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I had felt no such apprehension on that day in early August when I turned onto North Point Way and drove toward Brodie's Watch for the first time. I knew only that the road needed maintenance and the pavement was rippled by the roots of encroaching trees. The property manager had explained to me on the phone that the house was over a hundred fifty years old and currently still under renovation. For the first few weeks, I would have to put up with a pair of carpenters swinging hammers up in the turret, but that was the reason why a house with such a commanding ocean view could be rented for a song.

"The tenant who was renting it had to leave town a few weeks ago, months before her lease was up. So you called me at just the right time," she said. "The owner doesn't want his house to stand vacant all summer and he's anxious to find someone who'll take good care of it. He's hoping to find another female tenant. He thinks women are much more responsible."

The lucky new female tenant just happens to be me.

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In the backseat my cat, Hannibal, yowls, demanding to be released from the pet carrier he's been trapped in since we left Boston six hours ago. I glance back and see him glaring at me through the grate, a hulking coon cat with pissed-off green eyes. "We're almost there," I promise, although I'm beginning to worry that I've taken a wrong turn. Roots and frost heaves have cracked the pavement and the trees seem to crowd in ever closer. My old Subaru, already weighed down with luggage and kitchenware, scrapes the road as we bounce along an ever-narrowing tunnel through pines and spruce. There is no room here to turn around; my only choice is to continue up this road, wherever it may lead. Hannibal yowls again, this time more urgently as if to warn: *Stop now, before it's too late.*

Through the overhanging branches I catch glimpses of gray sky, and the woods suddenly give way to a broad slope of granite mottled with lichen. The weathered sign confirms that I've arrived at the driveway for Brodie's Watch, but the road climbs into fog so thick that I can't see the house yet. I continue up the unpaved driveway, my tires sputtering and spitting gravel. Mist veils my view of windswept scrub brush and granite barrens but I can hear seagulls circling overhead, wailing like a legion of ghosts.

Suddenly there is the house, looming in front of me.

I shut off the motor and just sit for a moment, staring up at Brodie's Watch. No wonder it had been invisible from the bottom of the hill. Its gray clapboards blend in perfectly with the fog and only faintly can I make out a turret, which soars into low-hanging clouds. Surely there's been a mistake; I'd been told it was a large house, but I was not expecting this hilltop mansion.

I step out of the car and stare up at clapboards weathered to a silvery gray. On the porch a swing rocks back and forth, squeaking, as if nudged by an unseen hand. No doubt the house is drafty and the heating system is archaic and I imagine damp rooms and air that smells of mold. No, this is not what I had in mind as a summer refuge. I'd hoped for a serene place to write, a place to hide.

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A place to heal.

Instead this house feels like enemy territory, its windows glaring at me like hostile eyes. The seagulls scream louder, urging me to run while I still can. I back away and I'm about to retreat to my car when I hear tires crunch up the gravel road. A silver Lexus pulls to a stop behind my Subaru and a blond woman climbs out, waving as she walks toward me. She's about my age, trim and attractive, and everything about her radiates chipper confidence, from her Brooks Brothers blazer to her *I'm your best friend* smile.

"You're Ava, right?" she says, extending her hand. "Sorry I'm a bit late. I hope you haven't been waiting too long. I'm Donna Branca, the property manager."

As we shake hands, I'm already hunting for an excuse to back out of the rental agreement. *This house is too big for me. Too isolated. Too creepy.*

"Gorgeous spot, isn't it?" Donna gushes, gesturing toward the granite barrens. "It's a shame you can't see anything right now with this weather, but when the fog lifts, the ocean view will knock your socks off."

"I'm sorry, but this house isn't exactly what—"

She's already climbing the porch steps, the house keys dangling in her hand. "You're lucky you called about it when you did. Right after you and I spoke, there were two other inquiries about this house. Summer's been a madhouse in Tucker Cove, with all the tourists scrambling for rentals. It seems like no one wants to spend the summer in Europe this year. They'd rather be closer to home."

"I'm glad to hear there are other people interested in the place. Because I think it might be too much house for—"

"Voilà. Home sweet home!"

The front door swings open, revealing a gleaming oak floor and a staircase with an elaborately carved banister. Whatever excuses I had on the tip of my tongue suddenly evaporate and an inexorable force seems to pull me over the threshold. In the en-

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tryway, I stare up at a crystal chandelier and a ceiling with intricate plasterwork. I had imagined the house to be cold and damp, to smell of dust and mold, but what I smell now is fresh paint and wood polish. And the sea.

“The renovations are almost finished,” says Donna. “The carpenters still have a bit more to do up in the turret and on the widow’s walk, but they’ll try to stay out of your hair. And they only work on weekdays, so you’ll be left alone on weekends. The owner was willing to lower the rent for the summer because he knows the carpenters are an inconvenience, but they’ll only be here for a few weeks. Then you’ll have this fabulous house all to yourself for the rest of the summer.” She sees me gazing up in wonder at the crown molding. “They’ve done a nice job restoring it, haven’t they? Ned, our carpenter, is a master craftsman. He knows every nook and cranny of this house better than anyone alive. Come on, let me show you the rest of the place. Since you’ll probably be testing recipes, I’m guessing you’ll want to check out the *fabulous* kitchen.”

“Did I tell you about my work? I don’t remember talking about it.”

She gives a sheepish laugh. “You said on the phone you were a food writer, and I couldn’t help googling you. I’ve already ordered your book about olive oils. I hope you’ll autograph it for me.”

“I’d be happy to.”

“I think you’ll find this the *perfect* house to write in.” She leads me into the kitchen, a bright and airy space with black and white floor tiles set in a geometric pattern. “There’s a six-burner stove and an extra-large oven. I’m afraid the kitchenware’s rather basic, just a few pots and pans, but you did say you were bringing your own cookware.”

“Yes. I have a long list of recipes I need to test, and I never go anywhere without my knives and sauté pans.”

“So what’s your new book about?”

“Traditional New England cooking. I’m exploring the cuisine of seafaring families.”

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She laughs. "That would be salt cod and more salt cod."

"It's also about their way of life. The long winters and cold nights and all the risks that fishermen took just to haul in the catch. It wasn't easy, living off the sea."

"No, it certainly wasn't. And the proof of that is in the next room."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll show you."

We move into an intimate front parlor, where the fireplace has already been laid with wood and kindling, ready to be lit. Above the mantelpiece is an oil painting of a ship heeling on a turbulent sea, its bow cutting through wind-tossed foam.

"That painting's just a reproduction," says Donna. "The original painting's on display in the historical society, down in the village, where they also have a portrait of Jeremiah Brodie. He cut quite a figure. Tall, with jet black hair."

"Brodie? Is that why this house is called Brodie's Watch?"

"Yes. Captain Brodie made his fortune as a ship's master sailing between here and Shanghai. He built this house in 1861." She looks at the painting of the ship plowing through waves and she shudders. "I get seasick just looking at that picture. You couldn't pay me to set foot on one of those things. Do you sail?"

"I did as a child, but I haven't been on a boat in years."

"This coastline is supposed to be one of the best places in the world for sailing, if that's your thing. It's certainly not mine." She crosses to a set of double doors and swings them open. "And here's my favorite room in the whole house."

I step through the doorway and my gaze is instantly riveted to the view beyond the windows. I see rolling drifts of fog, and through the curtain of mist I catch glimpses of what lies beyond: the sea.

"When the sun comes out, this view will take your breath away," says Donna. "You can't see the ocean now, but just wait till tomorrow. This fog should clear up by then."

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I want to linger by that window but already she's moving on, hurrying me through the tour, into a formal dining room furnished with a heavy oak table and eight chairs. On the wall hangs another ship's painting, this one by a far less skillful artist. The vessel's name is mounted on the frame.

The Minotaur.

"That was his ship," says Donna.

"Captain Brodie's?"

"It's the one he went down on. His first mate painted this picture and gave it to Brodie as a gift, the year before they were both lost at sea."

I stare at the painting of *The Minotaur* and the hairs on the back of my neck suddenly rise, as if a chill wind has swept into the room. I actually turn to see if a window is open, but all of them are shut tight. Donna seems to feel it too, and she hugs herself.

"It's not a very good painting, but Mr. Sherbrooke says it belongs with the house. Since the first mate himself painted it, I assume the ship's details are accurate."

"But it's a little unsettling, having it hanging here," I murmur, "knowing that this was the ship he went down on."

"That's exactly what Charlotte said."

"Charlotte?"

"The woman who was renting this house just before you. She was so curious about its history, she was planning to talk to the owner about it." Donna turns away. "Let me show you the bedrooms."

I follow her up the winding staircase, my hand skimming the polished banister. It is made of masterfully crafted oak and feels solid and permanent. This house was built to last for centuries, to be a home for generations to come, yet here it stands empty, waiting to host one lone woman and her cat.

"Did Captain Brodie have any children?" I ask.

"No, he never married. After he died at sea, the house passed down to one of his nephews, then it changed hands a few times. Arthur Sherbrooke owns it now."

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“Why doesn’t Mr. Sherbrooke live here?”

“He has a home down in Cape Elizabeth, near Portland. He inherited this house from his aunt years ago. It was in pretty bad shape when it came to him and he’s already spent a fortune restoring it. He’s hoping a buyer will take it off his hands.” She pauses and glances back at me. “In case you’re interested.”

“I could never afford to keep up a house like this.”

“Oh, well. I just thought I’d mention it. But you’re right, the upkeep on these historic houses is a nightmare.”

As we walk along the second-floor hallway, she points through doorways into two sparsely furnished bedrooms and continues to a door at the end of the hall. “This,” she says, “was Captain Brodie’s bedroom.”

As I step inside, I once again inhale a strong whiff of the sea. I had noticed the scent downstairs, but this time it’s overwhelming, as if I’m standing before a crashing surf, the spray washing across my face. Then suddenly, the scent vanishes, as if someone has just closed a window.

“You’ll *love* waking up to this view,” says Donna, gesturing to the window, although at the moment there’s nothing to see beyond the glass but fog. “In the summer, the sun rises right there, over the water, so you can watch the dawn.”

I frown at the bare windows. “No curtains?”

“Well, privacy’s not an issue because there’s no one out there to see you. The property extends all the way to the high-tide line.” She turns and nods toward the fireplace. “You know how to light a fire, right? Always open the flue first?”

“I used to visit my grandmother’s farmhouse in New Hampshire, so I’ve had plenty of experience with fireplaces.”

“Mr. Sherbrooke just wants to be sure you’re careful. These old houses can go up in flames pretty fast.” She pulls the key ring from her pocket. “I think that’s about it for the tour.”

“You said there’s a turret upstairs?”

“Oh, you don’t want to go up there. It’s a mess right now, what

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with all the power tools and lumber. And definitely don't step out on the widow's walk until the carpenters replace the deck. It's not safe."

I have not yet taken the keys that she's holding out to me. I think about my first glimpse of the house, its windows staring at me like dead, glassy eyes. Brodie's Watch had promised no comfort, no sanctuary, and my first impulse had been to walk away. But now that I've stepped inside, breathed the air and touched the wood, everything seems different.

This house has accepted me.

I take the keys.

"If you have any questions, I'm in the office Wednesday through Sunday, and I'm always on my cellphone for emergencies," Donna says as we walk out of the house. "There's a handy list of local numbers that Charlotte posted in the kitchen. The plumber, doctor, electrician."

"And where do I pick up my mail?"

"There's a roadside mailbox at the bottom of the driveway. Or you can rent a PO box in town. That's what Charlotte did." She pauses beside my car, staring at the cat carrier in the backseat. "Wow. That's quite a kitty you have."

"He's fully housebroken," I assure her.

"He's enormous."

"I know. I need to put him on a diet." I reach into the backseat to haul out the pet carrier, and Hannibal hisses at me through the grate. "He's not happy about being cooped up in the car all this time."

Donna crouches down for a closer look at Hannibal. "Do I see extra toes? Maine coon cat, right?"

"All twenty-six pounds of him."

"Is he a good hunter?"

"Whenever he gets the chance."

She smiles at Hannibal. "Then he is going to love it here."