's bedside, Matthew stood up and stretched. He decided to go downstairs and talk to Mrs. Grand about putting up Christmas decorations for Caitlynn.

He found Mrs. Grand in the kitchen, putting away groceries. Since Linc had come from the hospital, Mrs. Grand had started using a grocery delivery service rather than going to the store herself. She told Matthew that she wanted to be around in case Mr. Linc needed anything, even though Matthew had arranged for round-the-clock nurses.

"Mrs. Grand, have you given any thought to Christmas decorations?" Matthew asked as the housekeeper was putting food in the refrigerator.

Mrs. Grand turned to look at Matthew, a glass bottle of orange juice in one hand. Before answering her employer's question, she placed the orange juice on a top shelf of the refrigerator and closed the door. "Decorations?" she asked.

"Yes, a Christmas tree, garland, those kinds of things," Matthew said.

"But we haven't had decorations since...you know," Mrs. Grand said.

"Yes, I know, but I thought with Caitlynn and Linc here, some decorations would be nice," Matthew said.

"Of course, sir. I'll call the company that put up the outside lights and have them bring everything we need," Mrs. Grand said.

"Good," said Matthew, turning to leave the kitchen. The he stopped and turned back to Mrs. Grand. "One thing. Perhaps we could leave some ornaments off the tree for Caitlynn to put on the tree. She might like that."

"Yes, sir, I'm sure she would. That's a good idea, and I'll make sure Miss Caitlynn has ornaments to put on the tree," Mrs. Grand said, a rare smile on her face.

Matthew went up the back staircase to Linc's room, and Mrs. Grand set about calling the decorating service, the smile remaining on her face.

Chapter 14

Tuesday, December 17

Maura Bouchard

After Gram shared with Maura what Molly Bouchard told her about Tess Carpenter, Maura asked Gram to call Molly to see if Maura could visit with her to find out more about Lane and Tess Carpenter for her MFA thesis. That same day, Gram called Molly and was surprised at the reaction she received.

"Emily, I would rather not. Please tell your granddaughter I wouldn't be of any help to her," Molly said. Emily could hear the tension in Molly's voice and wondered what was going on. This wasn't like Molly at all.

Emily ended the call and walked across the hall to Caitlynn and Maura's room. The two of them were curled up together on the love seat where Maura was reading a Curious George book to Caitlynn.

Emily sat down next to Caitlynn and kissed the top of her head. She gave Maura a look, and Maura handed the book to Caitlynn. "Why don't you sit in your little rocking chair and look at the pictures while Gram and Mama talk for a minute," Maura said.

"Okay, Mama," Caitlynn said as she jumped down from the love seat and headed to the rocking chair across the room.

"I just got off the phone with Molly," Gram said.

"Is she willing to talk with me?" Maura asked.

"That's the thing. She's not, which really surprises me. She said she would rather not and for me to tell my granddaughter that she wouldn't be of any help to you," Gram said. "It doesn't make any sense to me. She had no reluctance in telling me about Lane and Tess Carpenter. She was upfront about Tess's personality problems and how she clung to Lane. But now she doesn't want to talk about it anymore. I don't understand."

"I wonder..." Maura let her voice trail off.

"You wonder what?" Gram said.

"Is it possible someone asked her to stop talking about Lane and Tess?" Maura said.

"Who would do that?" Gram said.

Maura thought for a moment, then said, "Well, it could have been Paul Bouchard or maybe even Matthew Bouchard."

"But why?" Gram said.

"I have no idea but it seems obvious that something happened," Maura said. "So I guess this is a dead end, eh?"

"Well, maybe not. Why don't I give it another try in a day or so? Maybe she'll think better of her refusal to talk with you."

That evening, Matthew Bouchard a festive evening planned for his granddaughter. The decorating company had set up a 15 foot tree in the great room and festooned the walls with lights and garland and red velvet bows. At Mrs. Grand's request, they'd reserved a box of ornaments for Caitlynn to put on the tree; they'd also left room on the lower branches of the tree for Caitlynn to hang the ornaments.

At dinner that evening, Mrs. Grand announced that Mr. Bouchard had a surprise for Miss Caitlynn. Caitlynn looked up at Mrs. Grand, excitement in her face, as she said, "A surprise?"

"Yes, indeed," Mrs. Grand answered. She turned to Matthew and said, "Mr. Matthew, would you please tell Miss Caitlynn about your surprise?"

Matthew smiled and stood, then walked over to where his granddaughter was sitting at the dining room table. "Well, we'll have to go into the great room for your surprise," he told Caitlynn. Gram, Maura and Mrs. Grand stood up and followed Matthew and Caitlynn out of the dining room, down the hall and into the great room.

When Caitlynn saw the 15 foot Christmas tree in all its glory in front of the two-story windows, she gasped and clapped her hands in delight.

"Do you like the Christmas tree?" Matthew asked.

"I love it!" Caitlynn said, walking close to the tree and eyeing it up and down. Matthew walked over and stood next to Caitlynn. He pointed to a box of ornaments on the floor next to the tree and said, "We saved some ornaments for you to put on the tree, if you'd like."

"I would like! Can - may I put them on now?" Caitlynn said.

"Yes, you may," Matthew said.

The adults watched, broad smiles on their faces, as the little girl carefully lifted the first ornament out of the box. It was a sparkly angel, and Caitlynn looked it over, then gently hung the angel on a low branch of the tree.

Maura leaned over and whispered to her grandmother, standing next to her. "Look, they left space on the bottom branches for Caitlynn to hang ornaments."

Gram nodded and reached out to squeeze Maura's hand.

When Caitlynn was finished hanging ornaments, everyone told her what a great job she'd done. A few minutes before, Mrs. Grand had left the great room, and now she returned, carrying a tray with cups of hot chocolate and a plate of chocolate chip cookies. They all found a seat and enjoyed the treats Mrs. Grand provided.

Just before everyone left the room, Maura took the opportunity to walk over to where Mr. Bouchard was sitting and whispered her thanks to him for this special time for Caitlynn.

"It was my pleasure," Matthew said.

As Maura walked out of the great room, holding Caitlynn's hand, she wondered why she was so frightened of Matthew Bouchard. It did seem that he had a soft place in his heart for his granddaughter.

Chapter 15

Wednesday, December 18

Emily Price

On Wednesday, Gram called Molly Bouchard again and invited her to go with her to the mall for some last-minute Christmas shopping followed by lunch. She was surprised but pleased when Molly accepted.

They met at the main entrance to the mall and managed to make their way through the crowds swarming around them. Gram's main destination was the Yankee Candle store to buy a Christmas candle for Mrs. Grand. She found a balsam-smelling candle that she thought would be a perfect Christmas present for Mrs. Grand, and Molly selected a similar candle for herself.

As Molly paid for her purchase, Gram observed her friend. In her youth, Molly had been quite the beauty. She was still attractive, with fly-away blond hair and sparkling blue eyes. She was about 15 years younger than Emily Price but neither woman really looked their ages. Gram had let her hair go its natural gray but her face was relatively unlined, and her green eyes were still bright. They'd met about 20 years ago when Gram was a high school English teacher at the private school Molly's son Jeffrey attended. Both women had volunteered to help out the students on the school's debate team and had become friends.

The friendship had lasted all these years although Gram wasn't quite sure why. Molly was married to Paul Bouchard, who was the head of the Lyndhurst University Medical School, while Gram was a widowed school teacher. But one thing they had in common was that they both enjoyed reading and eventually ended up belonging to two book clubs together.

Gram had never understood the Bouchards' marriage. Paul was a serious, intellectual man with not an ounce of frivolity. Molly, on the other hand, was all about frivolity. She didn't have a serious bone in her body and danced through life with a smile on her face and a lilt in her voice. Gram had heard from some of Molly's other friends that they thought the woman was ditsy, to use an old-fashioned word. Gram had also heard Molly referred to as flighty.

Gram knew from personal experience that Paul Bouchard adored his wife. The three of them often had dinner together, and Gram enjoyed seeing Paul treat Molly like a queen. Sometimes their son Jeffrey joined them for dinner, and it was always a delight for Gram to see one of her former students. Jeff was now an attorney at one of the city's more prestigious law firms. Gram was pleased to see how the rather disheveled boy he'd been had turned into a successful, well-dressed, well-spoken, charming young man.

Now, leaving the candle store, Gram asked Molly, "How is Jeff doing?"

"He's doing great at the law firm. And I think he finally has a serious girlfriend. He brought her over for dinner last week, and she's quite the beauty and so nice. She works in public relations, and Jeff says she's very successful. So, we'll see. I'm longing for grandchildren, you know," Molly said.

"Yes, I know," Gram said. "Grandchildren are the best."

"I was so happy to hear that your Caitlynn is in remission. What a blessing that is for you and Maura," Molly said.

"Speaking of Maura," Gram said. "I really wish you'd reconsider your refusal to talk to her about Lane and Tess Carpenter. She's convinced your insights would be beneficial to her thesis."

Molly put a hand on Gram's arm and said, "Let's go sit down on that bench over there and talk about it." The two women crossed to the other side of the mall walkway and sat on a bench overlooking a small play area for toddlers. For a moment, they watched the children playing on the mini slide. Then Molly said, with a shake of her head, "Well, Paul has never liked me to talk about the Carpenter sisters, especially Lane. I told him about Maura wanting to talk to me about them, and me refusing your request. He said he agreed wholeheartedly with my decision and that I was absolutely forbidden to talk to Maura." She gave a chuckle, then said, "Of course, he shouldn't have said that. You know, no one tells me what to do."

Gram felt a moment of hope, wondering if Molly had changed her mind about talking to Maura. And sure enough, Molly's next words confirmed just that.

"So, my dear Emily, the bottom line is that this flibbertigibbet will be pleased to talk with your granddaughter. Just let me know where and when," Molly said, a mischievous grin on her face.

Chapter 16

Friday, December 20

Maura Bouchard

Gram called Molly Bouchard and arranged for her to meet Maura at Gram's downtown apartment on Friday afternoon. Gram asked Maura if she wanted her to tag along but Maura declined Gram's offer, saying she might be able to handle Molly better alone.

Gram had grinned and said, "Good luck with that. Molly can be quite the handful."

"I only saw her a couple of times when Linc and I were married -- at the rehearsal dinner, at our wedding and then on Thanksgiving. I had the same reaction you did to her marriage to Paul. On the surface, they didn't seem to fit but in reality, I guess they did, or do," Maura said.

Maura kissed Caitlynn and her grandmother good-bye and left Cliff House for her grandmother's apartment. She was looking forward to seeing her longtime home again and planned to bring back a few more of her and Caitlynn's things.

When Gram retired from teaching, she'd sold her house in the suburbs and bought a three-bedroom apartment in a high rise on the riverfront. She'd been delighted when, after Maura graduated from college, she had asked Gram if she could stay there for a bit till she found a job and could go out on her own

The two women had enjoyed living together, and Gram was sorry to see Maura go when she and Linc married. Later, Gram was sad about the ending of their marriage but glad when Maura came back to live with her. And with a baby on the way. Maura had settled in again with Gram and tried to hide the devastation she felt at Linc's abandonment of her and their unborn child. But Gram knew how her granddaughter was feeling and did her best to nurture and support her. Slowly, gradually, Maura regained herself, putting aside her broken-hearted sorrow at Linc ending their marriage. Loving Caitlynn had restored her heart.

At Gram's apartment building, Maura greeted Rafael the doorman with a hug and stopped a moment to let him know how Gram and Caitlynn were doing. Then, before heading toward the bank of elevators, she said, "Rafael, I'm expecting a guest in a few minutes. Her name is Molly Bouchard, and I would appreciate it if you would escort her up to Gram's apartment."

"Certainly, Ms. Bouchard. I can have Emilio watch the door while I'm away," Rafael said.

Maura patted Rafael on the arm and headed toward the elevators. She pressed the up button, and the door of the end elevator opened. She stepped in and pressed the button for the 22nd floor. As the elevator moved upward, she took a deep breath as she thought about where she was in her life at the moment.

Had her decision to stay at Cliff House been a foolhardy one? she wondered. She hoped not. She still hadn't gone to see Linc. He'd been home almost five days now. She just couldn't bring herself to make the trip to his room. Caitlynn went to see him a couple times each day and came back talking about Daddy. It broke Maura's heart to think what could have been if Linc hadn't imploded their marriage. Over the past four years, she'd seen him only twice, when Caitlynn was in the hospital undergoing her leukemia treatments. He'd flown in from his office in Japan to visit his daughter. Seeing him had brought back all the hurt and sorrow she'd felt when he left her.

Maura put aside her thoughts of Linc as she unlocked the door to Gram's apartment. Inside, she took off her coat and hung it on the brass coat rack in the entry hall. She went directly to the kitchen to make coffee. As the coffee brewed, she checked the freezer, looking for some of Gram's cinnamon scones. She put them in the counter top combination microwave and convection oven to warm up.

She wandered around the apartment, feeling a twinge of homesickness for this home Gram had provided for her. How fortunate she was to have such a wonderful woman in her life. Ending up in her bedroom, she checked her watch and saw she still had half an hour or so before Molly Bouchard's arrival. She rummaged in her closet, looking for a duffel bag, then packed a few of her clothes inside. In Caitlynn's room, she selected clothes and a few more of Caitlynn's favorite books. She sat on Caitlynn's bed and looked around, wondering how soon they'd be back here. She was enjoying their stay at Cliff House, especially since Gram had joined them, but this was home.

Maura still felt a bit guilty that Mr. Bouchard had interceded on her behalf with her boss, the Lyndhurst provost, Arthur Connery. When Mr. Bouchard requested that his friend grant Maura an extended leave of absence, to spend time with her daughter and to complete her thesis, Arthur had done so. But when Dr. Connery told Maura about the leave, he insisted that he had been planning to suggest the same thing to Maura, on his own, and his assurance helped her feel less guilty. Besides, the completion of her thesis would in effect also complete her master of fine arts degree, and Dr. Connery reminded her that he planned to recommend her for a lecturer's position in the English department as soon as she had her master's. Connery told her he would be sorry to have her leave her position in his office but he had always known she was over-qualified and capable of more than her current job required.

With a sigh, Maura slung the strap of the duffel bag over her shoulder and dropped it in the entry foyer by the coat rack, then headed back to the kitchen to wait for Molly Bouchard. Maura was almost an hour early for her visit with Molly and thought she'd spend the time going over her thesis notes.

She pulled her laptop out of the briefcase she'd brought with her and plugged it in on the kitchen counter. She poured herself a cup of coffee and then sat down in front of the laptop.

Scrolling through her notes files, she found the one she was looking for. Last month, on the Saturday after Thanksgiving, she'd set up a meeting with Cecilia Downey to talk about Lane Carpenter's stint as writer-in-residence at Lyndhurst six years ago. Cecilia had served as Lane's university liaison during her tenure as

writer-in-residence. Cecilia was also Maura's faculty advisor on her master's program and had been Maura's mentor and close friend for years.

Maura arranged to meet Cecilia in one of the faculty lounges in the Tower, the tallest building on campus and one of the taller buildings in the city of Rivermont. Maura brought coffee and pastries for them and set them out on one of the round tables in the lounge. She'd arrived before Cecilia and stood for a moment by the window that overlooked the quadrangle of Lyndhurst. The campus was deserted, students having gone home or elsewhere for the Thanksgiving break. She saw a few snow flurries fluttering past the window and wondered if they were in for a snowy winter.

She placed her laptop on the table and then got out the digital tape recorder she used for taking notes. A few minutes later, the door to the faculty lounge opened, and Cecilia walked into the room. She brought a wintry feeling with her, having snowflakes on the shoulders of her long black wool coat. Maura stood and walked over to Cecilia and pulled her into a hug.

"It's so good to see you, Cici. It's been too long," Maura said, releasing Cecilia from the hug, and stepping back to exam her friend. "You look wonderful. I love what you've done with your hair."

Cecilia ran her fingers through her short gray curls and laughed. "It's much easier to take care of than long hair." For years, Cecilia had sported long gray locks that she wore in an updo or in a high ponytail or as long braids that she wound around her head. Now her hair was cut short and allowed to fall into its natural curls.

Cecilia removed her coat and draped it over one of the chairs in the lounge. She sat at the table with the pastries and looked up at Maura, still standing nearby. "Have a seat, and tell me everything. Especially about Emily. How is your grandmother?" Cecilia said.

"Gram is doing well. You know she retired from teaching English at the Claredale school when Caitlynn was born, to take care of her while I was at work. In addition to that, she tutors students from one of the inner city high schools some evenings and weekends. I told her I was meeting with you today, and she said to expect a phone call from her with an invitation to dinner."

"That would be delightful! It's been too long since we've seen one another," Cecilia said.

For the next few minutes, the two women sipped coffee and sampled the pastries Maura had provided. Finally, Maura lifted the digital recorder and asked, "Is it okay if I record our conversation?"

"Of course, of course."

"Okay, my first question is how did it come about that Lane Carpenter became writer-in-residence at Lyndhurst?" Maura said.

Her question caused Cecilia to chuckle as she answered. "Well, the obvious answer would be that since her husband was chancellor of Lyndhurst, becoming writer-in-residence was a fait accompli. But that wasn't

what happened at all. In fact, I was the one pushing for Lane to come to the university. I was on the English faculty, and I submitted her name at one of our department meetings. It ended up being a unanimous vote to invite Lane to spend a year at Lyndhurst as writer-in-residence. The department chair extended the invitation, and Lane graciously accepted. I volunteered to be the department's liaison with Lane. I have to say it was one of the most interesting years I'd spent at the university."

"Tell me about it," Maura said, ready to take notes on the laptop.

Cecilia leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes for a moment. Then, straightening, she opened her eyes and began her story.

"I first met Lane when she was a student here at Lyndhurst. I was just starting my teaching career, and she was in one of my composition classes. When I read her first paper, I thought that perhaps I was fortunate enough to be teaching someone who was going to be a real writer. She and I became friends, and I was privileged to watch as she became one of the country's most revered writers. So when our English department had funding for a writer-in-residence, I recommended Lane. And it was a no-brainer for me to volunteer to be the department's liaison with her." Cecilia paused to take a couple of sips of coffee, then continued.

"We set up an office for Lane here in the Tower, and they found something the size of a broom closet nearby for my office. I spent time almost every day working with Lane, first planning classes and workshops and then implementing those plans. It was awesome, fun and so fulfilling. And if you can believe it, Lane still managed to find the time and energy to write. Her novel about life on a university campus was written while she was at Lyndhurst."

"That's amazing," Maura said. "I had no idea. What a remarkable woman she was."

"You couldn't be more right," Cecilia said. "How well did you know Lane?"

"Well, not very well, really. I first met her when I took one of the classes the two of you developed. Then, of course, I got to know her a little better when Linc and I were dating and then got married. Tragically, she died two months after our wedding. So I didn't really know her that well." Maura turned away, not wanting Cecilia to see the glint of tears in her eyes. What happened to her marriage after Lane's death had been the worst thing in her life, and she couldn't bear to think about it.

Cecilia picked up on Maura's emotions and changed the direction of the discussion. "I don't know if you realize it but two of Lane's students went on to become published writers. Both of them gave a lot of credit for their success to Lane," Cecilia said.

"No, I didn't know that," Maura said. "What were their names?"

Cecilia gave her the names, and Maura entered them into her notes on the laptop. "Do you think it would be all right to contact them for some insights into Lane as a teacher?" Maura said.

"I think they'd both like that," Cecilia said. "Lane had a special way with students. She listened to them, really listened. Actually, she listened to everyone. She'd sit there, making eye contact with you and just listen to your words. And you felt that she was understanding exactly what you were saying. It was a special gift that she had."

"I wish I'd had more time to get to know her better," Maura said.

"Her death was quite a loss," Cecilia said. She reached into her oversized handbag and pulled out a notebook. "I brought this along, thinking you might be interested in it." She handed the notebook to Maura, who took it and began flipping through the pages.

"What is it?" Maura asked.

"I kept a journal during the year of Lane's writer-in-residency," Cecilia said.

"You did? That's amazing," Maura said. She began reading some of the entries. After a couple of minutes, she looked up at Cecilia and said. "This really is something. May I borrow it? May I quote from it?"

"Yes, of course. That's why I brought it. The year that Lane spent here was so special, to me, to her students, and I think ultimately, to the university."

"Thank you so much," Maura said.

Cecilia stood up and got into her coat. She picked up her handbag, then set it down on the table and walked over to where Maura sat. Maura stood and the two women hugged.

"I hope you're doing okay, Maura," Cecilia said.

"I'm good," Maura said. "With Caitlynn in remission, I couldn't ask for anything more."

"I'll see you soon," Cecilia said and then was gone.

Maura sat back down and began to read Cecilia's account of Lane's year at Lyndhurst. So interesting was Cecilia's account of all that transpired in that year that Maura stayed in the lounge for another hour and a half and read the entire journal. When she finished, she realized she had tears in her eyes. Lane had indeed been a special woman, and Maura regretted the loss of her even more than before.

She sat in the lounge for awhile longer, thinking. Cecilia's journal was something special, and she was so grateful to have had the opportunity to read it. She wished everyone who loved Lane's writing could have the same opportunity. She flipped through the pages again, thoughts running through her head. What if... What if someone were to publish Cecilia's journal? What an amazing insight that would provide into Lane Carpenter.

Maura turned to her laptop and opened her email. She quickly drafted an email to Cecilia, telling her how very much she had enjoyed reading the journal. And, more importantly, suggesting that Cecilia consider submitting it to Lane's publisher for publication.

Maura closed the email by saying, "I really hope you'll think about publishing the journal. It would be such a remarkable tribute to Lane. Again, thank you for letting me read such an amazing account."

Maura pressed send and heard the swoosh indicating the email was being sent. With a sigh of satisfaction, she closed the laptop and gathered up her belongings.

Now, sitting in Gram's apartment, Maura wondered whether there was any chance that Cici's journal about her year with Lane would be published. She'd have to follow up and find out. She looked at her watch and saw that it was almost time for Molly Bouchard to arrive. She hoped her meeting with Molly would be half as productive as her meeting with Cecilia Downey last year had been.

Chapter 17

Friday, December 20

Molly Bouchard

Molly Bouchard had her driver Ralph drop her at the entrance to Emily Price's apartment high rise. "I'll call you when it's time to pick me up," Molly said as Ralph opened the Mercedes rear door for her.

"Yes, ma'am," Ralph said, extending a hand to help her out of the car. He watched as she walked into the building, feeling a bit concerned for her. Mrs. Bouchard hadn't been herself the past few months. More and more, she had him drive her rather than driving herself. Once upon a time, she'd been a woman on the go, driving herself everywhere and anywhere.

Inside the apartment building, Molly looked around for the doorman. She spotted a short, gray-haired man watering the plants in a garden area at one side of the lobby. She walked up to the man and said, "Would you please announce me to Emily Price?"

"Yes, ma'am," the man answered. "Who should I tell her is visiting?"

Molly looked at him for a moment, as if to say, "Don't you know who I am?" But instead she said a somewhat haughty, "Tell her Mrs. Bouchard is calling."

Emilio picked up the house phone and called Emily Price's apartment. After three rings, a woman answered. "Ma'am, there's a Mrs. Butcher here to see you." He heard a snort from the woman standing next to him, then she said, "It's Bouchard, Bouchard, not butcher."

Emilio tried again, "Boocherd."

"Yes, ma'am," he said into the house phone. "She said to send you up. It's apartment 2201, right across from the elevators."

Molly marched over to the elevators and pressed the up button. *Hmmpf*, she thought. *What a building! They need an elevator man.*

Molly stared at the elevator panel, at a loss. *2201*, she thought. *What floor would that be?*

Emilio saw the woman staring at the elevator and he called out, "22nd floor. It's the 22nd floor," just as the elevator door whooshed shut.

The elevator reached the 22nd floor and stopped. The door opened, and Molly stepped out. There in front of her was apartment 2201. As she started to knock on the door, it opened, and an attractive young woman stood in the doorway, with a wide smile on her face.

Chapter 18

Friday, December 20

Maura Bouchard

"Mrs. Bouchard, thank you so much for coming," Maura said, stepping back and opening the door all the way.

"Hello, Maura. It's been a long time, almost five years," Molly said, finally recognizing Maura and remembering why she was here at Emily's apartment.

"Yes, a long time. Please, come in," Maura said.

Molly walked past Maura and stood in the entry way.

"Let me take your coat," Maura said.

Molly shrugged out of her coat and handed it to Maura. Maura took the coat and hung it on the coat rack next to the apartment's front door.

"Come on into the kitchen," Maura said. "I thought we could sit there and have coffee and some of Gram's scones."

"Oh, I do like Emily's scones. I'm watching my weight but perhaps one scone wouldn't be that bad," Molly said. Clutching her handbag in both hands, she followed Maura into the kitchen.

A few minutes later, both women were settled in the dining nook with coffee and scones. Brushing crumbs from her fingers, Maura took a sip of coffee, then said, "I do appreciate your time, Mrs. Bouchard. I know Gram told you a little bit about what I'm doing but I can give you more information, if you'd like."

Molly hesitated a moment, then said, "Please call me Molly. After all, we're sort of family, or we were."

Maura nodded and said, "Thank you, Molly."

"What Emily told me is that you're doing your -- what is the word for it?" Molly said, a confused look on her face.

"Thesis," Maura said. "I'm doing my thesis on Lane Carpenter. I'm working on my master's degree, and the thesis is the final step in what has been a long process, at least for me. With Caitlynn to take care of, it's taken me a bit longer than most people working on their master's degrees."

"What would you like to know about Lane?" Molly said. "I'd known her since we were teenagers. We went to high school together, so we went way back."

Maura reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out a mini cassette recorder. "Would it be all right with you if I record our talk?" she asked.

Molly looked taken aback for a moment as she considered Maura's request. Finally, she said, "I guess that would be all right."

Maura clicked on the recorder, then stood up and walked over to the kitchen counter where she'd left her notepad and pen. "I'm going to take a few notes also," she said.

"My, you're taking this seriously," Molly said.

"Well, from what Gram shared with me, I think what you know firsthand about Lane Carpenter could provide important information for my thesis."

For the next two hours or so, Maura asked questions, and Molly answered them, sometimes offering additional information. As they talked, Maura felt a thrill of excitement at getting what she thought of as the inside scoop on Lane Carpenter. Twice she changed the tape in the recorder, and also poured more coffee for them a couple of times.

Molly was evidently a good observer; she provided Maura with detailed information about Lane that Maura didn't think she could have found anywhere else. As they reached the end of their discussion, Maura brought up the subject of Tess Carpenter. Molly had referenced Tess only in passing as they talked about Lane.

"Molly, can you tell me some things about Tess Carpenter. I met her again the other day, and she seems like an unusual person," Maura said.

"Unusual? Try weird," Molly said. "She's become a hermit since Lane's death. She lives in a cottage on the far side of the Cliff House property, and as far as I can tell, she hardly ever leaves the house."

"Why?" Maura said.

"I have no idea, really. My assumption is that Lane's death triggered some kind of depression in Tess. After all, Tess built her life around Lane. And with Lane gone, Tess was left sort of rudderless," Molly said.

Maura glanced down at her notepad, filled with page after page of notes. Hopefully, she'd be able to decipher them when the time came. If not, she had the tapes to depend on.

Maura reached out a hand to Molly and said, "Molly, I can't thank you enough for all the insights you've given me. You've provided a well-rounded picture of a great woman, and I appreciate your help. My thesis will be much better with the information you've offered."

The two women stood, and to Maura's surprise, Molly leaned over and hugged Maura. "You're just as sweet as your grandmother," Molly said. "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

Maura laughed and said, "Thank you, I think. I've never been called an apple before."

Maura walked Molly out into the entry hall and retrieved the older woman's coat from the coat rack. They said good-bye, and Molly left, pulling the apartment door closed behind her.

Maura went back to the kitchen, intending to tidy up. But before she did, she sent a text to her grandmother, telling her how helpful Molly had been and how excited Maura was about the new information she'd gotten from Molly. But before sending the text, she thought for a moment, recalling Molly's demeanor during their discussion. Somehow, Maura had gotten the feeling that Molly was holding back, not telling everything she knew. Maura wondered what secrets Molly was keeping. She made a mental note to ask Gram if she had any clue about what Molly was hiding.

Chapter 19

Friday, December 20

Emily Price

Sitting in the master bedroom while Caitlynn napped across the hall, Emily read Maura's text and smiled at her granddaughter's exuberance. Maura had a built-in joy for life, no matter what happened to her, like an exploding marriage or a child on the brink of death. Her mother Amelia had had the same zest for life.

Emily texted a smiley face to Maura and realized how much she was looking forward to Maura's download of what she and Molly had talked about. Maura certainly added an interesting fillip to her life. And so did Caitlynn. How lucky she was to have the two of them in her life. Actually, they pretty much were her life.

When Maura returned, she brought with her the smell of outdoors and a broad smile on her face. She hugged Gram and said, "Thank you so much for getting Molly to talk to me. She gave me such good information about Lane Carpenter. I think it will add a lot to my thesis."

Maura took off her coat and told her grandmother she was going to check on Caitlynn and then would come back and tell her everything.

Gram picked up her crocheting and started work on the afghan again. It was almost finished, and she hoped Mrs. Grand would like it. No matter how hard she tried, Gram couldn't figure out Mrs. Grand. It was as though the woman had a broomstick up her rear. She was undoubtedly the most uptight person Gram had ever met. She remembered Maura moaning to her years ago, when she and Linc were living at Cliff House, about what a hateful woman Mrs. Grand was.

Maura came back to the master bedroom and plopped herself down on the king-sized bed. "The little one is still fast asleep. And she's hugging that baby doll for all she's worth. I think she's slept with it since she first found it in the toy box."

Maura told Gram what Molly Bouchard had shared with her about Lane Carpenter. Much of it Gram already knew from her own conversations with Molly. The one part that was new to her was about Tess Carpenter living like a hermit in a secluded cottage on the far side of the Cliff House property.

"I wonder why Tess Carpenter has isolated herself like that," Gram said.

"Well, like Molly said, maybe Lane's death triggered a depression in Tess. With Tess building her life around Lane and then with Lane gone, Tess was left sort of..." Maura paused, searching for the word Molly had used. "Tess was left rudderless without Lane."

"Hmmm," had been Gram's only response. For a few moments, the two women were silent. Then Maura said, "You know, Gram, there was something puzzling about Molly."

"Puzzling? How? What do you mean?" Gram said.

"I got the distinct impression that Molly wasn't telling me everything, that she was hiding something," Maura said.

"Hiding something? What would she be hiding?" Gram said.

"I don't know but it sure felt like she was keeping something secret," Maura said.

"I can't imagine what that could be," Gram said. "Molly is such an open book and such a talker. I don't think she's capable of keeping secrets."

"Of course, I could be way off base," Maura said. "But my gut was telling me she was hiding something. And there's something else. Several times now I've come upon Mr. Bouchard and Mrs. Grand talking to one another, and when they see me, they shut up instantly and walk away. I'm sure there's something going on. I intend to find out what it is."

"Sure you will, Nancy Drew," Gram said with a laugh. "I remember you reading that whole series of Nancy Drew mysteries when you were a girl. You were always trying to solve some mystery, some imaginary mystery, I have to say."

"You don't still have any of those Nancy Drew mysteries, do you?" Maura said.

Gram smiled and nodded, saying, "As a matter of fact, I do. I've been saving them in hopes that you'd have a little girl who would like to read them. And guess what? That happened."

"Where are they?" Maura said.

"In my storage area downstairs in the apartment building, just waiting for Caitlynn to be ready for them." Gram said.

Just then, a little face peeked around the open door of the master bedroom, and Caitlynn called, "Surprise! I'm not sleeping!"

"I can see that, honey bun. Come on in and play with Gram and Mama," Maura said.

Caitlynn pushed the door open all the way and ran towards the bed, dragging the baby doll behind her. She stood by the side of the bed for Maura to lift her up on the bed.

Gram looked over at her two girls, snuggling together and smiled, then went back to her crocheting.

Chapter 20

Friday, December 20

Molly Bouchard

As Molly Bouchard drove home, she felt a nervous thrill at the thought of what she'd just done. She'd disobeyed Paul, and with great pleasure. He'd absolutely forbidden her to talk to Maura Bouchard about Lane and Tess Carpenter. But she'd defied him, ignored his demand and had done what she wanted.

But part of her knew Paul had good reason to forbid her to talk about Lane and Tess. A very good reason. And he also had good reason to worry about her ability to keep secrets. She had what Paul called "loose lips" -- meaning that she sometimes spoke before she realized what she was saying. It was as though her words bypassed the rational part of her brain and came directly out of her mouth with no editing and no filter.

To the best of her recollection, she didn't think she'd said anything about Lane and Tess that Paul could object to. She'd certainly not revealed any secrets.

She pulled into the driveway of their huge house on the outskirts of Rivermont and used the garage door opener. To her surprise, Paul's Volvo was parked in his side of the garage. She glanced at the clock on the dashboard of her BMW and saw that it was past 6 o'clock, much later than she'd thought. Where had the time gone? Then, she remembered driving on the outer highway that circled Rivermont rather than taking the most direct route home. *Why did I do that?* she wondered.

Lately, she'd noticed herself doing odd things, things she'd never done before. Driving the long way around to places, forgetting appointments, leaving her phone in odd places, including the freezer. She shook her head, dismissing her concerns.

She climbed out of the car and dug in her purse to make sure she had her phone. No, it wasn't there. She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen it, and she hoped she hadn't left it at Emily Price's apartment. That would be past embarrassing. Molly sighed and leaned back in the still-open car door and searched around for the phone. Not finding it, she closed the garage door at the switch by the door leading to the laundry room.

Inside the house, she listened for a moment, trying to hear where Paul might be. But then she smelled coffee brewing and decided he must be in the kitchen. She hung her long wool coat on one of the hooks in the laundry room and walked into the kitchen. Paul was sitting at the kitchen counter, laptop open in front of him. And she'd been right. He was brewing a pot of coffee. She could never understand how he could drink several cups of coffee in the evening and still fall asleep the moment his head hit the pillow.

Molly walked over to Paul and gave him a peck on the cheek and a pat on the back. "What are you working on?" she asked.

"Just checking email, that's all," he said, snapping the laptop shut. "And where have you been, my pretty?"

"Oh, just out and about. Nothing special," Molly said, thinking, *"My nose is going to grow so long, just like Pinocchio."*

"You forgot your phone again," Paul said, holding the iPhone out to her. Molly reached out and took the phone from Paul, wanting to ask him where he'd found it but afraid of his answer.

Paul looked down and murmured, "It was in the silverware drawer this time."

For a few moments, neither spoke. Then Paul said, "Moll, I'm worried about you."

Molly said, "I'm worried about me, too." She sat on the high stool next to Paul and leaned her head on his shoulder. "What should we do?"

Paul leaned his head next to hers and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "I'm going to take care of everything. I'll set up an appointment with Dr. Morales for Monday. We'll have him run a complete series of tests on you, and we'll figure out what's going on."

"And Dr. Morales is?" Molly asked.

"Head of the neurology department at the med school. He's the best in the Midwest, and I trust that he will get to the bottom of your --" Paul hesitated, then said, "memory problems."

"Oh, Paulie, I'm so scared." Molly looked into Paul's face, and he saw the tears trickling down her cheeks.

Paul pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped away her tears. Molly smiled at him, thinking how much she loved him and how much she loved that he still carried a handkerchief in his pocket every day.

"I have something I have to tell you," Molly said, taking the handkerchief from Paul and blowing her nose.

"What is it, sweetheart?" Paul said.

"Well, you're not going to like it. I did what you forbade me to do. You know better than to forbid me to do something. When you do that, you know I'm going to do exactly what you told me not to do." Molly said this with a bit of steel in her voice.

"What did you do?" Paul asked, matching the steel he heard in her voice with steel of his own.

"I went to Emily's apartment this afternoon and talked to Maura, the way Emily asked me to, what you told me not to do," Molly said.

Paul stood up and walked a few steps away from Molly. Then he turned and demanded, "What did you tell her? You didn't tell her about..." he broke off, as if not wanting to say something out loud.

"No, of course I didn't," Molly said. To herself, she said, *At least, I don't think I did.*

"Are you sure?" Paul asked.

It was as though he could read her mind, which was not a good thing, Molly thought.

"Yes, Paulie, I'm sure. I told her about Lane growing up, about how she started writing, about her marriage to Matthew. But when Maura asked about Tess, I was surprised. I don't know why she would be interested in Tess. Her thesis is about Lane, not Tess," Molly said.

"That is puzzling," Paul said. "What did you tell Maura about Tess?" Paul said.

"I just told her the truth. That Lane being gone triggered some kind of depression in Tess. After all, Tess had built her life around Lane, and with Lane gone, Tess was left sort of rudderless," Molly said.

"Rudderless. That's a good description," Paul said. "And that's all you said to Maura?"

"Yes, that's all," Molly said, thinking, *My nose is growing longer as I speak. I know I said something about Tess being a hermit in that cottage on the far side of the Cliff House property and hardly ever going anywhere. And I definitely should not have said that.*

Paul reached out and enfolded Molly in his arms. They stood there entwined for a moment, then Paul stepped back and said, "I'd like to take my girl out to dinner. What do you say to that?"

Molly nodded and said, "Your girl would like that."

Chapter 21

Friday, December 20

Matthew Bouchard

Matthew tapped lightly on the door to Linc's room and heard his son say, "Come in." Matthew walked into the room, closing the door behind him. Linc was seated in a wheelchair at a desk on the far side of the room. His fingers were busily tapping away at a laptop.

"Son, aren't you supposed to be resting?" Matthew said, coming up behind Linc and placing a hand on his shoulder.

"I'm tired of resting," Linc said, with a grin on his face. His father gave him an answering grin and sat down on a chair at the side of the desk.

"What are you working on?" Matthew asked.

"Nothing exciting. Just trying to catch up on email and other things that got backed up while I was in the hospital. The guys at the firm are handling the big stuff, doing the heavy lifting, as they call it. They told me to take it easy and take my time in getting back."

"Sounds good to me," Matthew said.

"Sounds boring as hell to me," Linc said. "I don't know how much more of this enforced rest I'm going to be able to stand."

"I have an idea. Since you seem to be getting around in your wheelchair, why don't you join us for dinner tonight. I'm sure everybody would be happy to see you," Matthew said.

"I'm not so sure about that. I don't think Maura would welcome my presence," Linc said.

Matthew hesitated a moment before saying, "I don't know about that but I do know Caitlynn and Emily would enjoy your presence, as would I."

"Dad, I don't think so. Maura would feel uncomfortable with me at the table, and I don't want to do that to her," Linc said.

Again Matthew hesitated, thinking about his son's words. "Perhaps you're right, perhaps not. It wouldn't hurt to at least try it. After all, Christmas is just around the corner, and we'll all be here in the house for the holiday. Think of Caitlynn. She would be so happy to have you at dinner and around for Christmas. And so

would I, son. Our family has had its share of tragedy, and it would mean a lot to me to have you by my side, both at dinner tonight and for the holidays. "

"I don't know. It just doesn't feel right," Linc said.

"Well, please just think about it. Okay?" Matthew said.

Linc sighed, then said, "Okay."

Out in the hall, Matthew stood for a moment, trying to decide whether to say anything to Maura about the possibility that Linc would join them for dinner. Finally, he decided to just let things work out however they did.

Chapter 22

Friday, December 20

Maura and Linc

When Maura first met Linc, he 'd just left one of Rivermont's leading law firms to join an investment banking firm. They'd met at a university function at the Alumni Center hosted by the chancellor of Lyndhurst, Linc's father Matthew Bouchard. Maura was a secretary in the provost's office and had volunteered to help out at the party. Linc had noticed the pretty brunette helping out at the name tag table and had given her his best smile as she handed him his name tag.

"Bouchard?" the brunette had said. "Any relation to Chancellor Bouchard?"

"No, I don't think so," Linc had teased. When he saw the brunette's puzzled look, he'd laughed and said, "Sorry. I was kidding. The chancellor is my father."

Later, her work at the name tag table done, Linc caught up with Maura and offered to get her a drink. She agreed, and they walked over to the bar together. Maura had asked for a sparkling water, and Linc asked for the same.

"We're such big-time drinkers, aren't we?" Linc said.

Maura laughed and said, "Yes, we are. Actually, I'm not much of a drinker at all. Alcohol just makes me sleepy so I mostly avoid it."

That had been the start for them. Their actual first date was dinner at a rotating restaurant atop a downtown Rivermont skyscraper. The restaurant featured what was advertised as a fabulous dessert bar. Linc was delighted with Maura's reaction to the dessert bar: She wanted to try each and every goodie.

"I'm more accustomed to young ladies who are perpetually dieting. How great to discover one who appreciates desserts." Linc said, with a grin on his face.

At dinner, Maura had gently probed for details of Linc's life. The law ran in his family, he told her. Matthew Bouchard had been a practicing attorney when he was younger. Deciding to leave his private law practice, he'd joined the faculty of the Lyndhurst law school. Eventually he'd been appointed dean of the law school. A few years later, a bit reluctantly, Matthew had left the law behind to become chancellor of the university.

"After graduating from the Lyndhurst law school, I followed in my dad's footsteps in more ways than one. For the first few years after passing the bar, I worked in one of the more prestigious law firms in Rivermont. Then, slowly, dissatisfaction set in. At first, I ignored it. But day after day, I found it more difficult to make my way to the office," Linc said.

"How did you get into finance?" Maura asked.

"Serendipity, I guess," Linc said. "Being in the right place at the right time. I was supposed to have lunch with a client at a restaurant out in the suburbs. The client cancelled but I decided to stay and have lunch anyway. I saw one of my law school classmates there having lunch by himself. I asked him if I could join him and so we had lunch together. It was a lunch that changed my life, for the better, fortunately."

"In what way?" Maura asked, intrigued by Linc's story.

"Carter, that was his name, Carter Browning, had started working in the capital markets area of a Rivermont law firm, serving several investment banking firms. One of the firms recruited Carter, and the rest was history. He told me all about investment banking, and I was hooked. It took a couple of months but eventually I left the law firm and joined the investment banking firm where Carter worked. And I never looked back," Linc said.

From that first date, Linc and Maura had been a couple. Six months later, they were engaged. And six months after that, they were married.

And three months into their marriage, Linc filed for divorce, ending what Maura thought was a fairytale life.

Chapter 23

Friday, December 20

Maura Bouchard

Ever since Gram had joined them at Cliff House, Maura looked forward to the evening dinners in the elegant Bouchard dining room. Gram and Mr. Bouchard got along famously, and their discussions kept things lively around the dining table.

At first, Maura had considered putting Caitlynn to bed at dinner time but ultimately decided to have the girl join the family for dinner. Caitlynn seemed to love the dinner occasions; Maura thought perhaps dining with the adults in a huge dining room made her feel more grown-up. Because Mr. Bouchard wore a suit and tie to dinner, Maura and Gram always changed from their casual daily clothes to something a little dressier, and Maura did the same for Caitlynn.

Mrs. Grand was an excellent cook, and Gram often asked her to share her recipes, something the woman seemed happy to do. So far, Mrs. Grand hadn't duplicated any of her dinner menus, and Maura wondered how long it would be before the woman had to serve the same entrée twice. It became a little game in Maura's mind, waiting to see what that evening's main dish would be. She'd even started keeping a list of what they'd had for dinner each evening. Two nights, Mr. Bouchard had been absent from the dinner table. On those occasions, Mrs. Grand had told Gram that Mr. Bouchard had meetings in the city. Maura noticed that Mrs. Grand was careful to speak only to Gram, not to her.

This Friday evening, Maura was looking forward to sitting at the dinner table and listening to Gram and Mr. Bouchard talk. She wanted, for a few hours, to stop thinking about Lane and Tess Carpenter and all that Molly Bouchard had told her that afternoon.

Each evening, Mrs. Grand placed a bottle of wine on the table next to Mr. Bouchard place. Mr. Bouchard and Gram would have a glass, but Maura was not a drinker. She didn't like the feeling that alcohol gave her, of being out of control of herself, of turning control over to an outside substance. But every evening, Mrs. Grand still included a wine glass in Maura's place setting. Mr. Bouchard, noticing Maura's first couple of times of refusing wine, no longer asked if she wanted a glass. But evidently, Mrs. Grand hadn't gotten the message, or more likely, was ignoring the message.

When Maura, Caitlynn and Gram walked into the dining room, Maura noticed an extra leaf in the dining table. Usually, the four of them sat around a small version of the table. She also noticed that there were five place settings rather than four. *Who could be joining us for dinner?* she wondered.

Then she heard the elevator descending, followed by a motorized sound and the murmur of voices. Her body went cold as she realized who the other dinner guest was. It had to be Linc. She stopped in her progress to the table and turned to Gram and said, "I can't do this."

Gram, understanding what was going on, took Maura's hand and whispered, "Yes, you can do this. For Caitlynn's sake, you can do this."

Through the arched doorway, Linc maneuvered the motorized wheelchair, with Matthew following closely behind him. Caitlynn caught sight of her father and jumped up, calling out "Daddy," as she ran toward Linc. When she got to his wheelchair, Caitlynn stopped and looked quizzically at Linc. "What's this, Daddy?"

Linc reached out and put his arm around his daughter as he said, "It's called a wheelchair. It will help me get around until my broken leg is healed. I'll take you for a ride in it sometime."

Linc wheeled himself inside the dining room and stopped at one end of the table. He looked up at his father standing beside him and asked, "Okay if I sit here?"

Matthew nodded, then took Caitlynn's hand and walked her back to her seat near Linc's, then went to the other end of the table.

Gram was seated across the table from Maura and Caitlynn. She stood and walked over to Linc. She reached down and hugged him, whispered "Good to see you out and about," then went back to her place.

Maura leaned around Caitlynn to look at Linc, and said, "I'm glad you could join us for dinner." Her voice shook a bit as she spoke but she hoped no one noticed. Her heart was pounding and for a moment, she felt light-headed. *What a ridiculous reaction*, she thought. These were the first words she'd said to Linc since his hospital visits to Caitlynn when she was undergoing her leukemia treatments. Linc nodded at her but didn't say anything in reply.

Mrs. Grand came in from the kitchen, bearing a tray of salads, then put one at each place. As she walked by Linc, she asked, "May I pour you a glass of wine, Mr. Linc?"

Linc smiled up at the housekeeper and shook his head no, saying, "Better not with all the medications I'm still taking."

After the salads, Mrs. Grand brought in a tray with plates of shrimp scampi, rice pilaf and asparagus. For Caitlynn, she brought chicken nuggets, the girl's current favorite. The nuggets were homemade by Mrs. Grand and were quite a hit with Caitlynn.

Dinner conversation around the table was lively among Matthew, Gram and Linc. Only Maura remained quiet, as she concentrated on pretending to eat her meal and ignoring Linc. His presence was excruciating to her, and she wasn't sure she could manage to get through dinner. But Gram's words were echoing in her head: "For Caitlynn's sake, you can do this."

Maura glanced at Caitlynn as she listened intently to the adults talking, first about the snowy weather and then about the upcoming Christmas festivities. Maura wondered how much the girl understood of the conversation.

At one point, Caitlynn turned to her mother and asked, "Mama, will Santa know where to find me this Christmas?" There were chuckles around the table. Maura reached out and gave her daughter a hug as she said, "Yes, of course Santa will know where to find you. Santa knows everything. And he especially knows how good you've been this year. I'm sure he'll bring you some special presents."

Matthew smiled as he asked Caitlynn, "What did you ask Santa for?"

"Well, Grandpa, Mama and I wrote a letter to Santa. I asked him for a puppy. Mama said I might have to wait awhile for a real puppy but Santa could probably bring me a stuffed puppy that can bark and walk."

"That sounds really special, Caitlynn," Matthew said.

The conversation turned to the annual Christmas concert at Lyndhurst this coming Sunday. Matthew turned to Linc and said, "Do you think you'll be able to manage the concert?"

Linc shook his head and said, "I don't think so, Dad. With the snow and the wheelchair, I'm better off staying at home."

Matthew then asked Gram if she was planning on attending.

"I wouldn't miss it," Gram said. "Maura and I have been going since she was a little girl just about Caitlynn's age. In fact, we're going to take Caitlynn this year." She looked across the table at Maura and said, "Right, Mimi?"

Maura started. It was obvious that she hadn't been listening to the conversation. "I'm sorry, Gram. What were you asking me?"

"I was saying we're taking Caitlynn to the university Christmas concert this year," Gram said, a concerned look on her face. She leaned across the table and whispered, "Are you feeling all right, dear?"

Maura nodded and said, "I'm fine. A bit tired, maybe. I think I'll go upstairs. Will you bring Caitlynn up when you're finished?"

"Of course," Gram said. "We could come with you now?"

"No need," Maura said. "You two stay and have dessert." Maura placed her napkin on the table and stood up. "Good night everyone." She left the dining room, trying her best not to run. Out in the hallway, she paused, took a deep breath and leaned against the wall, not sure she could make it up the stairs. *What a horrible dinner, she thought. I was sure I was going to pass out in there. Thank heavens I kept it together, at least sort.*

She walked down the hall to the elevator and pressed the up button. She'd never used the elevator before. Not when she lived here with Linc and not since she came a couple of weeks ago. The elevator door slid opened and Maura stepped in. The elevator was as elegant as the rest of Cliff House; with lush carpet and wood paneling. The elevator stopped on the second floor, and the door silently opened. *Nothing but the best for the Bouchards*, Maura thought.

In the bedroom she shared with Caitlynn, Maura quickly undressed and pulled on a sleep shirt. She placed her daughter's pajamas on Caitlynn's side of the bed and turned on the sparkly princess night light that they slept with each night. Crawling under the covers, Maura began to cry. It broke her heart to see Linc, to see him in the wheelchair, to have him so close but so far away. She sat up and reached for the box of Kleenex on the bedside table.

How can I still love him? she wondered. *It's been almost five years since he ended the marriage. Why can't I get him out of my heart?*

She put the Kleenex on the table and got under the covers. Coming to Cliff House was a big mistake, especially now that Linc was here.

Chapter 24

Friday, December 20

Tess Carpenter

Tess Carpenter pulled on a long wool coat and worked her feet into snow boots. It was almost midnight but she was antsy and needed some exercise. Part of her antsy-ness was because of what Louise Grand had told her earlier that day.

During her daily visit to the cottage, Mrs. Grand told Tess, "Mr. Matthew is encouraging Mr. Linc to join them for dinner tonight. I think he's hoping for a reconciliation between Mr. Linc and Maura,"

"That's nonsense," Tess said. "They'll never get back together."

"It would be a good thing for Miss Caitlynn to have her parents together," Mrs. Grand said, a touch of steel in her tone.

Tess glared at her and said, "What do you know? I know everything, and I say it won't ever happen."

As always, Mrs. Grand shared stories about the goings-on at Cliff House with Tess when she came for her visits. One of today's stories was about Caitlynn's Christmas wish that she had talked about at last night's dinner.

"It was the cutest thing," Mrs. Grand said with a smile on her face. "Caitlynn said she wanted a puppy but if she couldn't have a live one, maybe Santa would bring her a stuffed puppy that could bark and walk."

Tess tucked away that tidbit, the way she did all the things about Cliff House that Mrs. Grand shared with her. Someday they might be of use.

Mrs. Grand had been there for her daily three-hour visit that allowed Tess time to herself for errands or something entertaining. Today Tess was going in to the city to visit her favorite book store. She enjoyed strolling the aisles, skimming through copies of Lane's chart busters. Even now, four-ish years later, book stores still carried all five of the best-selling novels Lane had written. Tess, of course, had her own copies back at the cottage, multiple copies of each novel, actually, and never bought any of the books she picked up and skimmed. But she enjoyed the vicarious thrill she got at seeing Lane's name and photo on the books. Tess thought she and her sister resembled one another, with their shiny dark hair and deep brown eyes. Lane's eyes were flecked with yellow, where Tess's weren't. Of course, Lane's face had high cheekbones and arched brows. Tess's face was round and pale, really not much like Lane's, as hard as that was to admit.

The book store had a coffee and pastry area at the back, and Tess usually had an espresso and one of the pastries of the day. Today she selected a croissant dusted with powdered sugar. She sat in one of the leather-seated booths and scrolled through her phone as she ate the croissant. As she ate, she was definitely not happy

with the powdered sugar. It was getting all over everything, including her black coat. She was brushing the sugar off the coat and preparing to leave, when she heard someone say her name. She looked up and saw Molly Bouchard standing by the booth.

"Molly, what are you doing here?" Tess asked.

"Just browsing the latest best-sellers. Why are you here?" Molly asked, sitting down across from Tess without being invited.

"Same reason," Tess answered.

"Hmmm," had been Molly's response. Then she asked, "How are things?"

"Same as ever," Tess said.

For a moment, neither woman said anything. Then Molly said, "I had a delightful chat with Linc's ex-wife, all about Lane and you."

"What? Why would you do that?" Tess demanded.

"Oh, calm down, Tess. It was perfectly innocent. Maura is writing her thesis about Lane, and she wanted background information from me. And I gave it to her. That's all," Molly said, delighted to have pushed Tess's buttons. She didn't like the woman at all.

"What did you tell Maura?" Tess asked.

Molly considered for a moment, then decided to let the whole thing go. "Not much. Nothing to worry about, of course. See you."

Molly walked away, leaving Tess worried about she might have told Maura. She sat there motionless for a moment, coffee and croissant forgotten. After awhile, she heaved a deep sigh and sat back in the booth. From a side pocket of her purse, she took out her phone and opened the pictures app. She scrolled back to a photo that she'd taken a couple of weeks ago. It was a photo of her great niece Caitlynn. She'd taken it surreptitiously that day she'd come upon Maura and Caitlynn in the kitchen.

The girl was so beautiful, almost angelic, Tess thought. And what an ordeal the poor thing had been through, according to what Mrs. Grand had told her. The chemo, the radiation, the medication. Such an unbearable trauma for such a wee little thing. Lane's granddaughter, my great niece. Such a beautiful little girl. I need to get to know her. Lane would want me to.

Now, Tess slammed the door of the cottage behind her as she went on her midnight walk. The air was crisp, the sky was star-filled. Snow was still on the ground from the heavy snowfall two weeks ago. For the past two weeks, the temperature had hovered in the teens. She knew it was probably too cold for her to be outside, wandering around in the frigid night air. But she couldn't stand one more minute of being penned up in that house. She pulled out her phone and once again scrolled to the photo of Caitlynn. She stared at the photo, trying to see a resemblance to Lane. She walked half a mile down the road that wound through the Cliff House property. Way off in the distance, she could see a light that was Cliff House.

But looking at the photo, there really wasn't a resemblance between Caitlynn and Lane. Caitlynn was blond and blue-eyed. Lane was dark-haired and dark-eyed. How could I get to know the girl, Tess wondered. I'll have to think about that and come up with a plan.

She heard a rustling sound in the woods next to the road. The property had its share of wild animals: deer, squirrels, raccoons and deer. Rumor had it that coyotes lived in the caves near the bluffs overlooking the Mississippi but Tess had never seen any coyotes. Hopefully, the rumors weren't true.

Deciding the time had come to return to the cottage, Tess turned and headed back. She'd come farther than she'd planned and was really feeling the cold. Somehow the older she got, the more she felt the cold. She'd just turned 50 a few months ago and really felt the years. She knew she didn't eat as healthfully as she should. . She had various aches and pains that discouraged her from exercising so she didn't exercise as much as she should. God forbid that she would go to a gym like the rest of the world seems to be doing.

When she finally reached home she was shivering with cold and was short of breath from the exertion. It was heaven to walk into the warmth of the cottage.

Chapter 25

Christmas Day and New Year's Eve

Cliff House

The next few days were festive ones at Cliff House. Mrs. Grand had her hands full, cooking and baking. She called in extra help for cleaning so she could devote herself completely to getting ready to celebrate Christmas at Cliff House for the first time in over four years, since the tragedy.

Caitlynn had developed a fondness for Mrs. Grand, something that Maura was completely unable to understand. How could her sweet, precious daughter even tolerate this hellish woman?

Maura did her best to hide her dislike of Mrs. Grand from Caitlynn. She permitted her daughter to "help" Mrs. Grand bake cookies. Caitlynn also watched in fascination as Mrs. Grand made preparations for the special dishes she planned to serve at the upcoming festivities on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Gram usually accompanied Caitlynn on her trips to the kitchen. Gram and Mrs. Grand would chat as Mrs. Grand worked and Gram, perched on a high stool next to Caitlynn at the kitchen counter, crocheted.

Mrs. Grand was still somewhat stiff and reserved with Gram but at least she was talking to her, sharing stories of Christmases past at Cliff House.

Maura found that with Caitlynn occupied with Mrs. Grand, she was able to make considerable progress on her thesis. In some ways, it seemed to be writing itself. Cecilia's journal was providing great content for the thesis, with Cecilia's words providing a human interest direction for Maura to follow. Cecilia's impressions of Lane brought the writer to life, something Maura appreciated.

Maura was still struggling with Linc's presence at dinner but was doing her best to hold it together. She hoped that only Gram knew of her inner turmoil. Maura and Linc never spoke to one another during those dinners but conversation around the table was lively, and Maura didn't think anyone really noticed.

Christmas morning at Cliff House had surpassed Maura's expectations. Caitlynn was showered with presents from her grandfather and father, and from Gram and Maura. Maura noticed that Caitlynn seemed unusually quiet but decided that so many presents all at once were a bit much for the good to take in.

At the Cliff House Christmas dinner, Paul and Molly Bouchard joined the family. Mrs. Grand had enlarged the dining room table and used the stunning Christmas china. Maura remarked on how lovely the china was, and Molly said Lane had found the dishes on a trip she and Matthew took to Germany.

Matthew chuckled and said, "The shipping charges cost almost as much as the china itself. Lane was determined that it arrive home intact, in perfect condition. And it did."

"Well, it's absolutely amazing," Maura said. Everyone around the table agreed.

Matthew cleared his throat and said, "I'll make sure that someday the china is passed down to Caitlynn."

At the sound of her name, Caitlynn looked around the table and her eyes landed on her grandfather. "What am I getting, Grandpa?"

"You're going to get the pretty Christmas dishes that we're eating on," Matthew said.

"Oh, goodie," Caitlynn said. "I can have a tea party with my baby doll." Everyone laughed at that, and Caitlynn smiled at the laughter.

Caitlynn was sitting next to Maura, and a moment later, she stood up and came to sit on her mother's lap. "Mama, I don't feel so good," the girl said.

Maura put her hand on Caitlynn's forehead, then exclaimed, "My goodness! You're burning up!"

Paul stood up from his seat at one end of the table and came over to where Maura and Caitlynn were. He, too, placed his hand on Caitlynn's forehead and then said, "Yes, she definitely has a fever." He called out, "Mrs. Grand, bring me a thermometer." A few moments later, Mrs. Grand came through the open kitchen door and handed a high-tech looking thermometer to Paul. He pressed the tip of the thermometer to Caitlynn's forehead and waited for the beep indicating that the temperature had been taken. Paul looked down at the reading and said, "It's 103."

Paul turned to Maura and said, "I don't want to alarm you, my dear, but I'd like to take her to the emergency room."

The next few minutes were fairly chaotic. Maura went upstairs to get Caitlynn's coat and some of her clothes and toys. Gram had taken Caitlynn from Maura and the two were still sitting at the dining room table. Paul was on his cell phone, calling Rivermont Children's Hospital and asking them to be prepared for a former leukemia patient of Dr. Howard's. Gram was sure that everyone was thinking the same thing: that Caitlynn might have relapsed.

Paul went out to Maura's car and transferred Caitlynn's car seat to his own SUV. Then he came back in the house and carried Caitlynn outside and placed her in the car seat in his SUV. He tucked a soft cashmere throw around her and murmured, "Everything is going to be all right, princess."

Maura got in the back seta of the SUV next to Caitlynn, and Gram got in next to Maura. Paul sat alone in the front of the vehicle. He'd promised to call Matthew, Linc, Molly and Mrs. Grand as soon as they knew anything. Matthew had wanted to go along but thought that three adults were enough to accompany Caitlynn.

Maura held Caitlynn's hand as Paul raced to Rivermont Children's Hospital. Maura's hand was cold, and Caitlynn's was hot, and Maura could hear the words racing through her mind: *Please, God, please, God..* Gram reached out for Maura's other hand and gave it a squeeze. She whispered a reassuring, "Everything will be all right." Maura clung to Gram's words, praying that they would be true.

Paul reached the hospital in record time, and Maura was sure he'd been speeding the whole way. He pulled into the circular drive in front of the emergency room entrance and got out of the car. He opened the bag door and gently unbuckled Caitlynn's seat belt and lifted her out of the car seat, still wrapped in the throw.

"Come along," Paul said to Maura and Gram.

"What about your car?" Maura asked as she and Gram followed behind Paul through the automatic doors.

"I'll come back and move it once we have Caitlynn settled in," Paul said. He paused at the main desk and announced his name to the nurse and said that he'd called earlier about a former leukemia patient.

"Yes, doctor, I took your call. Dr. Howard is on his way. You can take the little girl to treatment room 2, through that door," the nurse said.

Paul headed through another automatic door, followed by Maura and Gram. Inside the treatment room, Paul laid Caitlynn down on the examination table. He'd brought the cashmere throw in with him, wrapped around Caitlynn. He tucked the throw around the girl and turned to Maura. "You know that Dr. Howard is the best pediatric oncologist in Rivermont. Caitlynn is in good hands."

The door to the exam room opened and a tall black man in blue scrubs entered the room. He walked over to where Paul stood next to the exam table and said, "Dr. Bouchard."

Paul returned the greeting with "Dr. Howard."

Dr. Howard turned to Caitlynn and looked down at her with a smile, "Hi, young lady. What are you doing back here? I thought I sent you home, safe and sound."

"I don't feel so good, Dr. Howie. Can you fix me again?" Caitlynn said, her voice soft and tentative.

"I'm certainly going to try, Caitlynn," Dr. Howard said. He turned to Paul and asked, "What are her presenting symptoms?"

"She was running a fever of 103. No other symptoms that she mentioned," Paul said.

Dr. Howard turned back to Caitlynn and asked, "Does anything hurt, Caitlynn?"

Caitlynn nodded her head and said, "My throat hurts."

For a moment, Dr. Howard looked confused, then when Caitlynn pointed to her throat, he said, "Ah, your throat, of course." He reached out to a tray of instruments and selected a mirrored tool with a light. He told Caitlynn that he was going to examine her throat with a little mirror so he could see what was going on down there.

Caitlynn nodded and said, "Okay, Dr. Howie."

Dr. Howard put the tool down Caitlynn's throat and clicked on the light. He looked around for a minute, then withdrew the tool.

He turned to Paul and said, "Caitlynn's throat is inflamed. I'm going to order a test for strep throat. I'll also order a full blood work-up so we can rule out..." Dr. Howard's voice trailed off, then he finished his sentence, "any relapse."

The words penetrated Maura's brain, leaving pain and fear in their wake. *This can't be happening*, she thought. Gram put her arm around Maura and squeezed. "Hang on," Gram whispered.

Dr. Howard drew blood from Caitlynn and then swabbed her throat. She was quite the trooper through the tests.

Dr. Howard turned to Paul and said, "I'll go expedite these test results. I'll be back as soon as I know anything."

"I'll walk out with you," Paul said. "I have to call my brother and my nephew and update them on Caitlynn's condition."

The two doctors left the room, leaving Maura and Gram standing by Caitlynn on the exam table. Gram reached into the carryall bag holding things for Caitlynn that she'd brought along, and pulled out a board book. It was *Goodnight, Moon*, one of Caitlynn's favorites. In a low voice, Gram began to read the book. Slowly, Caitlynn's eyes began to flutter and then close. Gram shut the book and stuffed it back in the carryall. She pointed to the chairs at the side of the room and said, "Let's have a seat."

The two women sat down, and Maura leaned back in the chair and closed her eyes. Gram reached out and patted her arm, saying, "It's all right. Please don't worry about our baby girl. She's going to be fine."

"From your lips to God's ears," Maura murmured, her eyes still closed. The door to the exam room opened, and Maura sat up, then stood up. Her shoulders slumped when she saw a petite nurse in Snoopy scrubs instead of Dr. Howard.

The nurse looked at Maura and then at Gram and said, "Pardon me, I was looking for Dr. Howard. I have some test results for him."

Maura reached down and gripped Gram's hand as she said, "What do the results show?"

The nurse hesitated, then said, "I'm sorry, ma'am but I can't tell you that. I can only give the results to Dr. Howard."

"But it's my daughter. I have to know the results." Maura reached out a hand, and the nurse drew back.

"I'll go find the doctor," the nurse said, leaving the room.

Maura sat back down in the chair and turned to Gram. "I probably scared that little nurse to death."

Gram patted Maura's knee and said, "I'm sure it wasn't the first time. Don't worry about it. You have more than enough on your mind.?"

Paul came back into the exam room, and asked, "Has Dr. Howard come back with any test results?"

Gram spoke up first, saying, "A nurse just came in looking for him. She said she had the test results he was waiting for."

"I'll go see what I can find out," Paul said. On his way out of the exam room, he said, "Maura, I talked with Matthew and Linc, and they both sent their best wishes."

"Thank you, Paul," Maura said. She could feel the burn of tears in her eyes and blinked them away. For a few moments after Paul left the room, Maura sat motionless, head down. Then, with a deep breath, she stood and walked over to where Caitlynn slept so peacefully. She leaned down and placed a soft kiss on Caitlynn's cheek, then gently took her daughter's hand. She closed her eyes and said over and over in her mind, *Please, God, please God, please, God.*

The door opened and Paul walked in, followed by Dr. Howard. Maura's heart leapt when she saw the broad smile on Paul's face, mirrored by the same smile Dr. Howard sported.

"We have good news for you, Maura and Emily," Paul said.

Dr. Howard began explaining the results of the blood work. The words mostly went over Maura's head. All she cared about was the bottom line. Caitlynn hadn't relapsed. She had strep throat. "We'll start her on a regimen of amoxicillin. She should be good as new in a week."

While they were waiting for the medication and the paperwork, Matthew called Linc to give him the good news. An hour later, they were on their way back to Cliff House.

On the drive home, Paul called Molly to tell her he'd be back shortly. She told him she'd be waiting. "Oh, and by the way, Merry Christmas. It's after midnight."

"And Merry Christmas to you, my dear. See you soon," Paul said and ended the call.

Caitlynn was asleep in the car seat, with Maura next to her. Gram was sitting up in front, talking to Paul. Maura heard the murmur of their voices but didn't pay attention to what they were saying. She was so grateful that Caitlynn hadn't relapsed, which had been her greatest fear. Strep throat she could deal with. Leukemia not so much. Maura said a quick prayer of thanks, and laid her head against Caitlynn's arm. She felt her eyes closing and she drifted off into a light sleep. She awoke when Paul's SUV pulled into the circular drive in front of Cliff House.

Paul got out and came around and opened the passenger rear door. He reached in and undid Caitlynn's seat belt, then gently lifted her out of the SUV. Maura and Gram followed behind him as he carried Caitlynn to the front door. Matthew must have been watching for them because he opened the door and ushered them in with a flourish. There in the entry hall, in addition to Matthew, were Linc in his wheelchair, Molly and Mrs. Grand. They saw that Caitlynn was sleeping in Paul's arms, and whispered their greetings so as not to awaken the little girl.

Paul carried Caitlynn to the elevator, and everyone got in and rode up to the second floor. They followed him as he carried Caitlynn to her room, with Linc bringing up the rear in his wheelchair. Inside the bedroom, Mrs. Grand pulled the covers back on Caitlynn's bed, and Paul gently laid her down. They all stood around the bed, looking down at the peacefully sleeping girl.

Finally, everyone but Gram, Maura and Linc left the room. Linc looked at Maura and Gram and said, "I'm so glad it wasn't anything more serious. The little one has been through so much. She deserves good news." He turned to go, and Gram followed behind him, saying good-night and closing the bedroom door. She turned to Maura and said in a soft voice, "Are you ever going to talk to Linc again?"

"I wish I could, Gram, but it hurts too much. He destroyed our marriage and my dream of a happily ever after. I don't think I could ever trust him again," Maura said.

"Well, you have to do what you have to do. But I think Linc has changed. I know he loves Caitlynn. I don't know what caused him to blow up your marriage but I don't think he's the same man who did that," Gram said.

Maura didn't answer, just began getting ready for bed. Gram came over and kissed her on the cheek, saying, "Have a good night's sleep," as she left the room.

Maura got ready for bed, then quietly climbed in next to Caitlynn. She reached out an arm to her daughter, wanting to touch her but not wanting to wake her. As she fell asleep, Maura whispered a heartfelt, "Thank you."

The next morning, Maura was pleasantly surprised when Mrs. Grand brought breakfast for Caitlynn and her up to their room.

"I wanted to make things as easy as possible on Caitlynn," Mrs. Grand said, as she set up breakfast on the table in the corner.

"Thank you, Mrs. Grand," Maura said. "Caitlynn and I appreciate that."

Mrs. Grand nodded but didn't say anything as she left the bedroom. Maura had thought for a moment there had been a breakthrough with the woman but evidently not, or at least not much of one.

For the next few days, Maura and Caitlynn stayed in Caitlynn's room, eating their meals there. Every day, Caitlynn improved. She slowly began playing with a few of her new Christmas toys. Paul came by Cliff House each day to check on Caitlynn, much to Maura's relief.

By the end of the week, Paul pronounced Caitlynn as good as new. It was New Year's Eve, and Maura felt that she really had something to celebrate. Mrs. Grand prepared a festive dinner for them: prime rib, baked potatoes with various garnishes, asparagus in hollandaise sauce, home-made dinner rolls, fruit salad, and baked Alaska for a flaming dessert finale. Caitlynn was delighted with the blazing dessert and thanked Mrs. Grand for what she called "the fire dessert."

After dinner, Linc wheeled over to where Maura was still sitting at the dinner table and said in low voice, "May I spend a little time with Caitlynn? It would mean so much to me."

Maura could feel herself shivering inside as Linc spoke to her. She wanted to say no, tried to say no but stopped. She knew how much Caitlynn would enjoy spending time with her father. So, head down, she murmured, "Yes, that would be all right."

"Thank you so much, Maura," Linc said. "I want to take her on a tour of Cliff House and show her the room I had as a little boy. My mom..." Linc's voice broke and he hesitated before continuing. "My mom kept all the things I had as a boy so the room is sort of, well, it shows what I was interested in as a kid."

"I never knew about the room. You never told me about it when we lived here," Maura said, finally looking up at him.

Linc gave her his crooked smile. "Well, I was a cocky young bridegroom. I didn't want you to think of me as a nerd who was also sports-obsessed. So I neglected to mention the room."

Maura turned to Caitlynn and said, "Your Daddy has a surprise adventure for you. He's going to take you on a tour of Grandpa Matthew's house. And there's a special room for you to visit -- the room that was your Daddy's when he was a little boy."

"That sounds super exciting," Caitlynn said, then added, "Just like the fire dessert."

Maura laughed and heard a chuckle from Linc.

"Ready to go on our tour, little one?" Linc asked Caitlynn.

"Yes, sir," Caitlynn said, earning a thumbs-up from her mother.

Caitlynn walked over to Linc and followed behind him as he rolled his wheelchair down the broad hallway. Maura watched as they walked away, then looked across the table at Gram. Gram gave her a smile, and then mirrored Maura's thumbs-up with one of her own.

Chapter 26
New Year's Eve
Maura

Maura and Gram walked arm-in-arm up the front staircase. "So, do you want to stay up till midnight and welcome in the new year," Maura asked.

Gram laughed as she answered. "You already know the answer to that, baby girl. My days of staying up till midnight on New Year's Eve are long over. What about you?"

"I'm going to bed as soon as Linc returns Caitlynn from their house tour," Maura said.

"That was a kind gesture on Linc's part, offering to take Caitlynn on a tour of the house," Gram said.

"Yes, it was," Maura said. "I'm glad that he's so kind to Caitlynn. I never expected it."

At the top of the stairs, Gram turned to Maura and said, "I know you didn't. But he's been like that with her for a couple of years now. I haven't talked much about it to you because I know how you feel, how upset you get at any mention of Linc."

Maura turned away from her grandmother and headed down the hall. Gram followed, wishing she hadn't said what she said. Maura paused at the door to Caitlynn's bedroom and walked over to hug Gram. "I love you, Gram," Maura said. "See you in the morning."

Gram hesitated, wanting to say something, anything, to make Maura feel better. But all she could think of was to kiss her granddaughter on the cheek and say, "Good night, dear."

Inside Caitlynn's room, Maura considered whether or not to change into pajamas. She decided against it, knowing Linc would be returning with Caitlynn shortly. She stretched out on the bed, and turned to the thriller she was reading on her iPad. The story caught her attention so thoroughly that she started when she heard a tap on the door. For a moment, she wasn't sure where she was or what the tap on the door meant. Then, remembering the whole Caitlynn and Linc tour thing, she jumped out of bed and hurried over to the bedroom door. She opened the door and looked down at her grinning daughter standing beside Linc in his wheelchair.

"So did you have a good time on your tour, pumpkin?" Maura said.

Caitlynn nodded and said, "Yes, Mama. The best part was seeing the room that was Daddy's when he was a boy. It had lots of toys and books and other stuff."

"That sounds great, sweetie," Maura said.

"I'll take you there sometime, if it's okay with Daddy." She turned to Linc and asked, "Is it okay, Daddy?"

"Sure, little one. It's okay. Now, say good night. It's past your bedtime," Linc said. He looked surprised when Caitlynn stood on her tiptoes and kissed him on the chin, unable to reach his lips or cheek.

"Good night, Daddy. Thanks for the --" she paused and looked at Maura. Maura supplied the word Caitlynn was looking for: "tour."

"Thanks for the tour, Daddy." She walked into the bedroom as Maura said, "Good night, Linc. Thank you."

Linc nodded and said, "You're welcome. And good night." He rolled off down the hall.

Chapter 27
New Year's Eve
Linc

Linc rolled the wheelchair down the hall and around the corner and down another hall to the wing of Cliff House where his quasi hospital room was located. It had been a hard few weeks for him, and it wasn't over yet. Physically, his crushed knee was healing well, and he seemed to have no lingering effects from his head injury. But emotionally, it was another story.

He'd returned from Japan to confront his father about Maura and Caitlynn coming to stay at Cliff House. Linc was angry that his father was seemingly interfering in Linc's business. Matthew had explained it differently.

"I'm not getting any younger, son. I haven't been as close to Caitlynn as I would have liked. And her health scare made me realize even more how fragile life is. Besides, Maura has been struggling because of Caitlynn's illness. She was going to have to put her master's degree on hold, and I wanted to help with that."

Linc had understood his father's position but feared that there would be unintended consequences from Maura's visit, and he'd shared those concerns with Matthew.

"Dad, Maura is a bright woman, an observant woman. Somehow, some way, she's going to pick up on the secrets you're trying to keep around here. And she's not one to go along with keeping your secrets," Linc said.

They'd wrangled a while longer that night at the beginning of December until finally Linc stormed out of the house and ended up careening off the road and landing in the hospital. During the subsequent weeks of his recovery, he and Matthew had mended their broken fences and reached a reconciliation of sorts.

Matthew reassured Linc that he and Mrs. Grand were determined to be extra vigilant around Maura so as not to give anything away. Matthew had also agreed not to drag out Caitlynn and Maura's stay. "As soon as Maura completes her thesis, I'll be fine with her returning to her home and to her job," Matthew said. "I just want her to finally have the career she wants."

Linc appreciated his father's good intentions but hoped they didn't cause unintended consequences.

Now, things seemed to be working out, with nothing for him to worry about or so he hoped. He got ready for bed but couldn't fall asleep. He lay there, thinking what a convoluted mess he'd made of his life. He'd lost the woman he loved, and he saw much less of his daughter than he wanted.

Since the divorce, he'd avoided any hint of a serious relationship. He'd started dating casually a year or so after the divorce but nothing lasted longer than a few months.

He knew Maura dreaded being around him. In the past weeks, she'd said less than a handful of words to him. Now, he hated what he'd done to her, to them, years ago, but at the time it seemed the only thing he could do. He'd been paralyzed emotionally by what happened to his mother, and the ramifications of Maura's pregnancy. He made sure that his father was unaware of the manner in which Linc ended his marriage. Linc had refused to talk about it, and left it to his father to come up with his own explanation of what had happened.

Lying in bed, sleepless and irritated at his inability to fall asleep, Linc finally got out of bed and into the wheelchair. Maybe a midnight snack would help. He wheeled down the hall to the elevator and took it down to

the first floor. The house was dim but not dark. Night lights and low-light lamps threw off enough light to navigate easily through the rooms.

When he entered the kitchen, he was surprised to see Gram sitting at the kitchen counter with a bowl of chocolate ice cream in front of her. She looked up when she heard him come in and gave him a wide grin. "You can't sleep either, eh?" she said.

"Nope!" Linc said. He headed to the fridge, then stopped. "Gram, I don't think I can reach the ice cream. Could you...?" Linc's voice trailed off as he gave Gram his most charming smile.

"Of course," Gram said. "Park yourself at the counter, and I'll get you a bowl. There's chocolate and mint chocolate chip. What's your poison?"

"I'll join you in the chocolate," Linc said.

A couple of minutes later, they had moved over to the kitchen table to make it easier for Linc and were both enjoying their ice cream.

"How's Caitlynn?" Linc asked.

"Still fast asleep, I hope. I peeked in on my way downstairs, and both Caitlynn and Maura were sleeping -- and snoring, I might say."

Linc didn't say anything, just remembering when he and Maura shared a bed, and he'd thought her snoring was so cute.

"How are you doing, Linc?" Gram asked in a gentle voice.

"Okay," Linc said, then added, "I guess. My knee is healing and there are no after effects from my head injury." He paused, took a bite of ice cream, then said, "It's just disconcerting to have Maura here. I don't know if you know it, but I was really angry with my Dad about this whole thing. But now, it's been nice having Caitlynn here and getting to spend more time with her. But I know Maura didn't expect me to be here. And I didn't expect that myself. But here we are. I hope it's not upsetting her too much?"

For a moment, Linc thought Gram wasn't going to answer, and he could understand that. But then Gram said, "She's upset, yes." Gram hesitated, then said, "Maura has never told me everything about how your marriage ended but I know she's still hurting over it."

Linc felt a stab in his heart as he remembered the horrible things he'd said to Maura when she told him about her pregnancy. He was grateful that Gram didn't know what he'd done. He had a deep respect for Gram and thought she was one of the best people he knew. For her to know how badly he'd behaved, how unbearably cruel he'd been to Maura, would have been the worst.

He closed his eyes and buried his head in his hands. He felt Gram's hand on his shoulder and looked up at her. "Things happen, Linc," Gram said. She stood up and took their ice cream bowls to the sink. She rinsed the bowls, then placed them in the dishwasher.

"I'll probably be in trouble with Mrs. Grand for infiltrating her kitchen," Gram said, looking at Linc. She was rewarded with a brief smile. "Well, I'm going back upstairs. Are you coming?"

Linc shook his head and said, "Not quite yet. I think I'll stay down here for a bit. Good-night, Gram. Thank you for being you."

Gram walked over and patted his shoulder. "See you in the morning," she said.

Linc watched her walk out of the kitchen and thought how lucky Maura and Caitlynn were to have her in their lives.

Chapter 28

New Year's Night, Wednesday, January 1

Tess

Another holiday with no invitation to Cliff House, Tess fumed. That makes four: Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, New Year's Eve and now New Year's Day. How dare they exclude me from their celebrations, after all I've done for them, for four years now.

She sat in the living room of the cottage, a fire blazing in the fireplace. It was almost midnight, and Tess knew she should have gone to bed an hour ago but she couldn't do it. She was so angry about the holiday events at Cliff House that she hadn't been invited to. She was family. She should have been there. Mrs. Grand could have come to the cottage to relieve her. After all, Mrs. Grand was hired help, not family.

What to do, what to do? Tess ruminated. *I need retaliation, anonymous, of course.*

She stood up and began pacing around the living room. It was a beautiful room, stylishly decorated but warm and welcoming. She liked this little jewel of a house. The past four years here had been a delight. She had satellite TV plus several streaming services. She had bookcases full of best-sellers. Mrs. Grand kept the fridge and the pantry full, plus a freezer stuffed with her homemade specialties. In one of the three bedrooms was a high-tech treadmill, along with a desktop computer and a laptop.

The only drawback was the loneliness. That was one of the reasons her exclusion from the holidays angered her so much. She wanted to be around people when she could, which wasn't often. Most of all, now, she wanted to get to know the little girl, Caitlynn.

She began noodling over the possibility of bringing the little girl here, to the cottage. She sat back on the comfy couch in front of the fireplace and grinned. What if she brought Caitlynn here without telling anyone? she thought. *That would upset a few people. More than upset, actually.*

She went into the back bedroom and sat down at the desktop computer with its oversized monitor. She created a blank document and began to type.

Plan for Caitlynn, she typed at the top of the page, then sat there for a moment, planning what came next.

Chapter 29

Saturday, January 4

Maura Bouchard

On Saturday morning at breakfast, Mrs. Grand asked Gram if Miss Caitlynn would like to help her bake the birthday cake for Mr. Linc's birthday celebration that evening. Gram smiled at Mrs. Grand and said, "You should ask her mother."

Mrs. Grand frowned as she said, "Yes, of course." Turning to Maura, she said, "Would it be all right with you if Caitlynn helped me bake Mr. Linc's birthday cake this morning?"

Caitlynn overheard the conversation and jumped in with, "Please, Mama, please. I want to bake Daddy's birthday cake. Please!"

Maura smiled at her daughter and said, "Well, how can I say no to such a nice request. Yes, you may help Mrs. Grand bake the cake." She couldn't bring herself to say the words, "Daddy's birthday cake." She'd awakened that morning with an ache in her heart, knowing it was Linc's birthday.

"Thank you, Mama, thank you. Will you and Gram be okay without me?" Caitlynn asked.

"I think we'll be fine, sweetie. We'll miss you but we'll know you're having a good time," Maura said. *And it will give me a chance to talk to Gram about leaving Cliff House and going back home, away from here and all the messed-up feelings I'm feeling.*

Maura and Gram walked up the stairs together, leaving Caitlynn in Mrs. Grand's care. Upstairs they settled themselves in Gram's room. Gram sat on the love seat and picked up her crocheting, while Maura sat in a chair opposite the love seat.

"Well, girl, what's on your mind?" Gram asked.

"Why do you think there's something on my mind?" Maura answered, thinking, *How does she always know when I want to talk to her about something? It's like she has some kind of sixth sense or something.*

"Mimi, I know you. Now, out with it," Gram said.

Maura stood and began to pace around the bedroom, trying to come up with the right words to say to her grandmother. Finally, she sat back down in the chair and leaned in to Gram.

"Gram, I can't be around Lincoln. It upsets me too much. I could barely breathe at dinner tonight. I can't go through that again. I want us to go back to your apartment. I want us to leave Cliff House."

Gram reached out a hand and took one of Maura's hands in hers. "I didn't realize it was that bad, that you felt so strongly. Of course, we can go home." She paused a moment, then said, "Caitlynn will be sad but we'll make it okay for her."

Maura sighed and said, "Yes, Caitlynn will be sad. But Gram, this is unbearable for me. Linc broke my heart. He walked out on me and our unborn baby. And he did it with a lot of shouting."

"I knew it ended badly, but..." Maura interrupted Gram, saying "Saying our marriage ended badly is a gross understatement. You have no idea."

Maura buried her face in her hands and fought off tears. Deep inside her, the end of her marriage began bubbling to the surface. She'd never told Gram the whole story. Now, the truth wanted to get out.

Gram stood and came over to where Maura was sitting. "Come sit with me on the love seat," Gram said. Maura stood and both women went to sit on the love seat. Gram put her arm around Maura and whispered, "Please tell me what's going on, Mimi."

"Oh, Gram, I want to, I really do." Tears started to trickle down Maura's cheeks, and she brushed them away. She leaned her head on her grandmother's shoulder and gave way to the tears. Gram patted her shoulder and murmured comforting words.

Finally, Maura took a deep breath and lifted her head from Gram's shoulder. "I never told you what Linc did to end the marriage. I never told anyone. I never intended to tell anyone. But I can't hold it in anymore."

"You might feel better if you got it off your chest," Gram said. "But it's all right if you don't tell me. Whatever you do, I'm on your side, always."

"I know, I know," Maura said. She felt the words coming out of her mouth, and she was powerless to stop them.

"When I told Linc I was pregnant, he went ballistic. He screamed that I had to get an abortion, that there was no way I could have the baby. I was devastated. I didn't know what was happening. He was out of his mind with rage. I thought he'd be over the moon when I told him I was pregnant. Instead he went postal, insisting I had to have an abortion. It was unbelievable, absolutely unbelievable. He would never tell me why he was so adamant that I have an abortion. I never could understand his reaction."

Gram shook her head as she said, "I had no idea, no idea at all. How horrible for you. I'm so sorry you had to go through that."

"I can't be around him. Seeing him brings back that horrible time, and I can't go through it again."

Maura paused, then said, "There's something else I haven't told you. I've been seeing a counselor at the university. The university provides counseling service to students, faculty and staff through the health center. It's free of charge and has been so beneficial to me. I've been seeing a woman named Kathy Dougherty since shortly after Caitlynn's birth. I'm down to monthly visits now and Dr. Dougherty says I'm ready to stop counseling completely but I don't want to do it yet."

"I'm so glad you were able to get the help you needed. Thank heavens the university provides such a good service," Gram said. "And I'm so sorry I didn't know all of this. I'm sorry you had to go through it all alone."

"I thought about telling you but I knew how much it would upset you, and I couldn't bear to do that," Maura said.

"Please don't ever think you can't tell me anything and everything. I'm a tough old lady," Gram said.

Maura shook her head and said, "Tough, yes, and a lady, yes. But never old."

"One other thing," Maura said. "Dr. Dougherty diagnosed me with a mild case of PTSD, based on what I went through with Linc. I haven't seen her since I came to stay here at Cliff House but I think she would advise me not to be around him and that's what I'm going to do."

"I understand," Gram said. "I can talk to Matthew tomorrow and explain things to him, if you'd like."

"I would really like that but I have to do it myself. I'm terrified of the man but it's only right that I tell him Caitlynn and I -- and you -- are leaving," Maura said. "Of course I won't tell him anything about what Linc did to end our marriage. I'll just tell him it's too upsetting for me to be here with Linc and that we're going back home."

"I'm proud of you for knowing that you should be the one to talk to Matthew. And try not to be so terrified of him. He's a really good man, and he truly loves Caitlynn." Gram sighed, then said, "It's been interesting staying here at Cliff House but I must admit I'll be glad when we're back home."

"Me, too," Maura said. "I don't look forward to breaking the news to Caitlynn. But I'm going to wait until tomorrow, after Linc's birthday celebration and after I talk to Mr. Bouchard."

Maura stood and went over to hug her grandmother. "Thank you for all you do for Caitlynn and me. We're so fortunate to have you."

"Back at you, Mimi. You and Caitlynn are my life," Gram said.

"Speaking of Caitlynn, I'm going to go downstairs and check on her and her cake-baking adventure," Maura said.

"See you soon," Gram said. She stood and walked with Maura to the door. The two women hugged each other, and Maura left.

Gram sat back down on the love seat and picked up her crocheting once again. *Yes, indeed, it would be good to be back home*, she thought.

A few minutes later, the bedroom door burst open, and Maura stood there in the doorway, shouting, "Is Caitlynn here?"

Chapter 30

Saturday, January 4

When Maura had gone downstairs to check on Caitlynn, she found Mrs. Grand at the kitchen door with her coat on, evidently in the process of going somewhere. Maura had asked where Caitlynn was, and Mrs. Grand said she'd gone upstairs awhile ago.

"I wanted to take her upstairs myself but she said she was a big girl and could go by herself. Before I could convince her otherwise, she ran up the back staircase. Isn't she upstairs in her room?" Mrs. Grand said.

"I don't know," Maura said. I thought she was still down here with you. I'll go up and check her room." Maura hurried up the back staircase, trying to tell herself not to worry, that Caitlynn was just in her room. But it wasn't like Caitlynn to go into her room without first trying to find her mother and grandmother.

Upstairs, out of breath, Maura threw open the door to Caitlynn's room and called out her daughter's name. But there was no answer. She went into the adjoining bathroom but it was empty. She ran across the hall to Gram's room and burst through the door, saying, "Is Caitlynn here?"

Gram had stood up abruptly, dropping her crocheting on the floor. "No. I thought she was downstairs with Mrs. Grand."

"That's what I thought, too. But Mrs. Grand said Caitlynn wanted to come back upstairs by herself. But she's not in her room and she's not in the bathroom," Maura said.

Gram walked over to the door and squeezed Maura's hand. "Don't worry, dear. We'll find Caitlynn. Let's go look for her. I'll check my bathroom, in case she went in there through the hall door."

A moment later, Gram was back, shaking her head and saying, "Not in there. Let's check the other rooms on this hall. She may have gone exploring."

The two women went up and down the hall, opening doors and calling out Caitlynn's name. But there was no answer and no sign of the girl.

"I think we need to find Matthew and have him help us search the house," Gram said. She headed toward the elevator, and Maura followed. The two women stood in silence as the elevator whooshed down to the first floor.

They found Matthew Bouchard and Linc in Matthew's study. Maura was shaking and having difficulty talking so Gram took over and told Matthew and Linc that Caitlynn was missing. Gram asked the two men if they had seen her.

"No, not since dinner last night," Matthew said. Linc said the same.

"Have you talked to Mrs. Grand?" Matthew asked.

"Yes, Maura talked to her a few minutes ago, " Gram said. "Caitlynn was in the kitchen with Mrs. Grand, helping her bake a cake for Linc's birthday. Maura went downstairs to check on her and found Mrs. Grand on her way out. Maura asked where Caitlynn was, and Mrs. Grand said Caitlynn told her she was a big girl and could go back upstairs by herself. So that's what she did. She ran up the back staircase. But she's not in her room, and she's not in any of the rooms on that wing."

"I'll call Mrs. Grand and have her help us search the house," Matthew said, picking up the intercom phone. When Mrs. Grand answered, Matthew told her that Caitlynn was missing from her bedroom and asked her to come to his study so they could decide how to search the house.

"Linc and I are here in the study with Maura and Emily. Please come immediately," Matthew said.

"I'm on my way," Mrs. Grand said.

A few minutes later, she came through the door and walked over to stand by where Matthew sat. They mapped out a plan of who would search what rooms. Linc volunteered to search the rooms on his floor and headed out to the elevator. Mrs. Grand said she would search Mr. Matthews' wing, along with the basement and the laundry room. Matthew asked Maura and Emily to search the downstairs rooms. Matthew said he'd take the attic and the garage. They agreed to meet back in the study as soon as they'd completed their searches.

"There are intercoms in each room," Matthew said. "If anyone finds Caitlynn, please use the intercom to let the rest of us know!"

As they all set out for their search areas, Maura was grateful to have Gram with her. She wasn't sure she would have been up to doing this alone.

A half an hour later, with no sign of Caitlynn, Matthew used the intercom to call them back to the study. When they were all gathered here, he announced, "I'm going to call the Rivermont chief of police -- he's a friend of the family," Matthew said.

The next hours were chaos. Half an hour after Matthew's call, the Rivermont chief and two police detectives were at the front door of Cliff House. Mrs. Grand led them to the study and entered the room behind them. She stood by the door, ready for anything Mr. Matthew might ask of her.

Matthew introduced the chief, Toby Blackwell, to Maura and Emily. Toby asked everyone to take a seat. Once they all were settled, Chief Blackwell asked Maura to walk him through what happened.

Maura took a deep breath, then began to choke out the words. "Caitlynn was downstairs in the kitchen, helping Mrs. Grand bake a birthday cake for her father. I went down to check on her and found Mrs. Grand about to leave. She said Caitlynn had wanted to go upstairs by herself, like a big girl. But she wasn't in her room or in any of the rooms on that wing. My grandmother and I came downstairs to find Mr. Bouchard." She stopped, unable to go on.

Matthew took up the story, talking directly to Chief Blackwell: "Linc and I were in the study where Maura and Emily found us. We called Mrs. Grand in to talk with us, and she repeated the same story Maura told us."

"Has this every happened before? Has Caitlynn gone missing before?" Chief Blackwell asked. Maura

"No, never," Maura said. "She's only four years old, and she's just gone through a horrible regimen of chemotherapy. She never wanders off. I just don't think she would have gone anywhere on her own."

Chief Blackwell turned to Matthew Bouchard and asked, "Matthew, who all is in the house tonight?"

"Just the five of us and Caitlynn," Matthew said.

"Have you searched the house?" the chief asked.

Matthew nodded, saying, "Before calling you, we divided up the house and searched every room, the basement, the attic, the garage. We searched everywhere. Caitlynn is not in the house."

"Just to be sure and not that I don't trust your judgment, we'll start with a thorough search of the house, inside and outside," Chief Blackwell said. He turned to the two detectives, and the three of them divided up the house for the search.

"Gram and I will help," Maura offered, her voice shaky.

"Thank you, ma'am. We appreciate the offer but it would be better if you and your grandmother stay here in the study with Mr. Bouchard and his son," Chief Blackwell said.

The three policemen left the study, closing the door behind them. Matthew had been standing, and he now sat behind his desk. Linc rolled his wheelchair closer to the desk, and Maura and Emily sat on the long couch against one wall of the room. Mrs. Grand still stood by the door, her face a study in concern. She blamed herself for Caitlynn's absence and wished she'd chased after the little girl running up the stairs.

Maura could feel her heart pounding as she sat next to Gram. She reached out and took one of Grams' hands in hers. She could feel the sting of tears and squeezed Gram's hand, saying in a whisper, "I can't handle this. I can't bear the thought of my baby being lost."

"Shh, sweetie, everything is going to be all right. We'll find your baby, and she'll be just fine." Gram let go of Maura's hand and put her arms around her. They sat like that for a few moments, then leaned back into the couch, holding hands once again.

An hour later, Chief Blackwell and the detectives returned to the study. "We didn't find Caitlynn," the chief said. "We did find a cluster of footprints and tire prints in the snow outside one of the doors leading out of the basement. Did any of you use that door today?"

All of them except Linc said no; Linc said, "Not hardly."

"The crime scene unit is on its way out here to take impressions of the footprints and tire prints. But unfortunately for us, Matthew's high-tech heated driveway system melted the tire tracks a few feet from where they show up by the basement door. But we got some clear tracks by the door and also some fairly clear footprints so we'll do what we can with them," Chief Blackwell said.

A few minutes later, the chief received a phone call saying the crime scene unit had arrived. He stood up and started toward the door to the study, then paused. He turned to where Matthew behind the desk and said, "Matthew? Walk out with me?"

Matthew nodded, stood up and said to those remaining in the room, "I'll be right back." As he passed by Mrs. Grand, he said, "Louise, would you please bring in coffee, water, whatever, maybe something to eat?"

Mrs. Grand nodded, saying, "Yes, sir," as she followed Matthew Bouchard and Chief Blackwell out of the study.

Maura squeezed Gram's hand and whispered, "Louise? I never knew her first name."

Gram nodded and patted Maura's knee. "How are you doing, sweetie?"

"Not good," Maura answered. "I'm terrified for Caitlynn."

"Me, too," Gram said.

"So am I," Linc joined in, moving his wheelchair over to the couch where Maura and Gram sat.

Maura stiffened and squeezed Gram's hand again, as if to say, "Help me."

Gram squeezed back as she said to Linc, "We just have to keep thinking that Caitlynn is going to be all right. We can't let ourselves think about anything else."

"Right," Linc said.

Chapter 31

Saturday, January 4

Out in the hall, Mrs. Grand went toward the kitchen. Matthew and Chief Blackwell headed to the circular staircase in the foyer that led to the downstairs. As they walked, the chief said, "I'm going to call in the FBI. With us being so close to the state line, we'll need more help than our department can provide."

"Good idea," Matthew said. "Go ahead and call them."

The two men sat in chairs in the foyer while Chief Blackwell called the FBI. At first, Matthew thought the chief was calling the field office in Rivermont. But as he listened to Toby's side of the conversation, he realized that he must have called the head of the office on his cell phone.

And from the familiarity of the conversation, Toby must know the Special Agent in Charge personally, Matthew thought.

The chief ended the call and stood up. "A couple of agents will be here shortly," he said. "I'm going down to talk to the crime scene guys. You want to come along?"

Matthew nodded and said, "Sure."

The two men headed down the stairs, Matthew taking the lead. Downstairs, they headed toward the door leading to the outside where the chief's men had found footprints and tire tracks in the snow.

Chapter 32

Saturday, January 4

An hour later, the FBI agents had arrived, and Matthew suggested that they all move to the dining room and sit at the long table. Once again, Mrs. Grand stood at the door. She had moved the coffee, bottled water and cookies from Mr. Bouchard's study to the sideboard in the dining room.

Linc was at one end of the dining room table; it made for easier positioning of the wheelchair. Matthew was at the other end. The two FBI agents, one a man in his fifties, and the other, a younger man, probably 30 or so with a buzz cut, sat on one side of the table, facing Chief Blackwell, Maura and Gram. After the introductions were made, the older of the two agents asked Chief Blackwell to give them the rundown.

The chief told them that Caitlynn, the missing girl, who was four years old, had been baking cookies in the kitchen with the housekeeper, Mrs. Grand, earlier in the day. Toby indicated that the woman standing by the door was the housekeeper. When they were done, the little girl had insisted on running up the stairs on her own. A little while later, Caitlynn's mother came downstairs to check on her daughter. Toby nodded at Maura and told the agents that Maura Bouchard was Caitlynn's mother. Once Maura and her grandmother searched the upstairs rooms and realized Caitlynn was missing, they'd alerted Mr. Bouchard. They proceeded to search the entire house but found no sign of the girl.

"That's when Mr. Bouchard called me. I came out here with a couple of my men, and we found footprints and tire tracks in the snow by one of the downstairs doors. My crime scene unit is down there now."

The older agent, named Johnson, then had Mrs. Grand come over and sit at the table and retell her story. Next, he asked Maura to retell her story. Finally, Johnson asked Matthew to tell them about the search of the house.

"Was there anyone else in the house today" Johnson asked the group.

Mrs. Grand spoke up, saying, "We had a grocery delivery around noon, and the young man brought the groceries into the kitchen. Then, a little later, the dry cleaners dropped off the cleaning." She paused, then continued, "I think that's all."

Maura sat up a little straighter and stared at Mrs. Grand. For some reason, she thought the woman wasn't telling the whole truth. She was tempted to call her out on this but hesitated, not wanting to cause any unnecessary disturbance.

Johnson turned to Matthew and said, "Is there a room we can use? We're going to have to set up a command center, install some phone lines, bring in computers and other equipment. Thomas and I and a couple of other agents will be with you for the duration."

Matthew nodded and said, "This room might be the best one for you to use. It's large and centrally located."

Johnson nodded and said, "Fine. Mr. Bouchard, we'll be treating this as a kidnapping, with the assumption that there will be a ransom demand. We'll need to install some software on your cell phone in case the kidnapper calls you on that. We'll also do the same with your landline."

The words "ransom" and "kidnapper" tore at Maura's heart. It was all she could do keep from sobbing out her terror. Gram reached out a hand to Maura and whispered, "Let's go upstairs for a bit. There isn't anything we can do here."

Maura started to protest, then stopped. Part of her wanted to stay here, in this room with the FBI and the police so that she knew exactly what was going on. But another part of her just wanted to crawl under the covers and bury her head and hope this was all a nightmare.

Gram and Maura stood up, and Gram walked over to Matthew. She leaned down and whispered, "Maura and I are going upstairs for a bit. You'll let us know if there's any news?"

Matthew stood up and gave Gram a pat on the shoulder, whispering back, "Of course, Emily. Immediately."

Linc watched Maura and her grandmother walk out of the dining room. It was all he could do to keep from following after them in the wheelchair. He wanted to tell Maura that everything would be all right, that they'd have their daughter, their precious Caitlynn, back in no time. But he sat there at the end of table, motionless, helpless.

Matthew followed Maura and Gram out of the dining room and stood in the hallway as they walked toward the elevator. Maura noticed Mrs. Grand walk away from her post at the door of the dining room and go to stand beside Mr. Bouchard. The two of them began to whisper to one another, and Maura wondered what it was they were trying to keep anyone from hearing. It reminded her of the other times she'd seen the two of them deep in an urgent-seeming conversation that ended abruptly when they saw her. She started to say something to Gram about it but then just let it go. Nothing mattered but Caitlynn. They had to find her.

Chapter 33

Saturday, January 4

Gram insisted on staying with Maura in Caitlynn's room. She went into her room and gathered up her crocheting and iPad and returned to Caitlynn's room. Maura was lying on Caitlynn's side of the bed, holding Caitlynn's pillow and the baby doll that the girl had gotten so attached to clutched to her chest. Her eyes were closed but Gram knew she was still awake.

"Is there anything I can get you?" Gram asked.

Maura murmured, "No, thanks," but didn't open her eyes or say anything else.

Gram turned on the TV and muted the sound, then settled herself on the love seat and took out her crocheting. The light was dim in the room but she could crochet with her eyes shut so the lack of light didn't hinder her.

Eventually, Maura fell into a fitful sleep. Gram got up from the love seat and walked over to the bed. Gently, she slipped off Maura's shoes and covered her with one of the afghans she'd brought from home. Then she went back to the love seat and resumed her crocheting and watching her favorite home renovation channel. Around midnight, her eyes began to flutter closed. She managed to stay awake for another half an hour or so but finally sleep won the stay-awake battle. She put down her crocheting and curled up on the love seat, falling into a deep sleep.

Maura awoke a little after 2 a.m. She looked around the dimly lit room, trying to orient herself. *What was going on?* she wondered. Then it all came crashing back. Caitlynn was missing. She sat up and swung her feet over the side of the bed. She stood up and fumbled around on the floor, searching for her shoes. She found them at the side of the bed and put them on.

She saw that Gram was asleep on the love seat, looking fairly uncomfortable but sound asleep anyway. Maura tiptoed out of the room and gently closed the door. She was going downstairs to see what was going on in the search for Caitlynn. In her heart she knew her daughter hadn't been found yet. *Matthew would have raced upstairs to tell me if that had happened*, Maura thought. She didn't notice that for the first time ever she thought of him as Matthew rather than Mr. Bouchard.

The downstairs was still brightly lit, with lights in every room. In the dining room, a dozen or so men clustered around the long dining room table. They were in shirt sleeves, ties loosened, hair tousled, except for Matthew Bouchard. He still had his suit jacket on and his tie was taut against his neck. Matthew and Linc were seated together at one end of the table. As Maura walked toward them, Matthew got up and headed in her direction. Linc followed in his wheelchair.

"Were you able to get some rest, dear?" Matthew asked.

Maura nodded, then said in a rush, "Have they found Caitlynn? Is there any news?"

"I'm sorry, Maura, nothing yet. But they've got everyone on it," Matthew said.

"Has there been a ransom demand?" was Maura's next question.

Linc and Matthew both shook their heads, and Linc said, " No, nothing yet."

"Do you want to come sit with us?" Matthew asked.

"No, I don't think so. I think I'll go back upstairs," Maura answered.

"Do you want me to come up with you?" Linc asked, to Maura's surprise.

She shook her head and said, "No, but thank you for offering."

Maura turned and left the room, surprised at Linc's offer. It was the first time in over four years that he had reached out to her. She climbed the stairs rather than using the elevator. She felt a need to move. Upstairs, she quietly opened the door to Caitlynn's room. Gram was still fast asleep, and Maura looked down at her grandmother, glad that she could find a bit of respite from this horror. For a moment, she just stood there, not knowing what to do. Then, decisively, she went to the closet and took out her long wool coat and scarf. She put the coat on, wrapped the scarf around her neck and pulled on her gloves. She grabbed her car keys from the top of the chest by the door and left the room.

Maura had to get out of the house, away from here. She couldn't bear to be in this house without Caitlynn. She ran down the back stairs and out through the kitchen door, thankful that she didn't come across anyone. Outdoors, she walked around the side of the house to the circular driveway. The drive was filled with vehicles, most of them official looking SUVs. Her SUV was at the head of the line. She got in and turned the ignition. At first, the engine just rumbled but eventually, thankfully, it caught. She switched the heater on to high and turned on the front and rear wipers to clear away the light snow that had fallen earlier in the day. Once she could see out the windshield and rear window, she put the SUV into gear and slowly drove down the driveway, not turning on her headlights and hoping no one would hear the sound of her car. She had to get away from here, if only for a brief escape.

At the end of the circular drive, she hesitated, then turned right instead of left, her usual way down to the highway. She'd never gone this other way on the Cliff House road, not even when she lived here with Linc. She had no idea what was this way on the road, if anything.

After a minute or so on the road, she finally switched on the headlights. Woods surrounded the road on both sides. As she drove, she realized she was crying. Tears slid down her cheeks, and she brushed them away with her gloved hand. She wished she could as easily brush away her terror about Caitlynn.

The road wound around, back and forth, and it took all of her attention to keep up with its twists and turns. Sometime earlier, the road had been plowed and her headlights revealed piles of snow lining the shoulder on each side of the road. Seeing the piles of snow, she thought about how she'd wanted to take Caitlynn outside

earlier in the day to build a snowman. But her concern over her daughter's health kept her from suggesting it, thinking, *Maybe next winter.*

Suddenly, Maura hit a patch of black ice and struggled to keep the car on the road. As she regained control of the car, she realized she'd left her phone back in Caitlynn's room. If anything happened out here on the road, she wouldn't have a way to call for help.

The road began to descend, and Maura slowed to a crawl, not wanting to hit another patch of black ice. As she drove, she saw a light up ahead. She stared out the window, trying to make out what the light was. Suddenly, a small animal ran across the road. Maura jammed on the brakes and went into a spin. The rear of the car fishtailed and slammed into the snow piled at the side of the road.

Maura sat motionless for a few seconds, unable to believe what had just happened. Then she bent her head against the steering wheel and let the tears come again. After a moment of despair, she took a deep breath and wiped away the tears. She pressed on the accelerator, trying to free the rear of the SUV from the snow bank. Nothing happened but the spinning of the rear wheels. So much for her four-wheel drive. Leaving the engine running and the vehicle in park, she got out of the SUV and walked around to the back of the vehicle to check out what had happened. From the glow of the tail lights, she could see that the back of the SUV was buried in the pile of snow at the side of the road. Evidently, the fishtailing had wedged the vehicle into the snow bank.

Maura got back in the SUV and put the gear into drive and once again tried to pull out of the snow bank but had no luck. She waited a couple of minutes, then tried again, hoping the spinning rear tires had melted some of the snow. Still no luck. She didn't know what to do. Without her phone, she couldn't call for help. Then she remembered the light she'd seen before the animal ran across the road. Maybe there was a house or something where she could get help. She turned off the engine but left her headlights on, hoping they'd help her see in the dark. Then she remembered the flashlight in the console and got it out. She switched it on and was dismayed to see how dim it was. She should have changed the batteries in it every once in awhile.

She wrapped her scarf around the lower part of her face and flashlight in hand, got out of the SUV. Pointing the flashlight ahead of her, she began walking down the side of the road. She could see the light farther down the road and walked toward it as quickly as she could. She wished she had on boots. She was wearing flats and she couldn't stop the snow at the side of the road from getting into them. Her feet quickly began to ache from the cold.

Up ahead, the light got closer and closer. She felt a thrill of excitement when she realized it was coming from a house. As she drew closer, she saw that it was a porch light on a cottage surrounded by woods. She wondered who lived there. And was the house still on the Cliff House property. Something niggled at the back of her mind but she couldn't remember what it was she was forgetting.

She walked up the steps leading to the front porch of the house. She stomped the snow off her shoes as best she could, then knocked on the front door. To her surprise, the door pushed open. Evidently, it hadn't been tightly shut and certainly hadn't been locked. Tentatively, she stuck her head inside the door and called out, "Hello? Is anyone there?"

But there was no answer. She took a step inside and then another one. She found herself in an entry way. A night light was plugged in along one wall. Once again, she called out, "Hello? Is anyone here? I need some help." But once again there was no answer.

She walked down the hall and came to a room with the door open. She peeked inside and saw someone lying in a king-sized bed, seemingly asleep. Hesitating a moment, then gathering her courage, she edged into the room and said, "I'm sorry to wake you." She waited for some response to her words from the person lying in the bed but there was none. She walked closer and said, "I've had an accident and don't have my phone. May I use yours?" Still no response. She walked up next to the bed and looked down at the person lying there. It was a woman lying under the covers. Long gray hair flowed out on the pillow. From a night light near the bed, Maura could see that the woman's eyes were wide open, staring into the darkness.

Maura leaned down and said, "Ma'am, can you hear me?" But there was no answer. *Who was this woman and why wouldn't or couldn't she answer?* Maura thought.

Maura backed out of the room, going down the hall till she came to another room with the door open. She leaned her head inside and saw a narrow single bed with a pile of covers, looking like someone was lying there. "Hello?" she called out. "Are you awake?" No one answered, and the pile of covers didn't move. She walked into the room and over to the bed. From the small mound of covers, Maura thought it might be a child lying there. She leaned down for a closer look and gasped in shock as she saw the short curly blond hair. The mound of covers was Caitlynn.

Maura bent down and patted the girl on the shoulder, saying, "Caitlynn, sweetie, it's Mama. Please wake up." But Caitlynn didn't wake up. She seemed to be in a deep sleep, and Maura wondered if she'd been drugged. They had to get out of there. Maura picked up Caitlynn and headed out of the room and down the hall. In the entry way, she saw a landline telephone on a table. She hurried to the phone and was picking it up to call 9-1-1 when the front door opened. In the open doorway, Maura saw Tess Carpenter standing there, a terrifying look on her face.

"What are you doing with my Caitlynn?" Tess demanded in a strident tone. "Give her to me! I'll put her back in bed immediately."

Maura ignored the woman and holding Caitlynn in one arm, clumsily dialed 9-1-1. Tess rushed at her, grabbing the phone and ripping it out of the wall. Then she tried to grab Caitlynn out of Maura's arms. Maura shoved Tess out of her way and headed toward the front door. Tess blocked her way and once again tried to grab Caitlynn. Again, Maura pushed Tess away, shouting, "Leave her alone! What is wrong with you?"

Tess punched Maura in the face, then pulled Caitlynn out of Maura's arms. She avoided Maura's attempt to hold on to Caitlynn and ran into the living room. She lay Caitlynn down on one of the two couches flanking the fireplace. Maura followed after the woman, heading directly to where Caitlynn lay. She wrapped her arms around the girl and again tried to wake her up. But Caitlynn slept on. A wave of fury washed over Maura as she realized that Tess must have certainly drugged the girl. She stood up and confronted Tess.

"What did you give her? What did you drug her with?" Maura demanded.

"None of your business!" Tess hissed. She moved toward the fireplace and picked up the heavy brass poker. Turning toward Maura, she said, "Move away from my Caitlynn," Tess spat at Maura.

Maura froze, afraid of the poker Tess was gripping. "Tess, stop," she begged. "You don't know what you're doing."

Tess advanced toward Maura, waving the fireplace poker as she moved. Maura put up her hands to protect herself from the expected blows. Then she saw a figure moving into the room, heading toward Tess. It was the gray-haired woman she'd seen lying in the bedroom down the hall. The woman slowly came up behind Tess and wrenched the poker out of her hands. Tess turned and screamed, "Lane! What are you doing?" As she screamed, Tess tried to get the poker back from the woman but the woman held on tightly. As the two women fought, the gray-haired woman finally swung the poker at Tess's head. Tess fell backwards, landing on the floor but not before striking her head on the coffee table.

For a moment, there was total silence in the room. Then Maura moved back toward Caitlynn on the couch, as if to protect her daughter from this gray-haired woman. Crouching next to her daughter, Maura demanded, "Who are you?"

The woman stared at Maura and then at Caitlynn. In a hoarse raspy voice, she said, "Lane Carpenter."

"No, Lane Carpenter is dead. She drowned almost five years ago," Maura insisted.

"No, I don't think so," the woman said hesitantly.

"We have to call the paramedics for Tess. Do you have a phone?" Maura asked.

"No," the woman said, again in that strained voice. She moved slowly to one of the nearby chairs. She grabbed the back of the chair, then abruptly collapsed into the chair.

Maura moved over to where Tess lay and felt for a pulse. "She's still alive. We have to get help for her." She started searching through Tess's coat pockets and then in the pockets of the jacket she wore under the coat. In one of the pockets, she found a cell phone. "Thank God," she whispered under her breath. She quickly dialed 9-1-1. She told the operator she needed paramedics for an injured woman. But it was difficult telling the operator where they were located because she didn't really know. "I think it's a cottage on the Cliff House grounds but I'm not really sure. Just a minute. Let me go look at the landline and see if the phone number is on it." She hurried out into the entry way and picked up the phone Tess had torn out of the wall. Sure enough, the telephone number was there. She read it off to the 9-1-1 operator, who said, "Great. I'll be able to get the address from that. Do you want me to stay on the line with you till the paramedics arrive?"

"No, I'll be fine. Thank you for all your help." Maura ended the call, then quickly dialed Matthew Bouchard's number. He was surprised to hear from her, saying he thought she was upstairs sleeping.

"I found Caitlynn," she told Matthew.

He said, a quick, "Thank God!" Then he asked, "Where?"

"I'm not exactly sure," Maura said. "I think it's Tess's house. I think she took Caitlynn. She tried to attack me with a fireplace poker, and a woman who says she's Lane Carpenter saved me. Tess is badly injured and I've called 9-1-1 for paramedics."

For a few moments, there was silence at the other end of the line, and Maura thought they'd been disconnected.

Then she heard Matthew heave a long sigh and say, "It is Lane. I'll explain when Linc and I get there. We'll be bringing the police and the FBI with us." He ended the call.

Maura sat there holding Tess's cell phone in her hands, wondering what to do. Then she realized she should call her grandmother. Gram always kept her cell phone nearby, no matter where she was. After a couple of rings, a groggy voice answered, "Hello?"

"Gram? It's me, Maura. Caitlynn's okay. I've got her."

"Oh, thank God!" Gram said. "Where are you?"

"I think it's Tess's house. I think she's the one who took Caitlynn. And Gram? Lane Carpenter's alive. She's the one who protected me from Tess."

"What are you talking about? Lane died years ago," Gram insisted.

"No, she's sitting in a chair right by me. She says she's Lane Carpenter, and she certainly looks like her. Anyway, Tess is hurt and I called the paramedics. They're on their way, and so is Matthew. I called him, too."

"I'm going to go see if he's still here so I can come with him," Gram said, ending the call.

Chapter 34

Saturday, January 4

Later, it seemed to Maura like the world had descended on the cottage. First to arrive were the paramedics. They quickly examined Tess. The older of the two paramedics told Maura that the woman had a serious head wound, and they were transporting her to Rivermont Memorial. As they loaded Tess onto a gurney, Maura asked them to take a look at her daughter. "I think she's been drugged," Maura said.

The female paramedic examined Caitlynn, taking her vitals and trying to awaken her. Caitlynn roused for a moment but then fell back asleep. "Let me take a look around and see if I find anything that might have put her to sleep like this." She left the room and was back in a couple of minutes, holding a bottle in her hand. "I think your daughter may have been given this to put her asleep," she said.

Maura looked at the bottle and said, "Benadryl. Yes, that would do it. Is Caitlynn going to be all right? Is there anything you can do?" Maura asked, a note of desperation in her voice.

"She'll be fine, ma'am. The Benadryl is starting to wear off, and there won't be any after effects. But if you're still concerned, you can contact your family doctor."

"Thank you," Maura said, as the two paramedics wheeled the gurney out to the ambulance. Maura watched out the front door as the paramedics drove away. Pulling into the driveway just as the left was a caravan of vehicles, led by two Suburbans, followed by two Rivermont police cruisers, with Matthew Bouchard's Mercedes bringing up the rear. The five vehicles just barely fit in the double driveway.

Four of the FBI agents were the first to reach the front door. Maura held it open for them. They waited in the entry way until Chief Blackwell came through the door. Maura led them into the living room. She turned to Chief Blackwell and nodded toward Caitlynn asleep on the couch. "My daughter's okay. According to the paramedics, she was dosed with Benadryl to put her to sleep but she's going to be all right."

"What happened here, Mrs. Bouchard?" Chief Blackwell asked, gesturing at the overturned lamp and coffee table.

"It's a long story, Chief. Let's start with this. Sitting over there in the corner is Lane Carpenter," Maura said, indicating where the woman sat.

"Lane Carpenter? No way! She drowned five years ago," Chief Blackwell said. He edged toward the woman in the corner and murmured, "Lane, is that you? Is that really you?"

Just then, Matthew Bouchard came into the living room, followed by Gram, who was followed by Linc in his wheelchair.

Maura sat on the edge of the couch where Caitlynn was lying and put her hand on her daughter's back. Gram came over and stood by her granddaughter and great-granddaughter, whispering, "She's all right?" Maura nodded and reached out a hand to Gram.

Chief Blackwell turned to Maura and said, "Mrs. Bouchard, please tell us what was going on here?"

"I can only tell you about what happened here tonight. I don't know anything about Lane Carpenter," Maura said.

"That's all right. We'll get to that eventually. Just tell us about tonight," Chief Blackwell said.

"I couldn't sleep so I decided to go for a ride. My car slid on some black ice and got wedged into a snow bank. I'd left my phone back at the house so there was no way to call for help. I saw a light off in the distance so I walked there. I came to a cottage, this place, and I knocked and called out but no one answered. My knocking on the front door pushed it open. It must have been ajar. I went inside and called out again but still no one answered. I walked down the hall and saw Mrs. Carpenter in one of the rooms. I didn't know who she was then. Caitlynn was fast asleep in another one of the rooms. I picked her up and carried her out to the entry way. I was trying to call 9-1-1 when Tess Carpenter burst through the front door and ripped the landline out of the wall. She tried to grab Caitlynn away from me, and I ran into the living room. Tess followed me and picked up the fireplace poker. She started to come after me with the poker when Lane Carpenter came up behind her and grabbed the poker away from. Tess tried to get it back, and Lane swung the poker at Tess. Tess fell down and hit her head on the coffee table as she fell. I found a cell phone in Tess's pocket and called 9-1-1. The paramedics came and took Tess to Rivermont Memorial, and that's it," Maura finished.

For a moment there was a complete silence as everyone in the room processed what Maura had just told them. Then almost everyone began to speak at once. Chief Blackwell clapped his hands and said, "Please," and they all stopped talking.

"So we can assume that Tess Carpenter is the one who kidnapped Caitlynn?" Chief Blackwell asked Maura.

"Yes, that's what it looked like," Maura said.

"Hmmm," Chief Blackwell said. Then he turned to a white-faced Matthew Bouchard and said, "Matthew, would you like to explain about Lane?"

"Dad, why don't you have a seat near Mom and let me answer Chief Blackwell's question?" Linc said, rolling his wheelchair closer to the chief. Matthew nodded and sat down on one of the chairs next to where Lane was sitting. He reached out and took her hand, then draped his arm around her shoulders. He whispered to her for a moment, then turned his attention back to Linc.

"When the tragedy occurred five years ago, we thought that Mom was somehow involved. Tess brought the boat back to the dock and came up to the house. She told us that Mom's assistant had fallen off the boat and

that Mom had pushed him overboard. She told us that Mom was still on the boat and was in what Tess thought was a catatonic state. She couldn't speak or walk or anything. Dad and I went down to the boat, and I carried Mom up to the house." He turned to look at Maura, and said, "You had gone to visit Gram that day so you weren't there for any of this. Dad called Uncle Paul, and he came over right away to look at Mom. He agreed with Tess's assessment that Mom was in a catatonic state." Linc stopped and looked to his father but before Matthew could say anything, Chief Blackwell spoke up.

"Wait a minute here. This isn't the same story you told us when it happened. You said Lane and the assistant both accidentally fell overboard. You mean all these years, Lane has been alive, and you've been keeping her hidden?"

Matthew patted Lane's hand, then stood and walked over next to Chief Blackwell, and said, "Toby, I know what we did was wrong but it was the only thing we could come up with at the time. I couldn't let Lane go to prison or a mental hospital for pushing her assistant overboard."

"Toby," came a soft voice from the corner where Lane Carpenter sat. All heads turned toward her, and Chief Blackwell walked over to Lane and sat in the chair next to her where Matthew had been sitting.

"What is it, Lane?" he said.

Lane's voice was raspy and hard to hear. The chief had to lean in to hear what she was trying to say.

"Tess was the one who pushed Brad overboard." She stopped speaking to clear her throat, then continued. "I saw her do it. Tess and Brad had been arguing, like they always did. The last thing I remember is Tess screaming at him and shoving him over the rail. I suppose I was so shocked that I went away somewhere mentally, physically. I guess that's what a catatonic state is."

Matthew walked back to where Lane and the chief were sitting and asked the chief, "Toby, I'd like to call my brother Paul to come take a look at Lane."

A grim look on his face, the chief stood and nodded, saying, "Yes, you can call Dr. Bouchard. But Matthew, this is serious business, you know. Fraud, accessory to a crime, lying to the police. I could go on and on. You and your son are both attorneys so you're well away of what you've done."

Matthew's face mirrored the grim look on the chief's face. "I know, Toby." He pulled his cell phone out of his coat pocket and walked out of the living room into the entry way.

The remainder of that night was a blur to Maura. One of the Rivermont policemen drove Maura, Caitlynn and Gram back to Cliff House. Before she left, Chief Blackwell told Maura he would call a towing service to get Maura's car out of the snow bank. He said he'd tell the service to deliver the SUV to Cliff House.

As they left the cottage, Caitlynn was still asleep in Maura's arms, for which she was grateful. Back at Cliff House, Maura and Gram began packing. On the ride back there in the police cruiser, they'd agreed that they would leave Cliff House as soon as they could. It was past time to go back home.

Epilogue

One Year Later

Gram was convinced that Maura was overdoing it, making Caitlynn's fifth birthday party into a major production. But she didn't say anything to her granddaughter. Maura was as excited about the party as Caitlynn was, and Gram didn't want to spoil their fun. It was a Sunday afternoon party, with an eclectic invitation list that included family, friends and several of Caitlynn's kindergarten schoolmates.

Gram looked at the list Maura had given her and ticked off the names: Matthew and Lane Bouchard; Linc Bouchard; Paul and Molly Bouchard; Cecilia Downey, Maura's advisor, mentor and friend; Carter Browning, Linc's college classmate who got Linc into investment banking and Carter's wife and twin girls who were in Caitlynn's kindergarten class; and Arthur Connery, the Lyndhurst provost who was Maura's former boss and his wife and granddaughter who was also in Caitlynn's class. Sixteen altogether, Gram thought. There were two tables for the party, one set up in the living room and the regular dining table in the dining room. It might be a little crowded in the apartment but so what. Caitlynn had wanted a party, and Caitlynn was going to get a party.

Gram set the place cards she and Caitlynn had made at the tables. The table in the living room would have the four little girls, plus Carter and his wife and Arthur and his wife. The rest of the adults would be in the dining room. Maura had gone overboard at the party store, buying princess plates, cups, napkins, tablecloths, centerpieces, etc. Caitlynn was enamored with princesses and would love how the tables looked, Gram thought. Gram and Maura had decorated the living room and dining room with princess posters, balloons, streamers and Happy Birthday banners.

Gram had urged Maura to have the party catered but Maura had insisted on doing all the cooking herself. But eventually, realizing her limitations, she gratefully accepted help from Gram. The apartment was filled with the delicious aroma of a chocolate layer cake just out of the oven. Soon the alluring smells of homemade pizza and garlic bread would join that of the chocolate cake; the party menu was all at Caitlynn's request. The plan was to eat pizza and garlic bread first, then play one or two birthday party games. The surprise activity was a clown who did a variety of tricks and who made balloon figures. Maura had been sure Caitlynn would be delighted with the clown, and Gram had agreed. Cake and ice cream would follow the clown's performance. Then Caitlynn would open her presents. By then, the four little girls would be exhausted and ready for the party to end. The adults, too, obviously.

It had been quite a year for all of us, Gram thought as she set the table. The impact of hiding Lane's death had wreaked havoc on three lives. Matthew, Paul and Linc had all pled guilty to a variety of felonies. Matthew was disbarred and spent six months in a minimum security prison. Linc was also disbarred; his sentence in the same prison was four months. Paul surrendered his medical license and served a three-month prison sentence.

All three were on probation following their prison sentences and were sentenced to serve community service stints of two years. Hefty fines were also imposed.

By mutual agreement, the men kept quiet about Molly's knowledge of their conspiracy. She'd been an innocent bystander and they thought she didn't deserve to be punished for that. Besides, they well knew that

Molly would not have made it unscathed through a prison sentence. They'd also protected Mrs. Grand. Matthew had found another position for his housekeeper in a colleague's home near San Francisco.

Lane Carpenter had returned to her writing with an astounding intensity. She'd produced two books in the past year, an incredible stint of productivity. She's also established a foundation whose purpose was providing scholarships to deserving students of Lyndhurst University. Following his release from prison, she'd asked Matthew to head up the foundation and to chair its board of trustees, and Matthew had been pleased to take on the responsibility. After Linc was out of prison, in addition to serving on the foundation's board, Linc helped Matthew with the fund raising side of the foundation. His former career in the financial world provided him with an abundance of wealthy contacts. Paul also served on the foundation's board and provided his expertise and input in the awarding of scholarships to students at the medical school.

That left Tess Carpenter. Gram didn't know how she felt about Tess. Tess had been found unfit to stand trial and was institutionalized, supposedly with catatonia. But Gram wondered if that was just a pretense, based on what Tess had seen Lane go through. Gram knew Lane made regular weekly visits to the mental hospital where Tess was under treatment. But as far as Gram knew, Tess had not responded to Lane's visits in any way. Gram thought Lane was a saint to still provide support to her sister after what Tess did to Lane's life.

Linc and Maura had slowly made their way back to one another over the past few months, helped along by their daughter, who loved having Mama and Daddy together to play with her. Gram liked seeing the happiness in Maura's eyes when she talked about Linc but Gram had still been hesitant about Linc. That is, until Maura told her about the long conversation she and Linc had.

"Gram, Linc told me why he'd been so adamant about me having an abortion. His reason makes a strange sort of sense when you think about it. After what he'd gone through with his mother -- her supposedly committing murder and then lapsing into a catatonic state. He was afraid that her seeming mental illness would be passed down to our child," Maura said. "And of course, there was the behavior of his "weird" Aunt Tess. He told me he had never broached the subject of Tess's behavior with his mother before all that mess happened, not wanting to cause her any concern. But the bottom line was that Linc was convinced that mental illness ran in the Carpenter family.

"I can see why he would think that," Gram said. "Poor boy. He was caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, I guess."

Maura nodded in agreement, then said, "There's more, and this is important. When Tess was going through all the court proceedings, the authorities uncovered some information about her that no one was aware of. It turns out that Tess was adopted. The Carpenters never told her, and no one else knew. And the adoption papers revealed that her birth mother was schizophrenic. So there wasn't any mental illness in the Carpenter family at all. Linc had no reason to fear our child would inherit any mental problems."

Maura and Gram ended the conversation there but from that day forward, Gram seemed more open to a renewed relationship between Maura and Linc.

Finished with setting the table, Gram walked around the apartment, making a last-minute check. Satisfied that everything was as it should be, Gram headed to the kitchen to help Maura. She found her

granddaughter frosting the chocolate birthday cake. Gram sat in one of high stools at the breakfast bar and said, "The table's set, the decorations are up, and I've checked that everything's where it should be. Now, may I help you with the cooking?"

Maura brushed a strand of hair off her forehead and took a deep breath as she said, "That would be wonderful! I'm afraid of messing up the pizza or the garlic bread or both. I don't know why I'm so nervous about this party but I am."

Gram stood up and walked over to the broom closet to retrieve one of the aprons hanging there. Tying it around her waist, she walked over to where Maura stood leaning on the kitchen counter and put her arm around her granddaughter.

"Why don't you go get ready? Take a shower, fix your hair, put on some make-up, whatever, and let me work my magic in here," Gram said, giving Maura a squeeze.

"I can't do that," Maura protested. That wouldn't be fair to you."

"Nonsense. You know I love to cook. Once you're ready, you can go spend some time with the birthday girl. She's been in her room having a birthday party with her dolls and stuffed animals. She wanted me to join them but I had to beg off because I wasn't finished decorating. I bet she would love for you to come to her party."

Maura grinned at Gram, and said, "Then that's what I'll do." She walked out the room and down the hall toward her bathroom. Gram saw her stop at Caitlynn's room and poke her head in. She couldn't hear what Maura said to her daughter but she hoped Maura was going to take her suggestion and join Caitlynn's party.

Gram washed her hands, then finished frosting the birthday cake. She picked up one of the frosting tubes on the counter and wrote "Happy Birthday, Caitlynn" in her elegant script, then arranged five candles around the birthday wishes. She read the description on the candle package and shook her head and laughed. Caitlynn had been asking for the candles that wouldn't blow out. One of her friends had had them at her party, and Caitlynn had been fascinated with them. So Maura had caved. Gram gave herself a mental reminder to have a small bowl of water nearby to douse the ever-burning candles at the end of the festivities.

An hour later, Gram had the pizza and garlic cheese bread ready for the oven. Maura had showered and dressed and was playing tea party with Caitlynn. Gram had taken off her apron and touched up her make-up and brushed out her hair. She walked around the living room and dining room, giving everything one last look, then joined her granddaughter and great granddaughter in Caitlynn's room.

"Thank you so much for all of your help," Maura said, standing up from the floor where she'd been sitting and walking over to hug her grandmother.

"My pleasure, sweetie," Gram said, kissing Maura on the cheek. She gave her granddaughter a quick once over, noticing the excitement in Maura's face and wondering what, if anything, was going on. Maybe it was just the thrill of her baby girl turning five.

The doorbell rang, and Maura headed out of Caitlynn's room, saying, "I'll get it."

Gram went over to Caitlyn who was still sitting on the floor where she and her mother had been having a tea party with Caitlynn's dolls and stuffed animals. Gram reached out a hand to Caitlynn and said, "Are you ready for your party?"

"Yes, Gram," Caitlynn said, jumping up and heading toward the door. She was dressed in her new princess dress, a poufy confection of pink tulle and satin. On her head was a pink jeweled tiara.

"Wait for me, princess" Gram said. The two of them walked out of the room and down the hall to the living room.

"Daddy!" Caitlynn shouted when she saw her father standing in the living room. Maura was hanging Linc's overcoat in the coat closet in the entry hall.

"Pumpkin!" Linc said and held out his arms to Caitlynn. She ran to him, and he picked her and swung her around.

The doorbell rang again, and Maura opened the door to greet Matthew Bouchard and Lane Carpenter, giving each of them a hug, then taking their coats. Linc came into the entry hall, still carrying Caitlynn. When he put her down, she ran to her grandparents and gave them each a hug.

Matthew, Lane and Linc herded Caitlynn into the living room. Gram was standing by the fireplace, and Lane walked over and gave the older woman a kiss on the cheek.

"Emily, it's so good to see you again," Lane said. "We need to have lunch. It's been too long."

"I'll give you a call," Gram said. *How wonderful Lane looks, Gram thought. She's certainly recovered from her ordeal.*

Gram noticed that Lane's hair was now a deep auburn, shoulder-length and arranged in one of the latest styles, not the long gray strands Gram had seen a year ago. Lane was sporting a deep red wool dress and black knee-hugging leather boots and looked her former energetic, confident self. Gram excused herself to head for the kitchen and put the pizza in the oven and to bring out the bowl of punch. She wheeled a bar cart with the

punch bowl and cups on it from the kitchen into the living room and parked it by the fireplace. The punch was a pink concoction Caitlynn requested, consisting of strawberry sherbet and sparkling white soda.

Once again, the doorbell rang, and this time it was Paul and Molly Bouchard. Maura hung up their coats and ushered them into the living room.

"Who else is coming?" Lane asked Maura, after greeting Paul and Molly.

Maura held up a hand and counted off on her fingers. "Let's see. There's Arthur Connery, his wife Penelope and granddaughter Celeste -- she's in Caitlynn's kindergarten class. Then there's Carter Browning, a college classmate and former colleague of Linc, his wife Sarah and twin daughters Delilah and Mercy who are also in Caitlynn's class. And last but not least, your old buddy and mine, Cecilia Downey."

"Delightful!" Lane said. "What a great guest list."

Carter Browning and his family were the next to arrive. Caitlynn ran to the twins and invited them to come see her room. The three girls danced off down the hall, with the adults smiling after them.

A few minutes later, the doorbell rang. Maura opened the apartment door to the last guests to arrive. Arthur Connery and his wife and granddaughter, followed by Cecilia Downey. Maura took Arthur's granddaughter Celeste down the hall to Caitlynn's room. The three girls in the room squealed to see their school friend Celeste and closed the door decisively behind them.

Lane hurried into the entry foyer when she saw Cecilia come in the apartment door and hugged the woman, winter coat and all. She turned and greeted Arthur Connery and his wife Penelope and exclaimed over their granddaughter. Then she hung Cecilia's coat and the Connerys' coats in the coat closet. Done with the coats, Lane hugged Cecilia again, saying, "It's so good to see you. It's been too long."

"This way," Lane said to the Connerys and Cecilia, leading them into the living room. Maura came up to greet Cecilia, Arthur and Penelope, then took their granddaughter Celeste down the hall to Caitlynn's woman.

Lane led Cecilia to a sitting area in one corner of the living room, and the two women sat down to talk. Matthew glanced over at his wife and smiled, happy to see her so engaged with her friend Cecilia.

Two hours later the party was winding down, with Caitlynn perched on a high-backed chair in the living opening her last presents. Gram sat next to her, helping her with the presents. The rest of the guest were spread out around the room, watching Caitlynn tear through the ribbon and wrapping paper. Maura stood in the arched

doorway between the living room and dining room, watching her daughter having so much fun with the presents. Linc came up behind her and whispered, "Is it time?"

Maura whispered back, "I think so."

They walked into the living room over to where Caitlynn sat like the princess she was. Maura reached out a hand and placed it on her daughter's shoulder. "Sweetheart, Daddy and Mama have another present for you, a special one that I think you've been wanting."

Caitlynn looked up at her parents, a wide grin on her face. "A pony? You got me a pony?"

Linc and Maura both burst out laughing. "Well, no, Caitlynn, not a pony. But it's something we hope you'll like even more than a pony." At that, Linc reached in his jacket pocket and pulled out a small velvet box. He got down on one knee in front of Maura and took her hand. Looking up into her eyes, Linc said, "You know how much I love you, and I want to spend the rest of my life showing you. Maura, will you marry me?"

At his words, Caitlynn shrieked and jumped down off the chair. She hugged her father, who was still on his knees, almost pushing him over. Then she turned and hugged her mother. "You're right, Daddy! This is better than a pony!"

Linc stood up and three of them hugged one another. Then, everyone in the room began applauding, and Caitlynn gave them a long, low sweeping bow. Then she turned to her mother and said, "Mama, you didn't answer Daddy. Will you marry him?"

"You'd better believe I will!" Maura said, leaning over to kiss Linc. Another round of applause filled the room.

THE END