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Summer
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ONE

I always held my breath when I signed in at the nurses' station, as if the visitor log was a test that I hadn't studied for. *Date?* it quizzed me. *Time?*

3:27 p.m., I wrote, later than usual today. The tropical storm had held off long enough for me to clock out of the bookstore and sprint to my car, but halfway to Elkins Village the thunder had rumbled its final warning before the sky opened up to shower Pennsylvania with its sorrows.

Sadly, I could relate to Mother Nature.

"It was a restless night," Tara told me after I scribbled my name on the visitor line. Not all the Elkins nurses knew me, but the team in Finlay House did. They offered me upbeat but heartfelt smiles four times a week. "But after sleeping in, it's been an uneventful day."

"Oh, good." I forced myself to exhale as she handed me a familiar green guest badge. Knowing the drill, I pressed the sticker to my chest and then saluted Tara before turning on my

heel and heading down the hall. The carpeted floor somehow silenced my squelching rain boots.

I smiled when I reached the atrium, trying to appreciate its hominess. Colorful photographs of Bucks County flora and fauna hung on the taupe walls, and the overhead lighting was now warm thanks to a petition banning fluorescent bulbs. A skylight usually bathed the atrium in a cheery glow, but today raindrops thumped against the glass. Most of Finlay's residents gathered here during the day; I called it the "rally point." A couple women sat at the round table working on a jigsaw puzzle while hundred-year-old Bob Coleman relaxed near a window wearing big headphones. I knew the Elkins librarian hooked him up with audiobooks, since Bob's eyesight had abandoned him.

Other people had been herded around the huge TV, but *House Hunters International* held not one iota of their attention. Instead, they dozed in their wheelchairs. My chest tightened at the sight of Sally Jones—who slept silently under a blanket in her fleece-lined recliner chair on wheels. "Why is that lady in a stroller?" Maisie had asked the first time here, and before my dad could answer, Bryce had pointed to snoring Frank Richards and said, "Why are his eyelids see-through?"

They had both sounded so scared.

They didn't visit very often.

I said hello to several village elders as I crossed the floor, but my pulse quickened when I reached the other side—when I reached the third door on the left. Room F-18. An artificial but

elegant boxwood wreath hung on the half-closed door. Once upon a time, the wreath would change with the seasons, but now one season slipped into the next without notice. Greenery worked no matter the time of year.

The door's nameplate read: ANNETTE LUPO.

But who am I? I thought, shifting from one foot to the other. *Who will I be today?*

Sometimes I was Olivia, loving granddaughter.

Other times I was not.

I took a breath and gently knocked on the door.

"Come in!" a slightly startled but kindhearted voice called.

I walked into the room to find my grandmother relaxing in her cushy white armchair by the window. My dad had nicknamed it her throne.

"Hello there!" Her face lit up in recognition. "What a surprise!"

I threw up my arms in a ta-da sort of way, having accepted that every single one of my visits—scheduled or spontaneous—would forever be a surprise. Time was no longer on my grandmother's list of priorities. "Hi, Annie," I said, upbeat. My grandmother had always been *Annie* to me, never Grandma or Grammy. "Delighted?"

"As ever." She beamed, and I hurried over for a hug before she tested her limits and tried to stand. Her left cheekbone was still bruised from her fall last month. "It's so good to see you, darling," she said as I held her close. For the overwhelming majority of

my life, her signature scent had been Jo Malone perfume and L'Occitane soap, but I was getting used to the Dove the Elkins staff now bought her—or, I was trying to. “How long has it been? Weeks?”

“Mmm,” I said noncommittally.

It had only been two days.

Forty-eight hours.

But Annie had thought I was a new aide on Monday.

The days she didn't recognize me felt like slaps in the face, but I'd learned that no matter how many times I insisted I was her granddaughter, her battlefield brain wasn't going to believe me. I'd never forget the first visit she hadn't known me, the first visit I'd had to *introduce* myself. She thought I was her neighbor's adult daughter. “It's a pleasure to meet you!” she'd said with her effervescent smile, so familiar it made my bones ache. “I have a granddaughter named Olivia. She turned ten a couple months ago...”

Now, I gently kissed Annie's cheek and played along with my supposed absence. It was easier. “I'm sorry, it has been a little while.”

“I understand.” My grandmother nodded. “School must be keeping you so...” She trailed off, wincing. I knew she was searching every nook and cranny of her vocabulary for “busy.” After my grandfather unexpectedly passed away several years ago, my grandmother started losing and mixing up words. It had been one of the first signs that something wasn't right, that her mind was doing more than grieving. “On your toes!” she finally sputtered.

School must be keeping you on your toes.

“Mmm,” I again neither confirmed nor denied. Annie hadn't been well enough to attend my high school graduation last spring. Not only was she becoming less steady on her feet, but her doctor had adjusted her medicine, and the side effects had hit her hard. Paranoia, in particular. She wouldn't stop accusing the Elkins chef of kidnapping her cat.

Annie hadn't had a cat in years.

Maybe she thought I was in college now, but after a series of arguments with my dad and Erica, I'd deferred Northwestern. Was I spending my gap year at a cooking school in Paris? Or hiking the Appalachian Trail? Or teaching English in Thailand? Or blowing glass in Brooklyn?

No, but I worked almost full time at Haddonfield's bookstore. That was something.

I know we are losing her, I remembered saying. But I can't just suddenly lose her.

My heart warmed when Annie invited me to curl up in her armchair, big enough for the two of us. “Those look pretty,” I said once I'd gotten cozy, gesturing to the vase of pink flowers on her windowsill. Tulips were her forever favorite.

“Yes, aren't they gorgeous?” she said in the dreamy voice she'd developed. “I found them at the market yesterday.”

No, you didn't, I couldn't help but think. I brought them on Monday.

But that doesn't matter! I quickly scolded myself. Who cares how she got them? The point is they make her happy.

We admired the tulips together, and then I stretched for one of the many Shutterfly memory books arranged near the vase. They all had a theme, ranging from Annie's childhood on the Chesapeake Bay, to my parents' wedding, to my dad's second wedding, to my Halloween costumes over the years. The newest book was titled *Beach Days with Maisie and Bryce*. (Erica had taken literally a thousand photos of the twins on vacation last summer.)

Today's selection was *She's Too Young to be Seventy!* Twelve years ago Pops had thrown Annie a surprise party with thirty of their closest friends. She'd thought the plan was a fancy family dinner, so she had looked stunned—blue eyes wide and hand covering her mouth—but also *stunning*, in a sophisticated black dress with gold jewelry and hair in her signature blond pixie cut.

I glanced at her now, feeling a twinge at the sight of her flat gray hair. I still couldn't get used to it. For as long as I could remember, up until Elkins had transferred her from assisted living to Finlay House six months ago, her hair had been blond and coiffed to perfection.

With each passing visit, she looked less like my grandmother.

I hadn't realized I'd been biting my pinkie nail until Annie lightly swatted my hand. "Olivia, stop," she said. "You need to break that habit."

Flushing, I folded my arms across my chest. I only ever chewed my pinkie nail, and it was only when I was lost in thought or a little anxious, but she was right. Plus, I'd just treated myself to my monthly manicure, keeping Annie's and my tradition alive. I didn't want to ruin it.

"Chris's nails were nothing more than nubs," she continued. "I couldn't stand it."

Chris. I hadn't heard her say his name in a while. Whenever we were together, Annie never referred to my dad as "Chris," or even Christopher. It was always "your father." Or, if she thought I was an Elkins aide or nurse or long-lost family friend, "my son."

"I didn't know he bit his nails," I said.

"Oh, yes, he most certainly did." Annie let out a deep sigh. "Sometimes I wonder where he is..."

It was silent for a beat, save for the pouring rain outside. I understood why she was disappointed. My pilot dad didn't visit Elkins as often as I did; American Airlines kept his schedule pretty tight.

"He had an exasperating flight to O'Hare today," I offered, smiling to myself. Every single time he flew to Chicago, my dad found its airport a hot mess. "One of his college roommates lives right on Lake Michigan, so they're getting drinks tonight."

"That's nice..." Annie said, but in her faraway voice again. She caught my gaze, and I tried not to let my heart sink at her distant smile, at her glazed-over eyes. Two tells that her thoughts had drifted to a mysterious elsewhere...

Before suddenly returning to the room.

“Look at my tulips!” she said delightedly, pointing to her vase.

“Aren’t they just lovely?”

“Yes.” I swallowed the rising lump in my throat. “They’re beautiful.”

But dementia was not.

TWO

My exit from Elkins was five o’clock sharp, right when an aide came to escort Annie to dinner. I walked to the dining hall with them, holding my grandmother’s hand, but then I gracefully fled. It was a strategic decision; Annie never liked when I left, especially when she knew I was her granddaughter. “Why don’t you stay and eat with me?” she’d ask. “The food is probably better than whatever that woman is making...”

I smiled weakly, too tired to defend Erica’s cooking skills. And honestly, what was the point? “I can’t tonight,” I said. “But I’ll be back soon.”

“When?”

It was a good question, one that almost brought tears to my eyes. Technically, I’d be back on Friday—only the day after tomorrow—but would Annie hug me then? Tell me how happy she was to see me? Or would she politely greet me, as if I were a new face at Elkins? I tried not to allow myself to dread the possibility of her being in a bad mood.

“I love you, Annie,” was all I said as I gave her a goodbye hug,

one that would hopefully last until she saw me again. “I love you very much.”

“I love you too.” She raised a slightly shaking hand to my cheek. Ridges of blue veins ran across her pale skin. “My dearest Olivia.”

And with that, an aide distracted her so I could slip away, steeling myself to not look back. Thankfully, the storm had calmed; it lightly drizzled as I crossed the parking lot toward my car. Elkins Village—the Ritz-Carlton of retirement communities,” per my dad—was safe, so I never locked the Jeep. But after I hopped up into the driver’s seat, I couldn’t help but feel like something was strange. It seemed like the car was higher off the ground than usual, and why was my seat farther away from the steering wheel?

It was only when I noticed the backpack and lacrosse stick riding shotgun that I realized I was sitting in someone else’s car. *Oh my god*, I thought, stomach dropping. *What the fuck, Olivia?*

My mind was always a little scrambled after leaving Annie, but seriously?

I slid out of the Jeep, hoping to flee the scene as fast as possible. *Funny story*, I didn’t want to explain to its owner. *I also drive an Anvil blue Jeep Wrangler, and just like you, I don’t lock it while I’m here...*

It luckily took less than a minute to find my actual Jeep, two rows over with its New Jersey license plate. I’d grown up in Pennsylvania—just up the road, actually—but Erica had

convinced my dad to move to Haddonfield after Pops died and once Annie was transferred to assisted living. I’d been a sophomore and went with the flow, knowing that my time had passed. Life in the Lupo family was about prioritizing the twins. The house my dad and Erica ended up buying? It had five bedrooms, the smallest of which was gifted to me. “You don’t mind, do you?” Erica had asked, pseudo-earnestly. “I just think it makes sense that Maisie and Bryce have bigger rooms, since they’ll be living here longer...”

By the time I pulled into our driveway, the cloudy sky had darkened and the front lights flickered on to show Bryce waiting for me. His light brown hair was extra curly from the humidity. “Hey, Olivia!” he called whilst launching himself into a big puddle. Erica would be thrilled. “Guess what?”

“Your kickball team *finally* beat Maisie’s at recess?”

My ten-year-old brother pointedly ignored my guess. “We got your favorite mac and cheese for dinner.”

“The Hot ‘n’ Honey Pork?” I asked, stomach rumbling with hope. A gourmet mac and cheese restaurant had recently opened in town.

“No, the pepperoni pizza mac.”

“Bryce, that’s *your* favorite.” I said, then wrinkled my nose. *Not to mention disgusting!*

He giggled. “Well, my mom said we all had to agree...”

“...so you *lied*,” I finished for him as we walked into the house together. The kitchen smelled like pepperoni and cheese and

Swede bounded over to us, nearly knocking over Erica's tall Nikon tripod. "Hello, hello, my dude!" I cooed, crouching to give the golden retriever a hug. "Bryce, do you know if Swede's been fed?"

My brother shook his head, and our dog corroborated by barking.

"Swede..." a voice warned, and I glanced over my shoulder to see Erica walking into the kitchen. She wore black leggings and a white T-shirt that read JERSEY GIRLS DON'T PUMP GAS, but her caramel-colored beach waves and flawless makeup made her look camera ready.

"Did you shoot some content today?" I casually asked, gesturing to the tripod.

She nodded. "Tuckernuck sent a couple dresses, and I made a charcuterie board."

"Cool." Erica was a lifestyle influencer on Instagram; her almost 250,000 followers watched her do stuff like model preppy clothes, whip up hors d'oeuvres, mix cocktails, review books, and go on weekend getaways. Maisie and Bryce also made regular cameos, usually in coordinating outfits. "Where's the charcuterie board?"

"I brought it over to Hilary's house. She's hosting book club tonight."

My stomach sighed in disappointment, but if my stepmother heard it, she didn't let on. Instead, she opened the fridge and started taking out salad supplies—a sign that she also planned to pass on eating Bryce's favorite mac and cheese.

I waited for her to ask about my visit with Annie.

She didn't. In fact, she didn't say anything at all; instead, she admired the invitation posted on the fridge for the thousandth time. It had arrived last month. WELCOME TO CAMP CARMICHAEL! the letterpress heading read, and below that were all the details for Erica's family reunion on Martha's Vineyard this summer. Her parents were celebrating their sixty-fifth wedding anniversary, and we'd been invited up for a three-week-long celebration.

To say I didn't want to go was an understatement. Erica's family was not my family, and three weeks was almost a month.

That was a *long* time to leave Annie.

The oven timer jolted Erica back to the moment. "Bryce, will you go get Maisie?" she asked as I rolled my eyes. Still no inquiry about Annie. It was amazing how wrapped up my stepmother could be in her own life.

"I can't," my brother answered. "I'm making sure Swede doesn't eat too fast. Olivia said the vet said his stomach could twist, remember?"

(Swede had a tendency to wolf down his Purina Pro Plan.)

"I'll call her," I offered, then took approximately three steps across the tile floor before dramatically shouting, "MAISIE! DINNER!"

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Erica flinch.

"COMING!" my sister called back, along with, "WILL YOU DO MY NAILS TONIGHT?"

Bryce groaned. "You guys are so *loud*."

Five minutes later, we took our unofficially assigned seats at the kitchen table. Swede followed suit and stretched out beneath us, resting his blocky head on my feet. The twins raved about their mac and cheese, and I thanked their mom for tossing a salad big enough for two. “You’re welcome,” she said, and after letting Maisie fill me in on first grade gossip—Violet P. thought her fish sticks tasted weird at lunch and then later threw up all over their science experiment—Erica spoke up again. “Olivia, how are Quincy and Gwen doing?”

“Good,” I said. Quincy and Gwen were my best friends, but unlike me, a gap year hadn’t been in their plans. With freshman year now in the books, they both had internships in New York for the summer. I’d helped them move into their apartment over Memorial Day Weekend last week. “They’re taking the train to Ocean City for the Fourth. Gwen’s parents rented a house.”

“Oh, right.” Erica took a sip of water. “I knew that. Chris ran into Gwen’s mom at Acme.”

I inwardly sighed. It was always *Chris*, not *your dad*. It sounded like I wasn’t his daughter; instead, I was just some adult who lived with them. An au pair, perhaps.

Maisie hiccupped, a much-too-fast eater like Swede. “So where did we land on the whole painting-my-nails thing?”

I mustered up a smile. “What color?”

After letting Maisie dig through my stash and painting her tiny fingernails an Essie shade of hot pink called “blushin’ & crushin’,” I took a shower and then found Swede curled up in my room. He always started the night in his plush dog bed, but like clockwork, when it got to be around midnight, he’d invite himself into my bed and snuggle up next to me. He was, to use the technical term, a “Velcro dog.”

“Don’t look,” I joked before I untied my bathrobe and changed into my new pajamas. A pale pink sleep set covered in flamingos and palm fronds.

I’d gotten my love for pj’s from my grandmother. She always wore a fun pair when I slept over at my grandparents’ town house as a little kid. My favorite was the silky blue-white-and-gold checkerboard pair. Very luxurious, very Annie.

There was a framed photo of her on the bookcase near Swede’s bed; she was eighteen at her high school formal, wearing a Grace Kelly–esque white dress. It was a total glamour shot, and after a quick glance at my own prom photo, I admit it *was* a little eerie how much I resembled Annie. While my eyes were hazel and hers deep blue, we had the same wavy blond hair, our lips were shaped the same (a “Cupid’s bow,” my grandfather had loved to say), and our eyebrows had the same intrigued arch.

Despite my room being tiny, I had two walk-in cedar closets—one was for my wardrobe while the other now stored some of Annie’s stuff. Most of her belongings were in a storage unit near Elkins, since she’d downsized to a single room. We

didn't have space in our house for all her furniture, but Erica suggested we keep everything for now; some pieces were family heirlooms and others could furnish an apartment someday. "Whose apartment?" I'd deadpanned, because how often did she fantasize about me moving out? Was it secretly marked on her calendar? I knew she was being pragmatic, but it just rubbed me the wrong way.

I switched on the light in the second closet, then sat crisscross-applesauce on the needlepointed rug that used to sit in front of Annie's town house fireplace. She'd stitched it herself, white with intricate springtime flowers and a green border. "Needlepointing is cheaper than therapy!" she often said, though I never understood what she needed therapy for. She'd lived a wondrous life.

Lives, I corrected myself. *She's still living life.*

It just wasn't so wondrous anymore.

I usually hid in the closet after my Elkins visits, looking through Annie's old record collection—she loved opera, especially *La traviata*—or admiring her jewelry and precious little trinkets. Once I'd put on one of her favorite winter coats and found a grocery list in a pocket. *Dark chocolate* had been the first item, written in her elegant penmanship. My eyes had stung; Annie couldn't write anymore. Thanks to her dementia, she could barely spell her name.

Maybe it was a little embarrassing, but the closet comforted me. It felt like *Annie* was comforting me, the grandmother who

had helped raise me and who I so fiercely loved and wasn't ready to lose. I only saw glimmers of that woman at Elkins, and they were becoming few and far between.

She's still here, I half-lied to myself. *She's still around.*