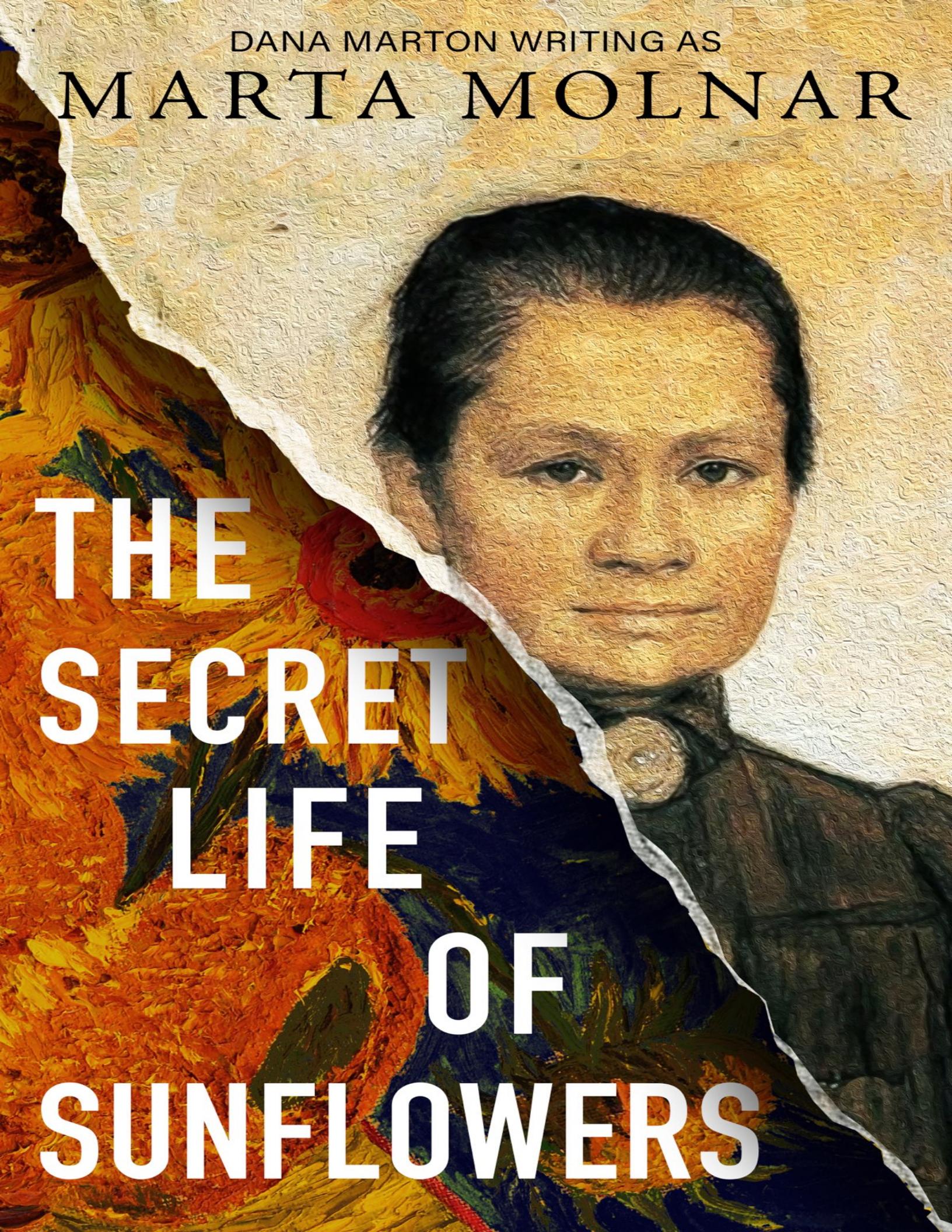


DANA MARTON WRITING AS

MARTA MOLNAR



THE SECRET LIFE OF SUNFLOWERS

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MARTA MOLNAR

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to all the women who keep on fighting.

With my sincere gratitude for endless patience and friendship to Sarah Jordan and Diane Flindt. For unfailing support to Jill Marsal. For invaluable help to Linda Ingmanson, Toni Lee, Mary-Theresa Hussey and Margie Lawson. For steadfast friendship and support to Patsy Keller. For early feedback to Deb Posey Chudzinski, Marcy Collins, Hilary Powell, Jo Dawson, Judy Wagner, Kaela Stokes, Audrey McDonald, Robin Diebold, Sue Cleereman, Linda Dossett, Sharon Ford, Dalice Peterson, Michelle Cox, Gretchen Coon, and Sue Chatterjee. And a huge thank you to all the wonderful friends on FB who helped me pick the cover art and provided encouragement along the way.

CHAPTER ONE

Emsley

The first time I saw the blue box of mystery was the last time I talked with my grandmother face-to-face.

“If you want to murder that cheating boyfriend of yours, I’m in,” she told me. “I thought about it, Emsley. I can’t help you bury his body, or Diya’s, but I can provide you with an alibi.”

She adjusted her Monet-print silk robe, blue-green with a smattering of purple water lilies, until it draped over her frail body just so. *The goddess in repose*. Stroke or no, prop-up bed or no, she was still Violet Velar, the Artist, the Diva, the toast of New York.

The cloud of disinfectant that hovered throughout the care center like highland mist in a Robinson Hall painting didn’t dare breach her room. Her perfume embraced me. *Spicy, unrestrained, bold*.

I plunked a stack of art magazines and auction catalogues on her nightstand. “We can let Trey live another day. He’s allowed to have a relationship with Diya, if that’s what they want. We’re business partners. I’m prepared to stick out the rough spots.”

“You could come back.”

I kissed her cheek. “You know New York is my Camelot.” The magical kingdom I always longed for. “But LA is my reality.”

New York auction houses seemed to have a secret charter that required auctioneers to look like the host of a British documentary series. You had to sound like you went to Cambridge in the sixties to be allowed on the stage.

“I’m not of a *distinguished* age, and here, that matters. I don’t have a stature that commands respect.” I turned down the metal bars around Violet’s bed that the new nurse liked to pop up for safety, but Violet hated. “And I’m not the preferred sex. I’m missing the dangly bits.”

She growled at that.

My sentiments exactly. “You know what Henry Fullerton told me when I asked for a promotion?”

“Henry was always an ass.”

“Expensive pieces of art are bought by the rich as an investment. A star auctioneer must be a person the CEO of a hedge fund would find trustworthy at a glance. Someone they could see themselves golfing with on a Sunday.” Henry’s exact words, his excuse for keeping me in a junior position year after year. “Anyway, if he wasn’t an ass, I wouldn’t have started looking at other opportunities.” When I was in a generous mood, I could almost convince myself that Henry Fullerton had done me a favor. “I wouldn’t have started my own business with Diya and Trey.”

Violet’s Valkyrie gaze softened with concern. “Are you sure you want to keep living with them?”

“It’s not a matter of *want*. It’s a matter of being unable to predict lottery numbers.” I settled into the recliner next to her bed with my bag and teased my laptop from the mess of papers in there. “Believe me, I want to have my own place. And someday soon, I will. And then I’m going to buy Diya and Trey out of the business.”

I wanted to reach a point where I was calling the shots, where I was my own woman, because I wanted to branch out into benefit auctions. I wanted

the current business to be strong enough that I could do benefit auctions for free. My dream was to hand a million-dollar check to stroke research one day. I daydreamed about that research helping Violet. I wanted nothing more than to see my grandmother restored to her old self.

Our niche auction house, Ludington's, handled political fundraisers, focusing exclusively on Hollywood celebrity donors. I didn't miss stuffy New York estate auctions of boring paintings from dusty financiers whose collections were accumulated strictly as an investment. In LA, we dealt with actors or producers or directors who offered a weekend at their ranch, or art they'd created, or a dress from an Oscar-winning role, down to smaller items like signed scripts. Our auctions were fun. They zinged.

"We're perfectly positioned to take advantage of Hollywood's political activism," I said, straight out of our standard proposal we gave to potential investors. "We're going to make serious money. Hopefully, soon."

I shouldn't have talked about work on my day off. My phone immediately pinged with a text.

Tonight at ten at the hotel?

Violet raised her head from her pillow. "Is that your mother?"

"Mark Selig. Junior congressman. We're about to sign him as a new client."

I'm in New York for the day. I texted back. *Monday morning at ten at the office?*

"Watch out for those." Violet wiggled her toes. "Men who come to power early tend to develop an awful sense of entitlement."

She wasn't wrong. "We need to figure out when we can meet up. I had a meeting with him yesterday that fell through." A noon intro session at Ludington's.

An hour before the meeting, he rescheduled for 10:00 p.m. at his hotel's restaurant. On arrival, the maître d' informed me that the meeting was

moved to the gentleman's suite. I'd pretended that I had an emergency phone call and had to leave.

When something like this happened, I usually asked Trey to take the rescheduled meeting, but Selig had requested me specifically because he had concerns about our auction format, which was my area. I was going to have to deal with him.

"Oh, honey. Are you going to lose out because you came to visit me?"

"He's in LA for a few days. We'll meet when I get back." And that was as much time as I was willing to waste on talking about Selig. "Hey, guess what I had under the hammer this week?"

"Trey's face?"

Violet was still indignant on my behalf, and I loved her for that. "I auctioned off an A-list action star's sweat-stained jockstrap for a hundred grand."

"I hereby pronounce Old Hollywood glamour officially dead." She closed her eyes as if the idea pained her, or she was offering up a prayer for Hollywood's collective soul. Then, after a mournful moment, her eyes popped open. "Did it stink?"

"Didn't smell like roses at dusk." My laptop beeped. "Mom is calling."

"Remind me later that I want to give you something," Violet said quickly.

Then the call connected, and Mom ruled the screen from Florida, in all her tanned and teased glory.

"Why are you so close to the screen? Put that laptop somewhere so I can see the both of you," was her opening bid into the conversation.

Mom excelled at issuing orders and preferred all things orderly, in their place. If something wasn't the way she liked it, she made it that way. Born Johanna Velar, she'd changed her first name to Anna in high school. And then she married Philip Gregory Wilson right after graduation to divest herself of Velar, Violet's maiden name, a clear sign that my mother had

been born out of wedlock. Johanna Velar—too exotic, people would think she was a foreigner, for heaven's sake. Anna Wilson—American, traditional, conservative, perfect for a dentist's wife. And then, when she finally had me, she named me Emily Wilson. Except, starting in kindergarten, I made everyone call me Emsley, Violet's nickname for me. Which drove my mother crazy.

Dad popped up behind her, golf bag over his shoulder. "Violet." Then to me, "Hi, dumpling." And then he kissed Mom on the cheek. "Why is my beer fridge in the garage full of face cream?"

"They discontinued Buti Balm." Other people would have to lose a limb to look that pained. "I had to stock up. Where are you going?"

"To beat the checkered pants off Bob." Dad waved at us, then disappeared from the frame.

Mom had adjusted her clip-on camera for my father's sake, so now she was off-center, only one eye showing, growing larger as she scooted closer to her computer. With her mascara running from the heat and humidity, I felt like the eye of Sauron was staring at me. "When did you get there?"

She wanted to know if we'd been talking behind her back.

"Barely walked through the door."

"How is your broken hip, Anna?" Violet asked her only child.

"Healing. I know better than to walk on the slippery pool deck barefooted." Mom huffed at her own carelessness. "We should have been back north a week ago."

My parents lived in Hartford, Connecticut for most of the year and usually drove down to the rehab center in New York when I visited each month. Two obligations with one stone, the pinnacle of practicality. Practicality and predictability were my mother's highest ideals. Forced changes to schedule threw her off track. She was not one to handle life's curveballs well.

I felt bad for her. “If Violet needs anything, I can help.” Nobody should have to sit through a three-hour flight with a shattered hip.

“Thank you.” She didn’t wallow in gratitude, but moved straight on to “Now tell me you’re back with Trey.”

“Not if all the men were gone and all the batteries were dead.” I’d read that in a book somewhere and saved it for this moment.

“Avery! How can you be so...” She wanted to say *vulgar*, but she thought the word *vulgar* was vulgar, so she delicately trailed off. “Think of your company. When you marry him, between the two of you, you’ll be majority shareholders.”

“I don’t have time to date.”

“Men aren’t attracted to you because you always wear black. At least chuck the pants. Don’t make that face. Men want to see women’s legs.”

“If I ever develop a sudden, burning need to know what men want, I’ll send out an online survey.”

Mom sighed with the exasperation of mothers of disobedient daughters everywhere, as if my thorny impertinence was tearing out the stitches from the fabric of society. “Just pick a dress with sex appeal for that *Fast Business* interview tomorrow. You never know who’ll see you.”

“It’s a business magazine, Anna.” Violet stepped up to defend me. “Not a mail-order bride catalogue.”

I loved my grandmother with the fire of a mega sun flare, the kind that knocked out the internet and messed up satellites in orbit.

Mom launched into her I’m-never-going-to-have-grandchildren routine with the crackling energy of a runaway auction. Then she slammed her signature why-do-I-even-bother look at me like a hammer and abruptly transitioned to “How is business?”

“Growing.” I sent the hopeful thought out into the universe. Truth was, our survival depended on our next few contracts. “We’re signing a new client.”

My phone pinged. A text from Trey. *Contract fell through.*

Damn Selig. We offered an excellent service. He would have made money for his run with us. Why wasn't that enough? Why did my presence in his hotel room have to be part of the bargain?

We needed more new clients. We needed to spend more on PR and customer outreach. I texted that back to Trey, out of sight of the laptop camera. Failure was my mother's catnip.

Three little dots wiggled on my phone. Trey was typing. Then the dots went *poof* away. Nothing. He was thinking about my suggestion. That he'd never once taken my word for anything annoyed me, but I let the familiar aggravation go. Consideration was better than a knee-jerk *no*.

"I don't know how long you can possibly last." Mom rolled right along. "You built a company based on the whims of politics. How can you be so irresponsible?"

"Why don't I just open a cupcake shop? Do something feminine?" I stole her next line.

"People have to eat." She shot me a withering look, then trained her Sauron eye on Violet. "What did the doctor say yesterday?"

"I want to talk to you about something else." My grandmother smiled at me impishly, so I knew to brace. "I sold the house."

No! Shock yanked my spine straight. Violet's four-story brownstone in Greenwich Village had been the nest of my best childhood memories.

"What do you mean you sold the house?" Mom's voice shot up. "We did not discuss selling."

"It didn't need to be discussed," Violet said gently. "I've been behind on the bills here, and I don't like being behind."

She didn't need our agreement. She was right. The decision clearly made her happy. I wasn't going to tell her how hard the news hit me.

She read it on my face. "Our love for each other doesn't live in that house, honey. Our memories won't be included in the sale with the

appliances.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever be able to think of your home as just a pile of bricks.”

“Think of it as I do. A place of great comfort, and lots of love, and blooming creativity. We were blessed by it for a long time. And now we release it with gratitude. May it delight all who enter the doors, for at least another hundred years.”

And there she was, my grandmother, shifting the world with a handful of words.

“I’m glad you found a solution.”

Her lopsided smile reappeared. “I also started a new NYU scholarship.”

“Oh, here we go again.” Sauron squinted with enough disapproval to give all of Mordor pause. But not Violet.

“Ninety-day settlement,” my grandmother said. “I made Emsley my sole beneficiary. Other than the house, there’s only the contents. You said you didn’t want any of it, Anna. Bram is taking care of the details.”

“Isn’t Bram too old to still be working as an attorney?”

Violet dismissed Mom with a regal turn of her head. “You can donate what you don’t want, Emsley. And then please arrange for cleaners.”

My mother’s huff held a wealth of meaning. *I can’t believe I’m not being consulted. Decisions made in haste are repented at leisure. You will all regret this later. Don’t come to me crying.*

“I don’t care about the furniture,” she said. “But for the record, I don’t like this sudden sale. Now, tell me what the doctors said.”

Violet summarized her latest tests that indicated a slight improvement. Then Mom signed off. Her bones hurt when she sat still too long.

I stashed away my laptop. “I’ll sneak downstairs for some predinner sweets.” And as I headed for the door, I told my grandmother what I always told her, “If I’m arrested, send bail money.”

Out in the hallway, I bumped into Violet's neighbor. She'd reached the window at the end since she'd waved at me earlier, and was now negotiating the return trip.

"How are you, Mrs. Yang?"

"Out for a run. Boston Marathon is coming up," she deadpanned. She was another indomitable spirit.

She watched me for a few silent seconds as if deliberating whether to say more. I was pretty sure she'd go for it. She usually did.

"Do I look like I'm hiding something?"

I scanned her from her yellow daisy dress to her terrycloth slippers. "Are you?"

She reached into her bulging pocket that I'd thought held a wad of tissues. And with the flair of a magician, she produced a fuzzy yellow chick. "What do you think?"

"Poultry is an interesting choice for a healthcare facility. Is this sanitary?"

"Eh. We have therapy dogs twice a month."

"Where did you find it?"

"They took some of us on an enrichment bus trip to the Chinese Market."

"And you brought home a friend." Who was I to judge? Honestly, it was nothing Violet wouldn't have done if she were ambulatory. "What's her name?"

"Lai Fa." The two syllables slipped off Mrs. Yang's tongue as if whispered by a spring breeze. "It means beautiful flower in Chinese."

The chick did resemble a fluff of dandelion. "She looks very sweet."

Mrs. Yang slipped her secret companion back into her pocket with loving care. "Don't tell anyone?"

"Who would believe me?"

The downstairs kitchen brimmed with the aroma of baking lasagna. When I inquired after dessert, the woman doing dishes simply asked, “Mango pudding or maple ice cream?”

“Mango pudding, please.”

I received twin bowls—no subterfuge needed. Violet and I made up the heist to keep life interesting.

I walked back into her room with “Quick. We must destroy the evidence as fast as we can.”

The afternoon light hit the bed just so, diamond dust glittering in her silver hair. Her lively eyes sparkled. I half expected her to rise from the bed and declare that she was ready for her easel and her paints.

“Next time I come, I’ll take you to the garden.”

“Ooh, it’s been forever since I’ve been out there.” She swept aside the art magazine she’d been reading. “Anybody catch you?”

“Close call. They chased me down the hall, but I lost them in the elevator.”

“That’s my girl.” We exchanged coconspirator grins, then settled in to savor our treats. We discussed art, then speculated about which of the staff members were having affairs with each other. We placed imaginary bets on who would elope.

“My money is on the PT guy and the blonde night nurse.” I was about to explain why, but the clock on the bedstand caught my eye.

Have we been talking that long?

Half the afternoon had flown by.

“I have to go.” I leaned in for a hug.

“Hold on, I told you I wanted to give you something. There’s a box in the bottom of the wardrobe.”

“What is it?”

“We’ll talk after you’ve read through the contents.”

The robin's-egg-blue box hid under Violet's robes and caftans, *Tiffany's* printed in silver on top. The sides were held together with strips of tape as if by the ribs of a corset. The once elegant, belle-of-the-ball box had aged into a disheveled old lady. Judging by the paint splatters that reminded me of makeup applied by failing eyes, the package must have sat in Violet's artist studio for some time.

The tight lid didn't want to open, but I managed. "Letters?"

I lifted out a handful of yellowed sheets from what had to be over a hundred pages, each covered with loopy cursive in fading ink. "I'll bring a bigger bag next time. I don't want to jam them into my laptop case and damage the paper."

"Take the diary, then." Violet was looking at the box, not at me. "The letters are in Dutch, anyway. The diary is in English."

I fished out the little green volume from the pile of loose papers.

"I'll read it on the plane." I sealed the lid and slid the box back into its hiding place. "Are you sure you're all right?" I returned to Violet for another hug. "I'll call you tomorrow. I love you."

"Love you more."

Her voice was too frail. I didn't like the tremble in it. I wasn't going to wait a whole month for another visit. I was going to make time in my schedule and come back next week.

And then we'd talk about her diary. Curiosity was killing me.

In an hour, I was at the airport, and an hour after that, I was settled in my seat for takeoff. I had the little green book on my lap, and I couldn't wait to jump in. I was about to meet Violet's scandalous past.

I cracked the cover open, but before I could read a single word of the loopy, handwritten cursive, my phone rang.

"Hey, Mom."

"You *cannot* hire a cleaning service," she said with a vehemence she usually reserved for things I did that kept me from *securing a man*. "I'd

clean the house out myself if I could. And golfing is one thing, but your father's heart can't take carrying boxes down all those stairs. You can take time off from work. Give Trey a chance to miss you. Who knows what risqué pictures of Violet with her celebrity friends might be at the house. You know what tabloids pay these days for sordid secrets like that? Do you want our family splashed all over the papers?"

"I'll clean. Relax, Mom."

"I know you idolize your grandmother, but she wasn't so perfect when I was young. All the wild parties. Strangers at the house at all hours of the night. Or she'd drag me to a museum, then walk away, under the spell of some great new idea for her next work. I would be crying in the corner, surrounded by people I didn't know, lost and terrified."

"I'm sorry."

"At least you know who your father is. Imagine if I had so many lovers, I couldn't tell you where you came from. How would you like not knowing your father's name?"

"You know I love Dad. I can't even imagine how terrible it must have been for you. I love you both." And I loved Violet too. But I was willing to accept the possibility that the Violet I knew was different from the Violet my mother had lived with.

"Be nice to Trey. He'll realize what a fool he's been and come back to you, you'll see."

An announcement came through the speakers, the captain asking all passengers to turn off their electronic devices.

"We're taking off. I have to go. I'll call you tomorrow."

I didn't have a chance to put my phone away yet when it pinged—a text from Trey.

After all the time he'd taken to think about my suggestion, he must have seen my point. I expected him to respond with *Okay, we'll invest in marketing*. Instead, he wrote: *We need to shut down.*

The words slammed into me as if I'd been physically hit. Shock pinned me to my seat.

I was working on forgiving him for Diya, but if he messed with our business, the tiny baby auction house I spent every ounce of my life energy to birth and nurture...

I texted him back.

I don't quit.

We were going to have to talk as soon as I stepped off the plane.

To keep myself distracted until then, I opened Violet's diary at last. Only to discover that it wasn't Violet's diary.