

SUMMER WITH MY SISTERS

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That it will never come again is what makes life so sweet.

– *Emily Dickinson*

CHAPTER 1

Poppy Higgins hung the last of her tops and blouses in the large chestnut armoire that had once contained her mother's clothes and firmly closed the door of the beautiful old piece of furniture. She wasn't at all sure she belonged in this room, what had once been her parents' master suite, but here she was, stowing away her clothes in the armoire and laying out her make-up and moisturizers in their bathroom.

This was the thing. Poppy hadn't been at all sure she could pull off a role of authority in the house on Willow Way if she continued to sleep in her girlhood bedroom, the place where she had mooned over airbrushed boy bands and cried in frustration when her parents wouldn't let her see a movie all of her friends were allowed to see and dreamed childish dreams of a secret benefactor suddenly leaving her billions of dollars to

spend in any way she liked. No, if she was going to succeed (or, at least make a stab) at being her sisters' guardian now that both of her parents were gone, she would need all the psychological props she could find, and installing herself in the master suite seemed like as good a prop as any.

Not everyone agreed with her. Sixteen-year old Daisy wasn't happy about it; then again, she hadn't been happy about anything lately and Poppy really couldn't blame her. Violet had said nothing about the move but anyone who knew Violet at all knew that she probably had a strong opinion about the matter. Violet was preternaturally mature, almost oddly so. Maybe mature wasn't the right word; maybe simply odd would do. She was as far from the average thirteen-year old girl (if such a thing existed) as you could imagine, more interested in esoteric subjects like astrology than in pop culture; often shockingly blunt and straightforward in her speech; and possessing a highly developed and always on target intuition about people and their motives.

Now, looking at the king sized bed in which Annabelle and Oliver Higgins had spent so many nights of their married lives, Poppy wondered. Could you invade a person's private space even when they were dead? Was she indeed trespassing or being disrespectful? Maybe, but she was determined to stick it out in the suite, at least for a week or two. After all, she was supposed to be the adult in the house now, the one who acted with firmness and a sense of being in the right. A person who made a considered decision and stuck to it.

Twenty-five year old Poppy had been back home – or, what had once been home – in Yorktide since the sudden death of her father in February and the completely

shocking discovery, when his old friend and solicitor Frederica Ross, aka Freddie, had read his will to the family, that he had named Poppy legal guardian of her two younger sisters. He had requested she not move them to Boston, where she had been living for the past several years, but that she return to the house on Willow Way so that Daisy and Violet could finish high school and middle school without being wrenched from the community in which they had been a part since the day they were born.

It made sense, of course. Poppy had no deep roots in Boston. She had moved to the city after graduation from college more in the hopes of doing something 'interesting' than because she had a definite plan for her future. Not long before Annabelle Higgins died of lung cancer three years earlier, she had strongly encouraged her oldest daughter to return in Boston when she, Annabelle, was gone, and not to feel that she need return to live with her father and younger sisters. So Poppy *had* gone back to Boston shortly after her mother's funeral, but she had never been able to entirely shake off a feeling of guilt, a feeling that she really should have stayed with her family and helped them cope with their loss.

Since then, Poppy had realized with each turn of the season that she still had very little idea of what she was accomplishing in Boston, and more importantly, of where she was going in her life. Her job as a freelance writer for a few online 'cultural' magazines was unfulfilling; how often could you write interestingly about a new beer and bacon joint or a pop up dance club or discuss whether socks with sandals was actually 'a thing'? The only reason she kept at it was to pay the bills. Unlike her highly motivated and focused parents, Poppy feared she was sadly directionless and quite possibly lazy.

Well, you could be directionless and lazy anywhere, so why not in Yorktide?

Leaving her on again, currently off again boyfriend Ian had caused Poppy no regret. Ian could be a lot of fun but not much more than that. The only thing – the only person – that she would miss – that she did miss – was Allie Swift, the woman who owned the beautiful old mansion in which Poppy rented a spacious and sunny top floor apartment. Though Allie was forty and had seen an awful lot more of life than Poppy had, they had formed a true friendship and Allie had promised Poppy a place to stay when – if – she returned to Boston when her sisters were finally on their own.

Poppy placed the palm of her hand against the smooth, polished wood of the armoire and fought a fresh wave of sorrow. Soon after Annabelle's passing her clothes had been given to charity; Freddie, the aforementioned Higgins' family lawyer, and her partner, Sheila Simon, had orchestrated that for the sisters. First, though, each girl had chosen one or two of their mother's item as keepsakes. For Poppy, this was the slim gold bangle she wore on her right wrist and a black velvet shawl, fringed with jet beads. She remembered her mother wearing the shawl to formal occasions at Adams College, where she was a professor of American History, and to the ceremonial dinners her husband, Oliver, was compelled to attend, many of them in his honor. "You look like a princess," Poppy remembered telling her mother once. "Thank you," Annabelle had replied. "But remember, it's better to be queen."

Now, her father's clothing had to be dealt with, and Poppy had decided she would see to the task herself. She was afraid she had already relied too heavily on Freddie and Sheila, who, as friends first of Oliver's father, Henry, and then of Oliver himself, were the

obvious choice of shoulders upon which to lean. Still, she had been back at the Higgins' house for almost four months now and had still failed to take the first step in sorting her father's beautifully tailored shirts and his bespoke suits. Oliver Higgins had been a brilliant intellectual on the international stage of political theory and practice, but he had also been a bit of a dandy. Alongside his beautiful wife, they had made a stunning couple, the kind of pair that turned heads and effortlessly drew people into the circle of their formidable personalities.

Annabelle Higgins' clothing might have gone to the local charity shop but her jewelry (except for the bangle Poppy wore) was locked in a safe in the master bathroom. Along with the pearls Annabelle had inherited from her grandmother, her diamond and platinum wedding set, and a hefty collection of Bakelite pieces from the nineteen thirties and forties, was Oliver Higgins' wedding ring. His watch, a Breitling, had been there, too, until a few days earlier Poppy had decided she would wear it in much the same spirit she wore her mother's bracelet, as a physical reminder of the two most important people in her life. A local jeweler had removed a few of the links from the watch for a better fit and though Poppy felt a bit conspicuous wearing such an expensive piece, she was glad to have this bit of her father so close.

Poppy turned from the armoire and her eye caught her parents' official wedding portrait next to a spray of dried hydrangea, her mother's favorite flower, on the dresser against the wall opposite the bed. Annabelle and Oliver had been anything but run of the mill types and had eschewed the popular bride and groom styles of the mid-eighties. (Hideous, in Poppy's opinion. Puffy sleeves? Really?) Her mother had worn a tailored

white pantsuit; her father, a simple, navy suit with a white shirt and no tie. His wildly wavy hair had already started to whiten though he was only in his early thirties at the time. It gave him a look of distinction and elegance.

Poppy looked more closely at the photograph. There really was a striking resemblance between Annabelle and her oldest daughter; everyone had remarked on it. Both women were tall and slim, with near perfectly symmetrical features. Their eyes were vividly green. Their hair was glossy chestnut brown and their complexions were clear and pale. Daisy, on the other hand, took after Oliver Higgins, although not in the elegance department, as she would be the first to admit. But she had his darker skin tone, his infectious, lopsided smile, and his medium build. Violet, Poppy thought, was a charming combination of both parents.

What would her own wedding day be like, Poppy wondered now, looking away from the photograph? No father to walk her down the aisle. No mother to help her plan the festivities. Maybe she would elope. It might be unbearably depressing to get through the occasion without her parents. Assuming that she ever decided to get married, which meant falling in love with someone and so far, *that* hadn't happened. Sometimes it bothered her that in her twenty-five years no one had ever captured her heart or inspired her devotion. Sure, she had dated and had even been with one guy for about six months before things just fizzled. Maybe the fault was hers. She knew that she wasn't cold or unsentimental. She cried at the drop of a hat like most women and all it took was a chubby cheeked baby or a fuzzy kitten to cause her to 'ooh' and 'aah'. But for some reason

when it came to romance, her heart, her inmost and truest self, just hadn't been brought to life.

How had Annabelle and Oliver done it, she wondered. They had been so deeply in love with one another. How had they found that sort of bliss? Sometimes Poppy wondered if her parents' perfect romantic union had tainted her own romantic career; maybe it had caused her to despair of ever finding her own soul mate. But maybe that was just silly.

Bellisima. That was one of the affectionate names her father had called her mother and his favorite poem was Edgar Allan Poe's "Annabelle Lee". In fact, he had had a few lines of the poem inscribed on his wife's headstone.

And neither the angels in Heaven above

Nor the demons down under the sea,

Can ever dissever my soul from the soul

Of the beautiful Annabelle Lee.

A grand gesture if ever there was one, though the lines had always disturbed Poppy. Maybe it was the word 'dissever'. It gave her the creeps, and that was probably what the poet had intended. Doomed love. Love cut short.

Or, love eternal, Poppy thought now as she left the master suite and went downstairs to start dinner. And this was also something new. For the past few years she had been catching meals when she could, hardly ever cooking (boiling water for pasta didn't really count), and rarely spending more than twenty dollars at a time in the grocery store. Now, she was responsible for putting at least two meals on the table each day for

three people and that took planning and time and energy. And money. Who knew the basics like milk and butter and eggs cost so much! Luckily, Annabelle and Oliver Higgins had left their children well provided for, with a mortgage fully paid and a portfolio of sound investments.

Things, Poppy thought as she entered the spacious kitchen, could be much worse. Being back home with her sisters might allow her to atone for having left them after Mom's death, and that was a good thing. Though how she was going to form a definite plan for a productive and meaningful life by playing parent to two strong-willed teenaged girls was anyone's guess!

CHAPTER 2

Daisy was lying on her bed, staring at the ceiling on which her mother had pasted glow in the dark stars so many years ago. They had lost some of their phosphorescence with the passing of time and Daisy occasionally thought that she should take them down but the time never seemed right. She was afraid that once the stars were gone she would miss them too much. Replacing them with new stars wouldn't bring the old ones back. Gone meant gone.

Like her mother was gone. And now, like her father. Nothing stayed the same. The only thing you could count on was change and the unexpected. Like how just the day before Daisy had caught her older sister, Poppy, wearing their father's watch.

"That's Dad's," she had cried. "You have no right to be wearing it."

"Why not?" Poppy had asked, looking down at large round face of the man's watch on her left wrist.

"Because you weren't here. I was the one who stayed with him after Mom died. I was the one who saw what it did to him. You were the one who left us."

Her sister had blanched. "Mom told me before she died that I should get on with my life when she was gone," she said, her voice trembling with emotion. "I asked her if she wanted me to stay here with you and Dad and Violet and she said no."

Later, Daisy had felt bad about what she had said but the pain of her father's death due to a sudden and massive heart attack at the age of just sixty was all too fresh and it wouldn't allow her to apologize to her sister. She just couldn't help but see Poppy's moving into their parents' bedroom and her adopting their father's watch as her own as an act of – an act of usurpation. Granted, Dad had appointed Poppy legal guardian over her sisters, but that didn't give her the right to co-opt Oliver Higgins. Daisy, as her father's favorite daughter (she knew this in her heart), was determined to be the keeper of his flame.

It was funny, she thought. If it were Violet who was wearing their father's watch, she wouldn't be half as annoyed, probably not annoyed at all. Toward her quirky younger sister Daisy felt nothing but straightforward and uncomplicated affection. Toward Poppy . . . Well, once they had been very close but that was a long time ago, before Poppy had gone to college, before she had left them and moved to Boston. By the time she had moved back to Yorktide four months earlier, Daisy felt that Poppy had become almost a total stranger. She wouldn't be surprised if Poppy felt the same way about her. Anyway, nothing was as it should be now, so Daisy supposed she would have to get used to chaos. What she wouldn't give for a boring, routine filled life that was guaranteed never to change!

She sat up on the edge of her bed, feet dangling. She had such clear and vivid memories of her father sitting just where she was now, singing her to sleep when she was little.

Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer do

I'm half crazy all for the love of you

It won't be a stylish marriage

I can't afford a carriage

But you'll look sweet upon the seat

Of a bicycle built for two

Interesting, Daisy thought now, that she was never good on a bicycle. Never good at any sport, really. Poor co-ordination compounded by lack of interest. She would rather be reading or doing a crossword puzzle or playing her clarinet with her best friend, Joel, or volunteering at the Pine Hill Residence for the Elderly than getting sweaty running around chasing a ball. Much like her father. It was he who had instilled in her a passion for crosswords and he who more than anyone encouraged her dream of becoming a doctor. Not that her mother hadn't been supportive, but it was Oliver Higgins who had given her a copy of the Physicians' Desk Reference, and a copy of a work by the ancient Greek physician and philosopher Galen entitled *On the Diagnosis and Cure of the Soul's Passion*, a very early attempt at psychotherapy. For her birthday in April – two months after Oliver's death – Freddie had passed on the present he had purchased for Daisy some time earlier, a book of high quality reproductions of Leonardo da Vinci's anatomical drawings. The Galen and the da Vinci were two of Daisy's most valued possessions.

Other sixteen-year old girls – most of them, maybe – might be into taking endless selfies and following their favorite pop stars and models on Instagram, but not Daisy. It was with some pride that she considered herself a nerd.

Daisy turned to look at the sampler that hung over her dresser, next to a poster of the cast of Game of Thrones. (In Daisy's opinion, the show was beyond awesome.) Ages ago her mother had painstakingly embroidered lines from William Wordsworth's poem entitled "To the Daisy". (Daisy couldn't imagine ever having the patience to make all those neat tiny stitches. Unless she decided to become a surgeon.)

Thou liv'st with less ambitious aim,

Yet hast not gone without thy fame;

Thou art indeed by many a claim

The Poet's darling.

. . .

He needs but look about, and there

Thou art! – a friend at hand, to scare

His melancholy.

She had mixed feelings about Mr. Wordsworth's sentiment, at least, in relation to her self. Less ambitious aim? Wasn't wanting to be a doctor a very ambitious aim? As for darling, well, she certainly didn't feel like anyone's darling, not now that her father was gone. And frankly, she didn't understand how anyone, not even a poet, could get so worked up over a silly flower! Well, there *was* her younger sister . . . Violet could get pretty obsessed about flowers and herbs and all the good things they could do for people.

And all the bad things, too, Daisy supposed. Poisons and all that. Even more so than their mother, Violet was interested in the legends and lore associated with flora, not only in the care and feeding of the green world. As for Daisy, neither flora nor fauna interested her half as much as did human beings in the here and now.

And in the great beyond? Daisy got up from the bed and began to pace, something she did when she felt frustrated. She just didn't know about the great beyond. She would like to think that her parents were – well, that they were *somewhere, somehow*, but she had no real faith that they were anything but gone.

Her eye caught the sampler again as she continued to tramp. Her name didn't really fit her at all, she thought. If her mother had been able to glimpse the sixteen year old in the baby she would have been better off calling her second daughter Cabbage or Pine Cone, something plain and prickly. Pineapple? Dangerous on the outside, sweet on the inside. Daisy smiled in spite of herself. And she realized that it was almost time for dinner and that she was seriously hungry. There probably wasn't any pineapple in the kitchen but there had to be something edible – if Poppy had remembered to go to the grocery store. Most times Poppy acted so . . . so tyrannical! Trying to change the way Oliver and Daisy and Violet had been doing things for the past three years, pretending to know better. But she routinely messed things up, like forgetting to turn on the dishwasher after she loaded it and then blaming Daisy for not turning it on when she realized that it wasn't on and . . .

No, Poppy was no parental figure, that was for sure. And though it was probably unfair to expect her to be one, Daisy wasn't ready to be very sympathetic toward her

sister. It wasn't Daisy's fault that Oliver Higgins had died or that he had requested (demanded?) that Poppy come home to the house on Willow Way. No, Daisy thought, coming to a halt and crossing her arms across her chest. None of it was her fault.

But then whose fault was it?

CHAPTER 3

"What do you think, Grimace?"

The large black and white Maine Coon cat Violet had addressed stared unblinking at her from his seat at the exact center of her bed. Not long after Annabelle Higgins' death a neighbor's cat had given birth to a litter of eight and thinking to raise the spirits of the youngest Higgins sister the neighbor, a Mrs. Greene, had offered Violet her pick of the kittens. Violet had chosen Grimace; his name had come into her head only moments later.

She couldn't quite explain why Grimace was Grimace. He was no Grumpy Cat; he had the usual 'smile' of the average feline. But the name seemed to fit him. Either that or he had grown into his name – had grown to fulfill the promise it suggested of an often ill-tempered animal who cared only for his own comfort, sometimes even at the expense of his beloved human caretaker. Grimace thought nothing of swatting Violet's face to wake

her in the morning, or of screaming directly into her ear as she sat at her desk doing her homework because he wanted an after dinner snack, or of chewing on her toes for no ostensible reason at all, and none of this bothered Violet in the least. She loved Grimace. She needed him, especially now.

"Well?" Violet prompted. "What do you think of this scarf with this skirt?"

Grimace finally deigned to reply by getting to his feet, arching his back in an extreme stretch, turning his tail to her, and resettling in a heap.

"I thought so," Violet said to the back of her cat's head. She draped the silk paisley scarf back over her desk chair and hung the long striped skirt in the closet.

Violet Higgins loved her home and she especially loved her room, which she thought of as a sort of grotto. She had painted the walls (with help from her father) Seaglass Green, and the wide baseboards Ocean Blue. The ceiling was a slightly lighter blue than the baseboards and across it in billowy drapes she (again, with her father's help) had hung gauzy strips of pale pink and coral material. The room felt cool and soft and peaceful. A haven when the startling fact of her being an orphan flared into consciousness which it might do at any time.

In addition to the bed, desk, desk chair, and comfortably saggy armchair, the room contained an old wooden dresser her mother had painted white. On top of the dresser sat a small bowl Violet had made at a two-week pottery camp the previous summer; in the bowl was a heap of quartz crystals. Beside the bowl lived a chunk of raw amethyst and one of rose quartz. Hanging from the bed's four posts were strings of beads – sponge coral, labradorite, aventurine, and carnelian. Because she was a Pisces, Violet kept a

large, rough-cut aquamarine, one of the stones closely associated with the sun sign, on the small table beside her bed. It gave her a great sense of peace, as did the painting of a bunch of violets that hung over the dresser. Her mother had commissioned the painting from a local artist for her daughter's first birthday.

Over the years Annabelle had collected other images of violets – at flea markets and yard sales, at galleries and shops – and they had all found a special place in Violet's room, as had her mother's favorite gardening hat, which Violet had chosen to keep when most of Annabelle's clothing had gone to the charity shop. The floppy straw sunhat was perched on top of the bookcase her father had built for her. (He had built one for Poppy and Daisy, too.) Next to the hat Violet had stacked several different decks of Tarot cards, but not the famous Rider-Waite deck, which she found extremely scary and negative. In the bookcase there was a copy of the I Ching her parents had given her for her eleventh birthday, and a copy of a beginner's guide to the Kabbala. Next to that was a copy of the Egyptian Book of the Dead, her first online purchase made shortly after Christmas with a gift card the family's friends Freddie and Sheila had given her. Over the past two years Violet had collected no fewer than six books on astrology and its practical applications. In the back of each book she kept notes about the people close to her and how they did or did not or only sometimes 'fit' the descriptions of their sun and moon signs. (She was saving up her money to have her own chart done someday by a real professional.)

On the shelf below these books were arranged some of her all-time favorite works of fiction: the trilogy by Philip Pullman called *His Dark Materials*, all of the Harry Potter titles, her mother's childhood copy of *The Secret Garden*, a copy of the original,

uncensored fairytales by the brothers Grimm, and a collection of folk tales from the British Isles. On the wall over her bed Violet had hung a Native American Dream Catcher. Next to it was a Celtic style cross, made of iron. Her father had found it for her on a business trip to Dublin.

There was no mirror in Violet's bedroom. She didn't need to be reminded of her image; she knew it well enough. Though Violet put very little stock in appearance as a matter of achievement (a person's aura was far more interesting and telling than how tall or short he was) she knew from the way so many people stared at her that she stood out in some way she couldn't yet define. She was tall, like Poppy, and graceful in her movements. Unlike both of her older sisters she wore her hair very short, in a pixie cut. She had heard her features described as elfin. Her eyes were very blue and very large, much like her father's had been. She liked to wear all sorts of natural stones, choosing them according to her mood. This day she wore a string of lapis lazuli beads around her neck and a chunky turquoise and silver ring on the middle finger of her right hand. She mostly dressed in stuff she found in local thrift and antique shops. She did not wear jeans or sneakers.

Violet peered out of her bedroom window and noted by the quality of the light that it was almost six-thirty and that meant dinnertime. Good. She was hungry. She hoped that Poppy wasn't attempting to cook something difficult; it would only make her frustrated. Poppy wasn't very good in the kitchen but Violet sincerely appreciated her sister's efforts.

Grimace grumbled and Violet went over to the bed to stroke his muscular back. "Lay her i' the earth," she whispered as the cat's grumble became a loud purr. "And from her fair and unpolluted flesh, May violets spring!"

That was from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Violet had been leafing through Daisy's copy of the play one evening when she came across those lines and she had immediately thought of her mother. The cancer that had taken a year to kill Annabelle had not been kind; it had left her body ravaged. But her spirit! Her spirit had remained fair and unpolluted until – and beyond – the very end. It was awfully ironic, Violet thought, that Annabelle Higgins should die of lung cancer when she had never smoked a cigarette in her life. It only proved what Violet had already sensed, that life and death and whatever came after it were great mysteries, to be treated with respect and also with awe.

Her parents had believed that, too. While neither had been religious, meaning they hadn't professed a particular faith, they had believed in the *possibility* of the unknown, of a spirit world of unfathomable beauty and meaning. Violet remembered her father saying, "Why should there be a life after death as we know it? And why shouldn't there be?" Violet believed – no, she *knew* - that there was more to life than what anyone could witness with the five senses. She felt this knowledge as surely as she felt hot under the summer sun and cold in the winter nights.

She thought now of the words inscribed on her father's headstone in the Yorktide Memorial Cemetery. "I go to seek a Great Perhaps." – Francois Rabelais. (Violet didn't really know much about him.) For her own headstone Violet thought she would rewrite the quote to be: "I go to seek a Great Certainty". Not that she was planning on dying any

time soon. Not that she thought a lot about death. Only the usual amount. Only what could be expected of a sensitive thirteen-year old girl who had lost both parents in the space of three years. And Violet knew that she was sensitive, and also, probably, what some people called 'a sensitive'. An old soul. It was just who she was.

There came a knock on the door and Grimace, who in spite of his contented purring had been staring at it intently for some minutes, as if anticipating some approaching activity, let out a low growl.

"Violet?"

Violet opened the door to her oldest sister.

"Dinner's ready," Poppy said.

Daisy came out of her room across the hall. "Finally! What are we having?" she asked.

"Chicken."

"That doesn't tell us much," Daisy pointed out. "What kind of chicken?"

"Well, a dead one, of course," Violet said.

Her sisters looked at her. Daisy was grinning. Poppy looked appalled.

"What?" Violet asked. And then she, accompanied by Grimace, ran ahead of them down the stairs to the kitchen.

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