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THE WOMEN

KRISTIN
HANNAH

THE
THINGS WE DO
FOR LOVE

A NOVEL

THE THINGS WE DO FOR LOVE

a novel

KRISTIN HANNAH



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Excerpt from The Magic Hour

Things do not change; we change.

—HENRY DAVID THOREAU

ONE

The streets of West End were crowded on this unexpectedly sunny day. All across town mothers stood in open doorways, with hands tented across their eyes, watching their children play. Everyone knew that soon—probably tomorrow—a soapy haze would creep across the sky, covering the blue, obliterating the delicate sun, and once more the rain would fall.

It was May, after all, in the Pacific Northwest. Rain came to this month as surely as ghosts took to the streets on the thirty-first of October and salmon came home from the sea.

“It sure is hot,” Conlan said from the driver’s seat of the sleek black BMW convertible. It was the first thing he’d said in almost an hour.

He was trying to make conversation; that was all. Angie should return the volley, perhaps mention the beautiful hawthorn trees that were in bloom. But even as she had the thought, she was exhausted by it. In a few short months, those tiny green leaves would curl and blacken; the color would be drawn out of them by cold nights, and they would fall to the ground, unnoticed.

When you looked at it that way, what was the point in noticing so fleeting a moment?

She stared out the window at her hometown. It was the first time she’d been back in months. Although West End was only one hundred twenty miles from Seattle, that distance had seemed to swell lately in her mind. As much as she loved her family, she’d found it difficult to leave her own house. Out in the world, there were babies everywhere.

They drove into the old part of town, where Victorian houses had been built one after another on tiny patches of lawn. Huge, leafy maple trees shaded the street, cast an intricate lacework pattern of light on the asphalt. In the seventies, this neighborhood had been the town’s heart. Kids had been everywhere back then, riding their Big Wheels and Schwinn bicycles

from one house to the next. There had been block parties every Sunday after church, and games of Red Rover played in every backyard.

In the years between then and now, this part of the state had changed, and the old neighborhoods had fallen into silence and disrepair. Salmon runs had diminished and the timber industry had been hit hard. People who had once made their living from the land and the sea had been pushed aside, forgotten; new residents built their houses in clusters, in subdivisions named after the very trees they cut down.

But here, on this small patch of Maple Drive, time had stood still. The last house on the block looked exactly as it had for forty years. The white paint was pure and perfect; the emerald green trim glistened. No weed had ever been allowed to flourish in the lawn. Angie's father had tended to this house for four decades; it had been his pride and joy. Every Monday, after a weekend of hard work at the family's restaurant, he'd devoted a full twelve-hour day to home and garden maintenance. Since his death, Angie's mother had tried to follow that routine. It had become her solace, her way of connecting with the man she'd loved for almost fifty years, and when she tired of the hard work, someone was always ready to lend a hand. Such help, Mama often reminded them, was the advantage to having three daughters. Her payoff, she claimed, for surviving their teen years.

Conlan pulled up to the curb and parked. As the convertible top shushed mechanically into place, he turned to Angie. "Are you sure you're okay with this?"

"I'm here, aren't I?" She turned to look at him finally. He was exhausted; she saw the glint of it in his blue eyes but knew he wouldn't say more, wouldn't say anything that might remind her of the baby they'd lost a few months ago.

They sat there, side by side in silence. The air-conditioner made a soft whooshing noise.

The old Conlan would have leaned over and kissed her now, would have told her he loved her, and those few and tender words would have saved her, but they were past such comfort these days. The love they'd once shared felt far, far away, as faded and lost as her childhood.

"We could leave right now. Say the car broke down," he said, trying to be the man he used to be, the man who could tease his wife into smiling.

She didn't look at him. "Are you kidding? They all think we paid too much for this car. Besides, Mama already knows we're here. She might talk to dead people, but she has the hearing of a bat."

"She's in the kitchen making ten thousand cannoli for twenty people. And your sisters haven't stopped talking since they walked in the door. We could escape in the confusion." He smiled. For a moment everything felt normal between them, as if there were no ghosts in the car. She wished it were an ease that could last.

"Livvy cooked three casseroles," she muttered. "Mira probably crocheted a new tablecloth and made us all matching aprons."

"Last week you had two pitch meetings and a commercial shoot. It's hardly worth your time to cook."

Poor Conlan. Fourteen years of marriage and he still didn't understand the dynamics of the DeSaria family. Cooking was more than a job or a hobby; it was a kind of currency, and Angie was broke. Her papa, whom she'd idolized, had loved that she couldn't cook. He took it as a badge of success. An immigrant who'd come to this country with four dollars in his pocket and made a living feeding other immigrant families, he'd been proud that his youngest daughter made money using her head, rather than her hands.

"Let's go," she said, not wanting to think about Papa.

Angie got out of the car and went around to the trunk. It opened silently, revealing a narrow cardboard box. Inside was an extravagantly rich chocolate cake made by the Pacific Dessert Company and a to-die-for lemon tart. She reached down for it, knowing some comment would be made about her inability to cook. As the youngest daughter—"the princess"—she'd been allowed to color or talk on the phone or watch TV while her sisters worked in the kitchen. None of her sisters ever let her forget that Papa had spoiled her mercilessly. As adults, her sisters still worked in the family restaurant. That was *real* work, they always said, unlike Angie's career in advertising.

"Come on," Conlan said, taking her arm.

They walked up the concrete walkway, past the fountain of the Virgin Mary, and up the steps. A statue of Christ stood by the door, his hands outstretched in greeting. Someone had hung an umbrella from his wrist.

Conlan knocked perfunctorily and opened the door.

The house rattled with noise—loud voices, kids running up and down the stairs, ice buckets being refilled, laughter. Every piece of furniture in the foyer was buried beneath a layer of coats and shoes and empty food boxes.

The family room was full of children playing games. Candy Land for the younger kids; crazy eights for the older. Her eldest nephew, Jason, and her niece Sarah were playing Nintendo on the television. At Angie's entrance, the kids squealed and flocked to her, all talking at once, vying for her attention. From their earliest memories, she was the aunt who would get down on the floor and play with whatever toy was "in" at the moment. She never turned down their music or said that a movie was unsuitable. When asked, they all said Aunt Angie was "way cool."

She heard Conlan behind her, talking to Mira's husband, Vince. A drink was being poured. She eased through the crowd of kids and walked down the hallway toward the kitchen.

In the doorway, she paused. Mama stood at the oversized butcher block in the center of the room, rolling out the sweet dough. Flour obscured half of her face and dusted her hair. Her eyeglasses—a holdover from the seventies—had lenses the size of saucers and magnified her brown eyes. Tiny beads of sweat collected along her brow and slid down her floury cheeks, landing on her bosom in little blobs of dough. In the five months since Papa's passing, she'd lost too much weight and stopped dyeing her hair. It was snow white now.

Mira stood at the stove, dropping gnocchi into a pot of boiling water. From behind, she looked like a girl. Even after bearing four children, she was still tiny, almost birdlike, and since she often wore her teenage daughter's clothes, she appeared ten years younger than her forty-one years. Tonight, her long black hair was held back in a braid that snaked almost to her waist. She wore a pair of low-rise, flare-legged black pants and a cable-knit red sweater. She was talking now—there was no surprise in that; she was always talking. Papa had always joked that his eldest daughter sounded like a blender on high speed.

Livvy was standing off to the left, slicing fresh mozzarella. She looked like a Bic pen in her black silk sheath. The only thing higher than her heels was the puffiness of her teased hair. Long ago, Livvy had left West End in a rush, certain that she could become a model. She'd stayed in Los Angeles until the sentence "Could you please undress now?" started to accompany

every job interview. Five years ago, just after her thirty-fourth birthday, she'd come home, bitter at her lack of success, defeated by the effort, dragging with her two young sons who had been fathered by a man none of the family had ever seen or met. She'd gone to work at the family restaurant, but she didn't like it. She saw herself as a big-city girl trapped in a small town. Now she was married—again; it had been a quickie ceremony last week at the Chapel of Love in Las Vegas. Everyone hoped that Salvatore Traina—lucky choice number three—would finally make her happy.

Angie smiled. So much of her time had been spent in this kitchen with these three women; no matter how old she got or what direction her life took, this would always be home. In Mama's kitchen, you were safe and warm and well loved. Though she and her sisters had chosen different lives and tended to meddle too often in one another's choices, they were like strands of a single rope. When they came together, they were unbreakable. She needed to be a part of that again; she'd been grieving alone for too long.

She stepped into the kitchen and put the box down on the table. "Hey, guys."

Livvy and Mira surged forward, enfolded her in a hug that smelled of Italian spices and drugstore perfume. They held her tightly; Angie felt the wetness of tears on her neck, but nothing was said except "It's good to have you home."

"Thanks." She gave her sisters one last tight hug, then went to Mama, who opened her arms. Angie stepped into the warmth of that embrace. As always, Mama smelled of thyme, Tabu perfume, and Aqua Net hair spray. The scents of Angie's youth.

Mama hugged her so tightly that Angie had to draw in a gulp of air. Laughing, she tried to step back, but Mama held on.

Angie stiffened instinctively. The last time Mama had held Angie this tightly, Mama had whispered, *You'll try again. God will give you another baby.*

Angie pulled out of the embrace. "Don't," she said, trying to smile.

That did it—just the quietly voiced plea. Mama reached for the Parmesan grater and said, "Dinner's ready. Mira, get the kids to the table."

The dining room held fourteen people comfortably and fifteen tonight. An ancient mahogany table, brought here from the old country, held center stage in a big, windowless room papered in rose and burgundy. An ornate wooden crucifix hung on the wall beside a portrait of Jesus. Adults and children were crammed around the table. Dean Martin sang in the other room.

“Let us pray,” Mama said as soon as everyone was seated. When silence didn’t fall instantly, she reached over and thwopped Uncle Francis on the head.

Francis dropped his chin and closed his eyes. Everyone followed suit and began the prayer. Their voices joined as one: “Bless us, O Lord, and these thy gifts which we are about to receive from thy bounty through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

When the prayer ended, Mama stood up quickly, raised her wineglass. “We drink a toast now to Sal and Olivia.” Her voice vibrated; her mouth trembled. “I do not know what to say. Toasting is a man’s job.” She abruptly sat down.

Mira touched Mama’s shoulder and stood up. “We welcome Sal to our family. May you two find the kind of love that Mama and Papa had. May you have full cupboards and warm bedrooms and—” She paused. Her voice softened. “—many healthy babies.”

Instead of laughter and clapping and clanking glasses, there was silence.

Angie drew a sharp breath and looked up at her sisters.

“I’m not pregnant,” Livvy said quickly. “But ... we’re trying.”

Angie managed to smile, although it was wobbly and weak and fooled no one. Everyone was looking at her, wondering how she would handle another baby in the family. They all tried so hard not to bruise her.

She raised her glass. “To Sal and Livvy.” She spoke quickly, hoping her tears would pass for joy. “May you have many healthy babies.”

Conversations started up again. The table became a frenzy of clanging forks and knives scratching on porcelain and laughter. Although this family gathered for every holiday and two Monday nights a month, they never ran out of things to say.

Angie glanced around the table. Mira was talking animatedly to Mama about a school fund-raiser that needed to be catered; Vince and Uncle Francis were arguing about last week’s Huskies–Ducks game; Sal and

Livvy were kissing every now and then; the younger kids were spitting peas at one another; and the older ones were arguing about whether Xbox or PlayStation was better. Conlan was asking Aunt Giulia about her upcoming hip replacement surgery.

Angie couldn't concentrate on any of it. She certainly couldn't make idle conversation. Her sister wanted a baby, and so it would happen. Livvy would probably get pregnant between Leno and the news. *Oops, I forgot my diaphragm.* That was how it happened for her sisters.

After dinner, as Angie washed the dishes, no one spoke to her, but everyone who walked past the sink squeezed her shoulder or kissed her cheek. Everyone knew there were no more words to say. Hopes and prayers had been offered so many times over the years, they'd lost their sheen. Mama had kept a candle burning at St. Cecilia's for almost a decade now, and still it would be Angie and Conlan alone in the car tonight, a couple who'd never multiplied into a family.

Finally, she couldn't stand it anymore. She tossed the dishrag on the table and went up to her old bedroom. The pretty little room, still wallpapered in roses and white baskets, held twin beds ruffled in pink bedding. She sat down on the end of her bed.

Ironically, she'd once knelt on this very floor and prayed not to be pregnant. She'd been seventeen at the time, dating Tommy Matucci. Her first love.

The door opened and Conlan walked in. Her big, black-haired Irishman husband looked ridiculously out of place in her little girl's room.

"I'm fine," she said.

"Yeah, right."

She heard the bitterness in his voice, felt stung by it. There was nothing she could do, though. He couldn't comfort her; God knew that had been proven often enough.

"You need help." He said it tiredly, and no wonder. The words were old.

"I'm fine."

He stared at her for a long time. The blue eyes that had once looked at her with adoration now held an almost unbearable defeat. With a sigh, he turned and left the room, closing the door behind him.

A few moments later it opened again. Mama stood in the doorway, her fists planted on her narrow hips. The shoulder pads on her Sunday dress

were *Blade Runner* big and practically touched the door frame on either side. “You always did run to your room when you were sad. Or angry.”

Angie scooted sideways to make room. “And you always came running up after me.”

“Your father made me. You never knew that, did you?” Mama sat down beside Angie. The old mattress sagged beneath their weight. “He could not stand to see you cry. Poor Livvy could shriek her lungs out and he never noticed. But you ... you were his princess. One tear could break his heart.” She sighed. It was a heavy sound, full of disappointment and empathy. “You’re thirty-eight years old, Angela,” Mama said. “It’s time to grow up. Your papa—God rest his soul—would have agreed with me on this.”

“I don’t even know what that means.”

Mama slipped an arm around her, pulled her close. “God has given you an answer to your prayers, Angela. It is not the answer you wanted, so you don’t hear. It’s time to listen.”

Angie woke with a start. The coolness on her cheeks was from tears.

She’d had the baby dream again; the one in which she and Conlan stood on opposite shores. Between them, on the shimmering expanse of blue sea, was a tiny pink-swaddled bundle. Inch by inch, it floated away and disappeared. When it was gone, they were left alone, she and Conlan, standing too far apart.

It was the same dream she’d been having for years, as she and her husband trudged from doctor’s office to doctor’s office, trying one procedure after another. Supposedly she was one of the lucky ones; in eight years, she’d conceived three children. Two had ended in miscarriage; one—her daughter, Sophia—had lived for only a few short days. That had been the end of it. Neither she nor Conlan had the heart to try again.

She eased away from her husband, grabbed her pink chenille robe off the floor, and left the bedroom.

The shadowy hallway waited for her. To her right, dozens of family photographs, all framed in thick mahogany, covered the wall. Portraits of five generations of DeSarias and Malones.

She looked down the long hallway at the last, closed door. The brass knob glinted in moonlight from the nearby window.

When was the last time she'd dared to enter that room?

God has given you an answer. ... It's time to listen.

She walked slowly past the stairs and the vacant guest room to the final door.

There she drew in a deep breath and exhaled it. Her hands were trembling as she opened the door and went inside. The air felt heavy in here, old and musty.

She turned on the light and closed the door behind her.

The room was so perfect.

She closed her eyes, as if darkness could help. The sweet notes of *Beauty and the Beast* filled her mind, took her back to the first time she'd closed the door on this room, so many years ago. It was after they'd decided on adoption.

We have a baby, Mrs. Malone. The mother—a teenager—chose you and Conlan. Come down to my office and meet her.

It had taken Angie the full four hours until their appointment to choose the outfit and do her makeup. When she and Conlan finally met Sarah Dekker in the lawyer's office, the three of them had bonded instantly. *We'll love your child*, Angie had promised the girl. *You can trust us.*

For six wonderful months Angie and Conlan had given up trying to get pregnant. Sex had become fun again; they'd fallen effortlessly back in love. Life had been good. There had been hope in this house. They'd celebrated with their families. They'd brought Sarah into their home and shared their hearts with her. They'd accompanied her to every OB appointment. Two weeks before her due date, Sarah had come home with some stencils and paint. She and Angie had decorated this room. A sky blue ceiling and walls, crowded by puffy white clouds. White picket fencing entwined with bright flowers, their colorful faces attended to by bees and butterflies and fairies.

The first sign of disaster had come on the day Sarah went into labor. Angie and Conlan had been at work. They'd come home to an empty, too-quiet house, with no message on the answering machine and no note on the kitchen table. They'd been home less than an hour when the phone rang.

They'd huddled by the phone together, holding hands, crying with happiness when they heard of the birth. It had taken a moment for the other words to register. Even now, Angie only remembered bits and pieces of the conversation.

*I'm sorry—
changed her mind
back with her boyfriend
keeping the baby*

They'd shut the door to this room and kept it closed. Once a week, their cleaning woman ventured inside, but Angie and Conlan never did. For well over a year, this room had stood empty, a shrine to their dream of someday. They'd given up on all of it—the doctors, the treatments, the injections, and the procedures. Then, miraculously, Angie had conceived again. By the time she was five months pregnant, they'd dared once more to enter this room and fill it with their dreams. They should have known better.

She went to the closet and pulled out a big cardboard box. One by one, she began to put things into it, trying not to attach memories to every piece she touched.

“Hey.”

She hadn't even heard the door open, and yet here he was, in the room with her.

She knew how crazy it must seem to him, to find his wife sitting in the middle of the room, with a big cardboard box beside her. Inside it were all of her precious knickknacks—the Winnie-the-Pooh bedside lamp, the Aladdin picture frame, the crisp new collection of Dr. Seuss books. The only piece of furniture left was the crib. The bedding was on the floor beside it, a neat little stack of pale pink flannel.

She turned to look up at him. There were tears in her eyes, blurring her vision, but she hadn't noticed until now. She wanted to tell him how sorry she was; it had all gone wrong between them. She picked up a small pink stack of sheets, stroking the fabric. “It made me crazy” was all she could say.

He sat down beside her.

She waited for him to speak, but he just sat there, watching her. She understood. The past had taught him caution. He was like an animal that had adapted to its dangerous environment by being still and quiet. Between the fertility drugs and the broken dreams, Angie's emotions were unpredictable. “I forgot about us,” she said.

“There is no us, Angie.” The gentle way he said it broke her heart.

Finally. One of them had dared to say it. “I know.”

“I wanted a baby, too.”

She swallowed hard, trying to keep her tears under control. She’d forgotten that in the last few years; Conlan had dreamed of fatherhood just as she wanted motherhood. Somewhere along the way, it had all become about her. She’d focused so much on her own grief that his had become incidental. It was one of those realizations that would haunt her, she knew. She had always been dedicated to success in her life—her family called her obsessive—and becoming a mother had been one more goal to attain. She should have remembered that it was a team sport.

“I’m sorry,” she said again.

He took her in his arms and kissed her. It was the kind of kiss they hadn’t shared in years.

They sat that way, entwined, for a long time.

She wished his love could have been enough for her. It should have been. But her need for a child had been like a high tide, an overwhelming force that had drowned them. Maybe a year ago she could have kicked to the surface. Not now. “I loved you....”

“I know.”

“We should have been more careful.”

Later that night, when she was alone in the bed they’d bought together, she tried to remember the hows and whys of it, the things they’d said to each other at the end of their love, but none of it came back to her. All she could really remember was the smell of baby powder and the sound of his voice when he said good-bye.