

A gripping and emotional page-turner full of secrets and second chances

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The House at Magpie Cove

A scenic coastal landscape featuring a white wooden house with a thatched roof and a red bicycle leaning against a wooden fence. The house is partially covered in snow, and the scene is set against a bright blue sky with falling snow. The foreground shows a sandy path leading towards the house, with tall grasses and a wooden fence. A red bicycle with a basket is leaning against the fence. The ocean is visible in the background under a clear blue sky.

Kennedy Kerr

THE HOUSE AT MAGPIE COVE

A GRIPPING AND EMOTIONAL PAGE-
TURNER FULL OF SECRETS AND SECOND
CHANCES

KENNEDY KERR

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Secrets of Magpie Cove

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For Kathryn, who gave me the idea.

PROLOGUE

The beach house swayed and shook in the wind. There was a storm coming in. The grey clouds off the Cornish horizon sat heavy like judges in a court, pendulous and dark over the silver sea. Suddenly, a clap of thunder echoed across the beach and startled a flock of magpies nesting in the ruined roof of the house. They flew out, chattering like a scolding mother in the silence.

Abby watched the rain come, wondering why the house looked so different to how she remembered it. She knew it so well: the slightly off-kilter balance of the wooden floor in the lounge; the wide front door, its paint badly flaked so it was hardly blue anymore, revealing a cracked cream undercoat peeling off in the salt air.

Upstairs, Abby knew where the landing would creak, and where to walk around the edges to avoid waking up her parents; she knew how far it was from the back door to the hidden slip of rock that appeared at low tide. If you clambered over the rocks, exposed sand led you to a private hollow, unlooked-over by anyone walking by. She knew the smell of the salt air and the sea purslane that grew around the beach. She knew this place well: Magpie Cove, where she had lived all her life until she was seventeen.

Abby knew that she was dreaming. And as the storm rolled in, she knew what it brought with it. In the dream, she turned to run from the shadow that always came; the shadow that chased her along the beach, away from the house. She ran and ran, her breath ragged in her throat, but it was no good; now, like she always did in this dream, she fell, catching her ankle on a rock hidden in the sand. And she begged the dream to let her wake up, because she knew what was coming for her. Abby knew what was in the storm, and she woke up screaming.

‘No one’s lived here for a time, by the looks of things. Fair amount of work to be done.’ The solicitor handed Mara the house keys and gave her a sympathetic smile. ‘Not quite the luxury beach retreat, I’m afraid,’ she added.

‘This is it?’ Mara looked around the deserted beach; it was the only house on this cove, though there was a small wooden shack at the other side, and she could see the roof of another house beyond a promontory that reached into the Cornish sea. She knelt and zipped up her son John’s coat against the wind, and beckoned her daughter Franny back to pull a purple knitted hat down over her black curls.

Her nine year-olds were the kind of twins that were so close they sometimes spoke in an incomprehensible secret language; they were growing out of it, but they were still an island, the two of them, a unit which didn’t include her. Mara was sometimes allowed into their secrets, but often not. She wondered what it would have been like to have just one child, or for John and Franny – Frances, not that she ever answered to it – to have been born a few years apart. Would they have shared their secrets with her then? It seemed that Mara’s family was full of secrets; perhaps it was in their DNA.

This house, it turned out, had sheltered generations of her family. As close to DNA as a wooden house aged by salt and wind could get, it had creaked under the feet of Hughes women since 1900. And yet, today was the first day Mara had ever seen it.

The solicitor, a woman perhaps her own age, was dressed practically in a sky-blue rainproof parka with the hood up and some tough-looking lace-up shoes. She had introduced herself as Clare in a no-nonsense but kind voice. Mara appreciated the

kindness and Clare's straightforwardness; both were in short supply in her life right now.

'This is it,' Clare agreed. 'Shame it's been so neglected. Might have been a boarding house once, I s'pose, given the size, but it's hard to say. Must have been rebuilt a fair few times to still be standing all these years.'

'Hmm.' Mara peered up at the wooden roof: it didn't look strong enough to hold up to the wind. 'How many bedrooms has it got?'

Clare looked at the paperwork and shook her head.

'Doesn't say here, but I'd say maybe four or five? Big place, just needs some love.'

'Mummy, can we explore?' John pulled against her, impatient to get away. Mara pointed to the house.

'Stay where I can see you. Don't go behind it,' she instructed, pulling her own long, loose coat around her. It was August – thank goodness it was still the summer holidays, because she didn't know whether she'd have to find another school for the twins or not – but it was windier than she expected next to the sea.

Mara pressed the keys into her palm. 'I didn't know it existed until last week.'

'Oh?' Clare raised her eyebrows enquiringly, but Mara didn't elaborate any further. 'Well. It's yours now! The deeds are here.' She handed Mara a thick envelope, bound with a blue rubber band. 'I'll be in touch about the rest of your mother's estate. There's not much, as you know.' She turned her gaze to the house, frowning. 'You're planning to sell it, then?'

'Uh-huh.' Mara watched the children as they raced in circles on the sandy beach: Franny's hat had blown off towards the sea and was caught on the wet rocks that led to the water. Her daughter was explaining something in detail to her brother. Mara wondered absently what it was this time – the life cycle of a clam, common seaside birds and their nesting habits, or an old

favourite, perhaps the story of the first woman to go over Niagara Falls in a barrel?

She didn't have a choice about selling it, not now. Gideon's words reverberated in her mind: *She's moving in. It's over between you and me. You need to leave.* Her husband of twelve years had thrown her out; he'd offered to keep the children, though he hadn't objected too strongly when she'd insisted they come with her. Straight-backed, she'd walked out of the house she'd thought was her forever home, one hand in John's and one in Franny's. It wasn't even her crime: Gideon had been unfaithful. He'd been sleeping with his executive assistant for the past two years.

Every time Mara thought about it, she felt sick. She'd felt even sicker when she'd had to explain it to the twins. She had to keep explaining, too. Today, John had wanted to know why Dad wasn't coming to see the beach house with them, and yesterday, Franny wanted to know if they'd see Gideon at the weekend. She felt awful trying to justify the fact that Gideon was spending all his free time with his new girlfriend – she wanted to say *mistress*, it had more of the sense of betrayal in it – and hadn't made time to sit down with Mara to talk about access.

'Right. Well, good luck!' Clare shook Mara's hand. 'Can I give you a lift back to town?'

Mara shook her head.

'I've got a car.' She smiled, tiredly. 'My husband let me keep that, at least.'

Clare nodded, following Mara's gaze to the black SUV parked on the dirt road behind the house. She reached for Mara's shoulder and squeezed it.

'Chin up. It'll be all right,' she said, her voice loud over the wind. 'Things will improve. I promise.'

What a cliché, Mara thought. *His assistant.* He couldn't even be bothered to go farther than his own office to find love – although, knowing Gideon, she doubted that love was really the

motivation. In twelve years of marriage, he'd told her he loved her twice. Once on their wedding day, and once when the twins were born. Dutiful *I love yous*. Contractual, obligatory *I love yous*. No excess.

She should have known. She should have seen it coming. But she hadn't.

Sometimes life takes the tiller and steers the boat over the falls, her mother Abby would have said; she had been the one who told Franny the story of Annie Edson Taylor, the first woman to survive going over Niagara Falls in her woman-sized barrel. *No point trying to steer upstream*. Abby had been fond of boating, rivers and waterfalls as life metaphors. Mara had tried to *steer the boat of her marriage upstream*, as Abby would have said, against the cold tide of Gideon's disinterest in her for so long that, now, as the boat hurtled them towards oblivion, she felt a kind of strange calm. It was good not to have to work so hard anymore.

Sometimes, life takes the tiller, rips it off and stuffs it down your throat, Mara ruminated, mocking her mother's soft Cornish accent in her own head, then feeling instantly guilty. None of this was Abby's fault.

Life wasn't a boat ride. Or, perhaps, you thought you were sailing peacefully down a river on a yacht, but in fact, you were plunging over a deadly waterfall at a hundred miles an hour with your rat bastard of a husband standing at the top, waving you goodbye. Annie Edson Taylor had at least made her own barrel and stuffed it with pillows.

Still, she had the car. Gideon had taken pains to point out its impeccable service history and recent MOT as he handed her the keys, like he was doing her a favour. Like he wasn't kicking her out of her own home and moving his – she searched for the right phrase in her mind, but all she could come up with was *fancy woman* – well, he was moving his fancy woman in. *She is fancy, ergo, I am not fancy*, Mara thought.

She stifled the impulse to laugh, because she knew it was the kind of wild laughing that would lead to tears, and she couldn't break down in front of the children.

'Come on, let's look inside!' she shouted.

The weather was turning and it was going to rain any minute; at least if they looked inside, they'd be able to shelter for a while and then she'd drive them back to the little hotel they were staying in in St Ives, along the North Cornish coast from Magpie Cove. She had enough money to stay there perhaps a couple of months while she put the house up for sale, and then, as long as it sold fast enough, she could buy somewhere small for her and the twins. She missed St Ives: her house, like many, sat on steep hills overlooking the pretty harbour which twinkled at night with the lights from the yachts and fishing boats; you could enjoy plump oysters and a glass of champagne in the evening at one of the modern harbour restaurants, watching the stars come out and the moon rise. Or, from the raised deck of her old house, which sat above an ample garden, she could watch the boats coming in and out with a cup of coffee between the school run and whatever else she had on that day.

Any new place she bought wouldn't be fancy, not like their house on Cedars Avenue, one of the most desirable streets in St Ives, with its double garage and top-of-the-range kitchen, but at least it would be hers. Like Annie Taylor, she could at least make her own barrel.

Part of the roof was missing.

When Mara opened the door, the creaking noise startled seagulls that were nesting somewhere upstairs, and they flew out, shrieking. The warped wooden floor creaked as she walked on it, and a damp stain had flowered on the wall facing the sea. Mara wrinkled her nose in distaste.

‘Oh dear,’ she murmured, as she took it all in.

The beach house was a two-storey wooden construction with a porch that ran the length of the front of the house, and wooden steps (now broken and half-rotted away) that led up to it from the beach. The house itself was oriented sideways, so that its front faced the beach, with the back of the house facing an outcropping of rock. The west side faced the sea.

Immediately inside the front door was a square sitting room that might once have been cosy. The floorboards spread across a wide room with light blue walls; there were darker patches here and there where pictures had once hung, not counting the damp. A white-painted kitchen dresser stood on one side; a couple of blue-and-white plates sat on the shelf, covered in dust. A door led to another large sitting room that looked out over the sea; it was damper in there, and the old blue wallpaper was peeling off. A pair of rattan easy chairs faced out to sea: the seat was missing from both of them. Otherwise, the only furniture left was a ratty cream sofa, a warped, empty bookshelf and an oil lamp which stood on top of it. Abby had not left much.

At the rear of the main sitting room, a large kitchen spread across the back of the downstairs. Mara walked over and inspected it for signs of functionality, but the stove appeared to have once used gas canisters, and there was nothing connected.

A few utensils sat in a pottery jar sticky with dust and ancient cooking residue.

‘Look, Mummy! A box!’ Franny raced past, her wet shoes leaving sandy prints on the wood. Mara opened her mouth to tell her daughter to take her shoes off, then closed it again. There was no point; people would be coming to view the house soon, no doubt tramping sand all over the place. Franny lifted the lid of a deep wooden chest and looked inside. Mara thought it had probably been a blanket box once; she walked over, curious to see what was inside, if anything.

John had already disappeared into the kitchen and was opening cupboard doors and closing them again.

‘John, don’t slam those doors,’ she called out. Anywhere there was a door, John would swing on it, lean on it or play with the handle: she was always terrified he’d catch his fingers in the jamb. Whereas his sister talked incessantly, John always had to be moving. A door handle turned and released. Fingertips drummed on tables. Standing on one leg, and then the other.

Looking down, Mara reached into the box and pulled out a mildewed cushion, showing it to Franny.

‘Yuck. Put it down.’ Her daughter made a face and peered back into the box. Mara leaned the cushion against the side of the box; she’d have to clear out all this old stuff before putting the house on the market.

Franny reached in again and pulled out a rag doll with red hair in a thick plait. She hugged it delightedly.

‘Look, Mummy! A doll!’ she cried happily.

‘That’s lovely, darling.’ Mara sat back on her heels and watched as Franny inspected the old toy. It had certainly seen a lot of love, but it seemed to have escaped the mildew, at least.

‘Can I keep it?’ Franny hugged the doll to her chest. ‘I’m going to call her Marianne. That’s her name.’

‘It’s her name?’

‘Yes. She told me. Also, it’s like your name, a little bit.’

Marianne seems like a good name for a doll that lives in a house by the sea – it’s quite romantic, isn’t it?’

‘Ah, I see.’ Mara stood up. ‘Yes, very romantic.’

‘Dad would like this house,’ Franny added, pointedly.

‘Mmmm.’ Mara made a noncommittal noise and walked into the kitchen to avoid any further discussion on the subject. She thought how odd it was that this was all hers now, when she hadn’t known anything about it last week. It had been enough of a shock that Abby had died so quickly; within a few weeks, cancer had developed, and taken her mother faster than anyone expected. Some weeks later, the solicitors had got in touch about her mother’s estate. *What estate?* Mara had asked, still shell shocked, whole days going past with her having no real memory of what she’d done. She must have made the twins meals, but she didn’t remember it.

John had found three saucepans in one of the cupboards, had upended them on the floor and was playing them like drums with a blunt pencil. Mara tried to open the back door, but it was locked and she couldn’t see a key anywhere.

Abby hadn’t even owned the house she lived in; it had been rented. She’d never owned anything much as far as Mara knew, but then there was this place, an address in an official letter. Abigail Hughes leaves this property to you. A house that her mother had never, in forty years, mentioned to her only daughter.

As she turned the back-door handle again, there was a knock on the front door. Surprised at the sound – why would anyone knock unless they’d seen her go in? The house obviously wasn’t lived in – she went to open it. Clare stood on the doorstep holding a large box.

‘Me again.’ She held the box out to Mara, who took it and put it down immediately; it wasn’t light. ‘Sorry, I got halfway down the road and remembered it. The box was left with us for safe keeping with your mother’s will.’ She was slightly out of

breath.

‘Oh. What’s in it?’ Mara asked, curiously, but the woman shrugged.

‘No idea. It’s been in storage for the past few years. Sometimes people want to store valuables with us, meaningful documents, that kind of thing. Could be anything.’

‘Hmmm. Oh, I’m sorry. Come in.’ Mara waved vaguely at the lounge, but the solicitor shook her head.

‘Thanks, but I’ve got to be off. Forms to process, paper to stamp. As I said, any questions or issues, let me know.’ She raised her hand as a goodbye and made her way back over the rocks to the sandy beach and to the road at the top where her car was parked.

Mara squatted on the floor and regarded the box. It was medium sized and taped up neatly: Abby was – had been, she corrected herself – neat to the point of obsession. Growing up with a neat freak as a mother was a challenge when your idea of neat involved piling all the books you were reading into a shaky tower next to the sofa. Mara slid her finger carefully under the tape at the edge of the box and snapped one end open. It had been years since she’d sat down and read a book – although of course she’d read stories to the twins. Why had she ever stopped reading for her own pleasure?

Peeling the tape carefully from the top of the box, she listened to the twins who seemed to be playing some kind of game on the landing; she hadn’t even seen upstairs yet. She knew why she hadn’t read a book in years: Gideon hadn’t ever specifically said it, but he disapproved. In fact, he had a way of never specifically saying anything, yet making her feel inferior for anything from her driving (too slow, but in the event she drove faster, he barked at her to be careful, the children were in the car), hair colour (she was a dark brunette; he openly admired women with blonde hair he saw at parties or when they were out shopping or picking the twins up from a club or class) to her

political views (he rolled his eyes when she raised the subject).

Well, at least now the book police aren't around. Gideon never read, outside whatever legal briefs he had to read for work. He gave the air of considering himself too important for something as fanciful as reading a novel or a play or a poem. Privately, Mara had always thought that anyone who didn't like books was either boring or an idiot. *Turns out, I was right.*

The thing was, that although Gideon was pretty unpleasant to her, he was a great dad. He made up plays with Franny – which always turned out to have some kind of legal theme, though Franny didn't seem to mind – and patiently painted the backdrops for her productions of *The Princess and the Pea* or *Rumpelstiltskin*. He played endless hours of football in the garden with John and talked to him when he had a nightmare, often up into the small hours himself, preparing for a case. Sometimes she'd wake up in the middle of the night and find one of the twins – usually John – asleep on Gideon's office sofa, with Gideon working at his desk. She'd pick John up and return him to his bed. Gideon, when he was working late, would usually sleep in his office and take John's place.

That's why Mara had stayed for as long as she did: Gideon was a devoted father. It was just that – as far as their own relationship went – things weren't great. She supposed that she had also believed that she could never do any better. Her confidence had never been high as far as men were concerned.

She opened the flap of the box. Inside, there was a clear plastic bag. She took it out, noting a few notebooks that lay underneath. Inside the bag was a bundle of letters.

She listened to Franny's voice upstairs for a moment which had taken on a familiar, monotonous tone; it sounded as though she was telling John one of her stories, which could take a while. Mara thought it was likely that the new doll was expected to listen, too.

She hadn't worked since the children were born, because

Gideon had said, *I earn enough to support us; you should concentrate on the kids.* And that had been fine; she'd wanted to, she'd been happy to support the family, being a stay-at-home mum. Yet, despite the fact that he had wanted her to, Gideon never seemed to respect her for it. He would make remarks about her lack of experience at work, that she wasn't savvy about things, that she was naïve.

Well, I'm not naïve now, she thought. *Not about cheating husbands, anyway. That cherry has been well and truly popped.*

Mara undid the rubber band that held the letters together and looked at them curiously. They all had the same name and address: Paul Sullivan, at an address in Helston, perhaps a forty-five-minute drive away from St Ives, as long as the traffic was okay. Every one of the letters was unopened, and each one had been stamped RETURN TO SENDER. She turned the bundle over in her hands thoughtfully.

Now, she had to find a job. She had studied literature at university, but a literature degree, some long-ago office experience and eleven years of being a stay-at-home wife and then a mother qualified her for precisely nothing, as far as she could see. She'd applied for a couple of jobs, but she didn't feel confident. All the more reason to sell this place – at least it might buy her some time to find a job if she had some cash to carry them through.

'Mummy! Come upstairs!' Franny's voice called down the stairs.

'I'll be right there, sweetie,' Mara called back. Should she open the letters? It felt wrong – they weren't addressed to her. Yet Abby had wanted to make sure she had them after she died. There must be some kind of important information she was supposed to have.

Mara had slid her fingernail under the flap of the first letter in the bundle when there was another knock at the door: Clare had forgotten to tell her something, she supposed. She

frowned and went to open it, absent-mindedly carrying the letter with her.