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Last Light over Galveston. . . [A] lyrical, uplifting novel."

DONNA EVERHART, *USA Today* bestselling author of *The Saints of Swallow Hill*



LAST
LIGHT
OVER
GALVESTON

A NOVEL

JENNIFER L. WRIGHT

Praise for Jennifer L. Wright

Historical fiction fans, get ready to fall in love with *Last Light over Galveston!* The early days of weather forecasting, the progression of photography, and a major weather event are the backdrop as Kathleen McDaniel's privileged life is upended and she's forced to come to terms with deep, personal betrayal. It is said tragedy oftentimes brings out the worst in some, yet the best in others. In this lyrical, uplifting novel, Wright showcases such human moments and excavates matters of the heart with the precision of a surgeon. A superb, compelling read.

DONNA EVERHART, *USA Today* bestselling author of *The Saints of Swallow Hill*

The seaside beauty of old Galveston shines in this beautifully written tale of a woman's quest to both lose herself and find herself. At land's end, a place of faith offers friendship, hope, and a fresh start, but with her past and a hurricane pressing in, Kathleen's newly reconstructed life will be threatened in ways she could never have imagined.

LISA WINGATE, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Shelterwood*

Jennifer L. Wright's *Last Light over Galveston* is a gripping tale of endurance through storms beyond our control, both personal and natural. With historical accuracy, Wright crafts a captivating story that sweeps readers to the balmy beaches of Texas at the turn of the twentieth century.

MICHELLE SHOCKLEE, award-winning author of *All We Thought We Knew*

Jennifer Wright has expertly crafted an unforgettable tale of redemption, perseverance, and friendship in the midst of unspeakable tragedy. The characters gripped me from the first line and held me long after the story ended. Intense, empathetic, and vividly painted, this is a novel not to be missed.

JAMIE OGLE, Christy Award–winning author of *As Sure as the Sea*

A profoundly moving portrait of a historical tragedy, *Last Light over Galveston* explores both the ravages of disaster and the resilience of hope. Not only is this a novel steeped in rich historical detail, it is also a compelling exploration of a woman's journey toward faith and belonging. Poignant and powerful, this is a tale readers of Jocelyn Green and Cathy Gohlke will treasure.

AMANDA BARRATT, Christy Award–winning author of *The Warsaw Sisters*

In *Last Light over Galveston*, Jennifer L. Wright links arms with her readers to guide them through the fury of a hurricane, of both the literal and metaphorical variety. This page-turning historical tale probes deep and tender places where every heart and every foundation are tested. As earthly things crumble, the reader is left holding poignant reminders of what truly matters.

AMANDA COX, Christy Award–winning author of *Between the Sound and Sea*

A triumph of historical storytelling amid human conflicts, Jenn Wright's latest is a tense, taut, gripping, satisfying success.

PATRICIA RAYBON, Christy Award–winning author of the Annalee Spain series

Last Light over Galveston packs a powerful punch from the first page to the last. Wright doesn't hold back in depicting not only the horrors of the 1900 Galveston hurricane but also the storms that sometimes batter the human heart. Then she holds forth the light of hope and truth that shines all the brighter because of the darkness. If you love impactful historical fiction that you won't soon forget, I highly recommend *Last Light over Galveston*.

KATIE POWNER, Christy Award winner and author of *When the Road Comes Around*

Brimming with grit and beauty . . . A poignant study in human frailty and unending mercy. *The Girl from the Papers* will remain in your thoughts long after the last tearstained page is turned.

STEPHANIE LANDSEM, author of *Code Name Edelweiss*

This is historical fiction as it is meant to be told: a glimpse (based on true events) through the eyes of people caught up in the maelstrom of world events beyond their control.

LIBRARY JOURNAL on *Come Down Somewhere*

Intelligent and arresting. . . . In the moving historical novel *Come Down Somewhere*, a nuclear test has explosive consequences for a burgeoning friendship.

FOREWORD REVIEWS

[A] lovely debut. . . . Wright's adept depiction of the times capture the grit of the Dust Bowl. Fans of Tracie Peterson should check this out.

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY on *If It Rains*

Last Light over Galveston

**LAST
LIGHT
OVER
GALVESTON**

JENNIFER L. WRIGHT



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Last Light over Galveston is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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Prologue

MAY 1900

I walked until I could go no farther, until open water was all I could see.

It was the end of the road, for sure. Possibly the end of the world.

For me, they were one and the same.

Standing on the rocky sand, I watched angry waves roar ashore through flashes of lightning. The air was thick with salt and electricity as warm rivulets of rain streamed down my face. Or were those tears? It was impossible to tell. The thunder rolling across the Gulf of Mexico could just have easily been the sound of my bones rattling inside this lifeless cage.

Miles and miles of train tracks, chosen at random but always going south, going west, going *away*, had brought me here. It was as far as I could go.

And it still wasn't far enough.

He would find me.

White foam nudged the toe of my boot, soiling the edge of a dress already grimy from weeks of wear. When the wave retreated, it tugged the worn leather.

Beckoning me.

LAST LIGHT OVER GALVESTON

Exhaustion and despair pulled at me. The last few weeks were finally catching up to me, now that I was standing still, trapped on this small spit of land with nowhere to go. Too much traveling, too much fear, too much sorrow. I took a sluggish step forward, wet sand making a sucking sound as my boot rose.

I could do it. Just keep going. A few more steps, and it would all be over. The end of the road but in an entirely different way.

Another swell, stronger this time. The smell of damp assaulted my nostrils. In the distance, a fork of lightning kissed the top of the waves. My nerves tingled as electricity raced through the water toward shore, searching for me. Numb fingers found the strap of my bag, the one I'd bought from a street vendor outside the train station in Lexington, and I took a step back, out of the water.

This bag. What was in this bag was the reason I wouldn't. The reason I couldn't.

And the reason I wanted to.

Fresh streams of water coursed over my cheeks; this time, I knew it wasn't the rain. They were tears. Tears for the man I'd loved . . . and for the one who'd never truly loved me. Tears for myself and my own foolish naivete. Tears for the life about which I'd dreamed, the life I'd abandoned . . . and the one I'd never really had to begin with.

I closed my eyes, lifted my face to heaven, and let out a scream. Maybe God would hear me. Or maybe not. The wind swallowed my cries. But it didn't really matter anyway. All those Sunday mornings were a hazy memory, blurred in with the rest of it, relics of another life.

Another me.

That girl was a stranger now.

And, I was starting to believe, so was God.

I had never been so utterly alone.

I wept until my tears were spent. Wind whipped my hair as

I opened my eyes. Lightning crackled across the sky once again, casting shadows onto the sand.

And revealing, just beyond a row of salt cedars and tall grass, the vague shadow of a building.

I blinked against the downpour, sure I was imagining it. The town sat behind me, its crowds, lights, and bathhouses miles down the shore, ignored and left behind in my distress. The money was gone. There could be no more trains, no more wagons, no more nights spent in boardinghouses under a false name, moving on before the first light of dawn broke over the eastern sky. There weren't even any more roads left to travel. This island that was little more than a sandbar was as far as I could go. Here, where there was nothing but sand and wind and grief.

And also, suddenly, a building.

I don't know what possessed me to move toward it. Perhaps it was the reckless sense that I had nothing else to lose. All I knew was the ground became firmer the farther I got from the shoreline. Sharp tufts of grass snagged my skirt as I stumbled over weed-covered dunes. Rain continued to pelt my cheeks, my eyes, my hands, lashed about by a ferocious wind that did not abate until blocked by the building's massive brick facade. Even then, however, it howled around the corner, desperate to continue its assault.

I pounded on the thick door. Or, rather, I tried to. My muscles were weak, my fingers too raw and aching to register the hard wood beneath. "Help!" It came out frail, easily suffocated by the roar of the storm. I tried to remember the last time I'd spoken out loud. But I had only a moment to consider before the door fell away beneath my touch.

Light poured out onto the stoop, blinding me. I held an elbow to my face, a sound like a hiss escaping from my lips.

"Good heavens!"

A firm but gentle hand seized my upper arm and pulled me

over the threshold. The light grew brighter, the warmth more intense, and I slipped from the woman's grip, collapsing in a heap on the threadbare rug. There was a click and then a sudden change in pressure as the door was tugged shut, making my ears pop. With leaden hands, I wiped at my face, feeling days' worth of grime roll beneath my fingertips. It was only here, out of the wind, that I noticed my own smell, dirt and sweat and mildew. I rubbed the water remnants from my burning eyes, revealing the pale glow of a lantern and, in it, the shadow of a figure slowly taking shape before me.

A nun, I realized.

A very old, very concerned nun.

"Good gracious, child." The woman peered at me from behind large spectacles, wrinkles lining the skin above her pressed lips. "Are you all right?"

I wanted to laugh. I wanted to cry. I could not have answered her question even if I'd been able to speak. Staring at her, eyes bleary, my sodden dress suddenly felt as if it weighed a hundred pounds. I worried it would pull me right through the floorboards.

A part of me wished it would.

The corners of the nun's eyes crinkled. She placed a withered hand to my face. It was a gesture of kindness, of compassion, the touch as light as paper . . . yet as heavy as a slap.

I flinched.

The nun pulled back, mouth pinched in concern, clasping her hands together in front of her black habit. The beaded rosary hanging from her belt clinked with the sudden movement.

"Where . . .," I managed to croak. "Where am I?"

"This is St. Mary's." There was a slight drawl in her voice. It was smooth and comforting, like honey over warm biscuits. "It's an orphanage here on Galveston Island."

I closed my eyes. *An orphanage.*

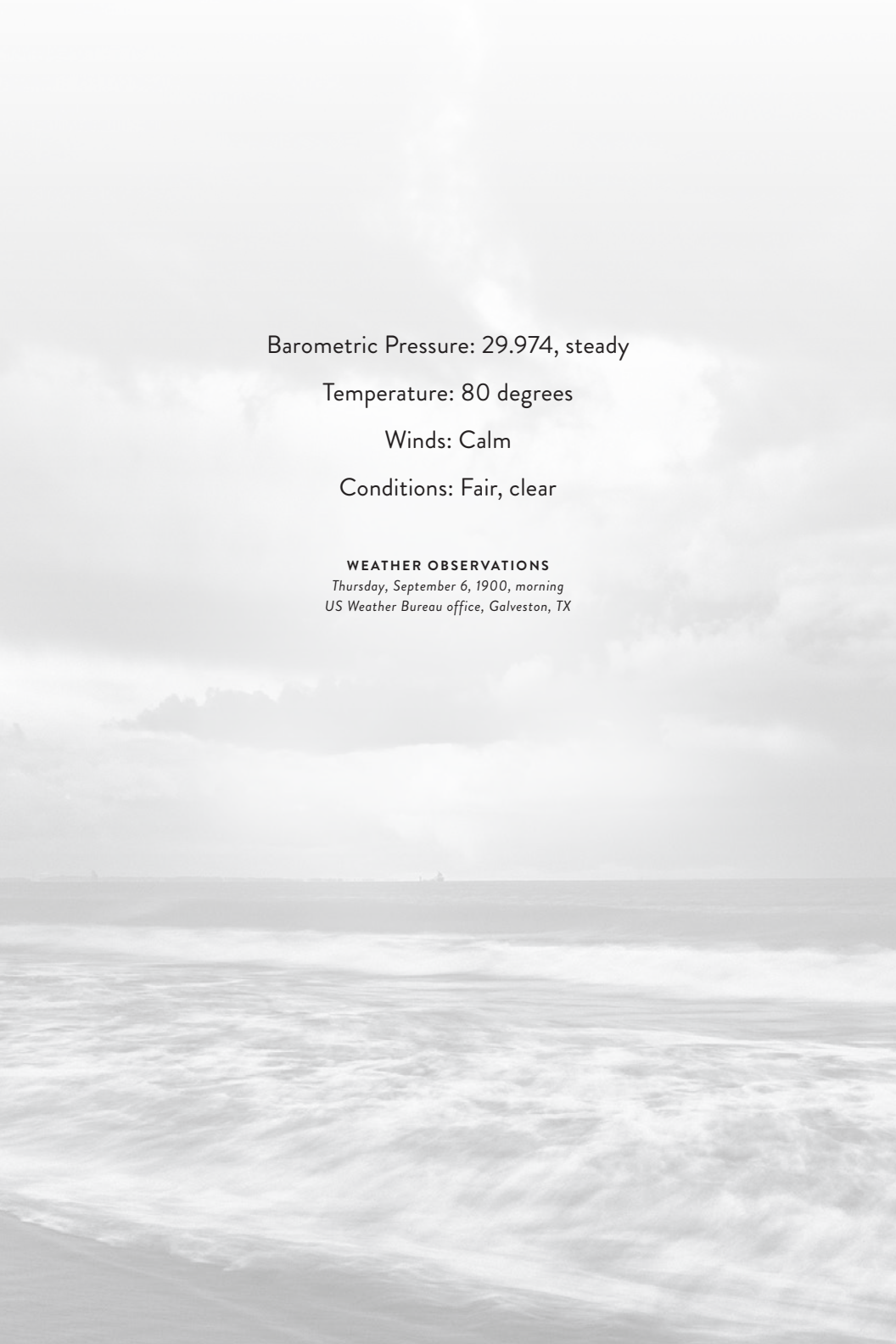
This time there was no stopping it. A laugh that may have actually been a sob welled up in my throat.

“Do you need help, dear?” The nun’s fingers found the wooden cross near her hips. Her knobby fingers roamed over it as she watched me, eyebrows furrowed in worry. “Are you an orphan?”

My shoulders heaved under the weight of my weeping giggles. I knew I looked crazy. Sounded crazy. And yet I could not stop. Instead, I glanced down, trying to steady myself, my eyes landing on the small brown satchel in my lap. Instinctively, my arms wrapped around it, cradling it like a baby. At the touch, all trace of titters ceased. In their place, only broken, breathless whimpers.

“Yes.” The word came out as a whisper, tasting of salt. “Yes, I am.”

It might have been a lie. But it might also have been the truth. And I wasn’t yet sure which one I wanted it to be.



Barometric Pressure: 29.974, steady

Temperature: 80 degrees

Winds: Calm

Conditions: Fair, clear

WEATHER OBSERVATIONS

*Thursday, September 6, 1900, morning
US Weather Bureau office, Galveston, TX*

ONE

FOUR MONTHS LATER
THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 6, 1900

The birds woke me again.

It was one thing I still couldn't get used to, even after all these months. The birds in Galveston didn't chirp and coo like the ones on the East Coast, alerting you to the rising sun with a gentle nudge, a melodious murmur to transition you from sleep to wake. No, here, this close to the shore, the birds shrieked and screamed, a lingering echo from the nightmares I couldn't quite shake even after I'd emerged from my attempt at slumber.

I stared at the ceiling, made grayer by the early light of dawn, gripping the scratchy bedsheets. I'd kicked the top one off even before my usual nightly thrashing. The heat had been unbearable, the only air coming through the window more like a trickle of steam than a refreshing ocean breeze, and the night had done little to cool it. The humidity was already thick; I had to peel the thin, faded nightgown from my skin. And I didn't even want to think about what an untamable mess my hair would be.

Tiptoeing to the window, careful not to wake my still-sleeping roommate, I pushed back the wispy curtains. The first strands of pink were just beginning to thread the sky. Those cursed seagulls swooped through the salt cedars toward the beach, where they screeched at the waves thudding against the sand and crushed shells. I took in a deep breath. It had bothered me when I first arrived, that ever-present smell of fish and salt. But there was something comforting in it now.

Perhaps because it was so far removed from the earthy, woody smell of home.

Of what used to be my home.

“You’re up.”

I spun around. Though the light was dim, I could see my roommate stretching, her pale, delicate toes curling onto the wooden floor as she reached her arms toward the ceiling. Sleep creased her face, but she was smiling. Emily was always smiling.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Did I wake you? I didn’t mean—”

She waved away my protestations, hiding a yawn behind her knuckles. “I couldn’t really sleep anyway. It’s too hot.” She gathered her long dark hair in one hand and pulled it over her shoulder before wiping the sweat from her nose. “Like sleeping in human soup.”

I giggled, mood instantly lifting. Emily had that way about her. “Well, since we’re up,” I said, returning her impish smile, “we might as well get a start on things. The first bell will be ringing soon.”

We settled into our morning routine, Emily taking her turn at the washbasin while I changed into the same gray shapeless cotton frock I’d worn the day before. The navy-blue braided two-piece dress I’d worn on my arrival was long gone, the first concession I’d granted Mother Camillus. Not that there’d been much to salvage of the outfit. Still, I missed the feel of the silky-smooth fabric, the way it had accentuated my figure. This dress made me look frumpy, failed to compliment my red hair, and did nothing for my

complexion. Even after all this time, I still felt naked and shapeless without my corset and petticoats. Worse, I felt ugly without all the colors and elaborate trims.

But I also felt invisible. And that was the whole point.

I smiled at Emily as we switched, me taking the basin while she changed into her habit. Well, it wasn't really a habit yet. No long robe or black-and-white wimple. Just a simple dark wool dress topped with a sleek cloth veil that started inches above her hairline. Although we were close in age, her twenty to my eighteen, vanity seemed to have no hold over Emily. She swore she liked her habit.

And, because it was Emily, I believed her.

Upon my arrival, Emily had seamlessly folded me into her space and her routine. Mother Camillus, though gracious in allowing me to stay, had been hesitant about my presence. As I was no longer a child, she believed it would be improper to allow me to board inside the children's dormitory, even more improper to allow a non-nun access to the private rooms of the Sisters of Charity. Emily, the orphanage's novice (or "nun-in-training" as she preferred to call it), was technically neither, so rooming with her seemed to be a suitable solution. Even though her lodging space was half the size of a full-fledged sister's, she never batted an eye at welcoming an additional body, and after the first few awkward dances of forced togetherness, I soon realized her cheerful generosity and loving spirit weren't a charade.

They were just . . . Emily.

I patted my face dry. There was no mirror in our room, of course, which had been quite an adjustment. But, by this point, I wouldn't have wanted to see what I looked like even if there had been. No makeup to cover my freckles, no hair products to tame the frizz. My heart panged for Stella. Not for the first time, I imagined her hands in my hair, smoothing my dress, powdering my nose. Pictured how she'd fuss if she could see me now.

Emily's voice startled me from my reverie, though her question was muted behind the sound of my toothbrush. I spat the chalky, soap-like paste into a cup. No Sheffield's tooth cream here. "I'm sorry?"

"I asked if you dreamed last night." She adjusted her rosary and glanced at me from beneath raised brows, her smile hopeful. "I didn't hear you."

I forced a smile back, pulling my lips across the gritty, bitter surface of my teeth. "No," I lied. "I guess I didn't."

She grinned. "I told you it would get better." With a wink, she sat on the edge of the bed and began rolling her stockings over her feet.

I turned back to the basin, sweaty fingers clenching the folds of my dress. That was the other thing about Emily—she never pried. Always took me at my word. Even on the nights when my screams were the loudest, when my tears refused to be quelled, she simply held me, never digging into wounds about which I knew she was curious, letting her prayers wash over me like the soothing balm they should have been. Though she offered her ear time and time again, she accepted my silence or one-word answers with a grace and gentleness that made me long to be honest, to lay it all bare before her.

But I couldn't. And because I couldn't, there would always be a wall, a certain level of deceit between us.

She could never know, would never truly understand. I was getting better at hiding them, yes. But the nightmares would never go away.

My throat burned as I attempted to swallow the lump rising inside it. There was a rustle of fabric behind me as Emily rose, the scuff of her flat leather shoes on wood. She was walking toward me. I blinked hard, trying to steady myself, and forced my trembling mouth back into a smile. "You ready?" I asked, spinning around.

Though the warmth in her face never faltered, I could see the moment she registered truth through my facade. The flicker of her eyes, the slight crease in her brow. Her fingertips brushed my elbow. “Annie?”

Clang! Clang! Clang!

My body jarred at the intrusion, then immediately slackened as it recognized the reprieve. “Call to morning prayers,” I said quickly, slipping my arm out of her grasp. “We should hurry. You know how Mother Superior gets when we’re late.”

I didn’t wait for her before opening the door and sliding into the hallway, where I was immediately swallowed by a mass of girls all dressed in white. Wood popped and creaked beneath dozens of shuffling feet making their way toward the large staircase leading to the ground floor, where daily chapel was held. The scents of morning breath and unwashed bodies were overwhelming; older girls were assigned a group of younger orphans to assist in their daily hygiene routines, but I’d been here long enough to know it was a lost cause for more than a few of them.

“Sister Annie! Sister Annie!”

I paused, allowing a familiar greasy-haired blonde to catch up to me. She grinned, that large hole where her front teeth should have been never failing to amuse me. Not only did it give her the look of perpetual playfulness, but it caused all her words to come out with a slight lisp-whistle. I smiled. “Good morning, Margaret.”

“Maggie,” the girl said, face immediately hardening. Her dark-brown eyes narrowed. “It ain’t Margaret. It’s *Maggie*.”

I tilted my head to my shoulder and raised my eyebrows. “I’ll start calling you Maggie when you *stop* calling me Sister. I’m not a nun, Margaret. You know that.”

She thrust a sticky hand into mine. “I know. I just like calling you that.”

“And maybe I just like calling you Margaret.”

She scowled but did not remove her hand. Instead, the two of us continued our journey in silence. Her hair was knotted, the smudge of dirt across her freckled nose revealing she had not properly washed last night or this morning, while the wrinkles in her dress told me she'd been storing it in a wadded ball rather than folded neatly in her assigned drawer like she was supposed to. My eyes flitted around the girls, trying to find Rebecca, the fifteen-year-old ward assigned as Maggie's helper, but it was no use. She was probably near the front of the pack with the rest of her charges. In the few short months I'd known her, Rebecca had proved herself to be mature, responsible, and good with children.

But she could not tame eight-year-old Maggie Sherwood, who, in a cruel twist of fate, had lost both her parents to yellow fever a full twenty years after the worst of the disease swept through the island. And who, for some reason I did not understand, listened only to me.

Yet another mark against me in Mother Camillus's already suspicious eyes.

Maggie was not allowed to sit with me during chapel; it was required she sit with the other children. Still, she made it a point to remain as close as possible, parking herself directly in front of me on one of the hard wooden benches lined up in rows on either side of a large ceramic crucifix near the front of the room. As the girls settled, a scuffling sound from the back signaled the arrival of the children from the boys' dormitory next door. They lumbered sleepily into their own section across the aisle. I took my usual spot next to Emily, behind the girls but segregated from the rest of the nuns proper, who sat on her other side.

A hush fell over restless bodies as Father Donovan appeared at the front of the room. He raised his hands. “Welcome, children. Sisters. This is the day the Lord has made . . .”

It was my cue to tune out.

Though I wasn't Catholic—another point against me in Mother Camillus's book—I *was* raised in the church. We never missed a Sunday in our reserved pew, right up front by the pulpit. It wasn't that I didn't believe in God. But it had been hard to face Him since that terrible night four months ago.

Especially since I could not untangle the memories of those long-ago sermons from the image of the man who'd sat beside me during them.

I did the motions, mouthed the words—after this long, it wasn't hard to figure out the routine—but I did not allow the clergyman's message to penetrate my heart. I kept my mind on the mess of Maggie's hair or the pilling wool of Emily's skirt or even the shrieks of those seagulls from the beach beyond. Just when I was starting to wonder if there was anything in this place I could use as a file—my nails looked absolutely ghastly—there came a quick jab under my rib cage. Emily stood up.

The service was over.

Finally.

Murmured voices immediately began to swell, along with the pops and creaks of benches. Through protestations, I attempted to run my fingers through Maggie's knots with little success before giving her shoulders a quick squeeze and following Emily out of the chapel. We ducked into the nearby kitchen, where both she and I draped aprons around our necks. There was no time to waste.

Ninety-three grumbling stomachs were making their way into the dining room.

Bread had been baked the night before by the dinner crew. I immediately began to slice it. Emily started the milk boiling and measured out oats. Sister Vincent was already at her station, cutting apples from a barrel. And Sister Bernice—the elderly nun who had greeted me upon my arrival—began piling trays on the counter, where they waited to be filled.

LAST LIGHT OVER GALVESTON

I didn't mind breakfast duty. Even though I'd never stepped foot in a kitchen before my arrival at St. Mary's, I soon found the routine soothing. I wondered why Miss Dover, our cook back home, had always been so grumpy; there was something very calming about preparing food. It occupied just enough of my mind to keep it from wandering but without the tedium of scrubbing toilets or ironing the laundry—chores to which Mother Camillus was more than happy to assign me. The nuns were cheerful but efficient, warm but rigorous. Theirs was a well-oiled system, and I felt a certain amount of pride at how well my particular cog fit into their wheel.

So long as I didn't think about how ashamed Father would be to see me with flour in my hair and milk on my clothes. Which was easier said than done.

Before I knew it, an hour had passed, breakfast was over, and the children were scattering to their respective classrooms, most of the nuns disappearing with them, including Emily. The empty trays seemed to echo when I gathered them, as if the room had expanded in the children's absence. Or maybe that was just the melancholy I felt, knowing the rest of the day would be spent alone, doing whatever additional chores Mother Camillus had dredged up from her never-ending list.

I completed the rest of my morning duties: scrubbing the dishes, wiping the tables, sweeping the floors, preparing for the lunch crew. When all was completed to the standards Mother Camillus demanded (and which, I suspected, not even Rosie or Joanne, our maids back home, could have achieved), I removed my apron and trudged from the kitchen to the small corner room that served as the head nun's office. I knocked.

No answer.

I knocked again, harder this time.

Still, from inside, only silence.

I scrunched up my face. Mother Camillus had never missed

an appointment with me. Or anyone, I would gather. I raised my hand to knock again.

“She isn’t here.”

I turned to find Sister Felicitus, an Austrian-born nun in her early fifties, whose thick accent made everything she said sound harsh, even when she was praying. Which was a shame because she was actually a lovely person, always kind to me, even in those early days when I was constantly stepping on toes and misremembering the dozens of Catholic rituals I was supposed to honor. She served as Mother Camillus’s assistant, though I’m sure that wasn’t the proper term for the position. All I knew was that wherever Mother Superior was, Sister Felicitus was surely two steps behind.

“Where is she?”

“She was called over to St. Patrick’s this morning.” She stopped in front of me, knuckles white as she clasped her hands together. “But she told me to tell you to wait here.”

I squeezed the muscle connecting my neck to my shoulder. It already ached. The sooner I started with my work, the sooner I could finish. “Do you know what chores she wanted me to do? I might as well get started while I wait.”

“No chores today.” The nun’s rosary made a gentle clinking sound as she shook her head. “She wants to talk.”

“Talk?”

“Talk.”

There was a heaviness to the word, one that had nothing to do with its European flavoring. I could sense it by the slight downturn of Sister Felicitus’s mouth, the way her eyes refused to meet mine. The already stifling temperature seemed to rise a few degrees. Sweat broke out along my hairline at the back of my neck.

I’d been found out.

It was the only explanation. Somehow, Mother Camillus had learned the truth: who I was, where I’d come from, why I was here.

Saliva pooled in my mouth, and yet my throat was dry. Although I realized I should say something, I found that I couldn't. In front of me, Sister Felicitus shifted from one foot to the other, eyebrows raised.

"Of course," I finally managed. "I understand. I'll just . . . I'll finish up in the kitchen until she gets back. Would that be all right?"

Sister Felicitus pressed her lips together so hard they almost disappeared. Her voice, however, was soft. Almost apologetic. "Of course. I will let you know when she returns."

I lifted my chin as I turned from her, hoping my legs betrayed none of the tremble afflicting my insides. It was only when I heard the door click behind me, signaling that the nun had retired into Mother Superior's office, that I let out a breath I wasn't even aware I'd been holding. My eyes burned with unshed tears. The first hint of a sob had just escaped my mouth when it was jarred into silence by a door bursting open on my right.

Sister Catherine emerged, red-faced and sweaty, dragging an equally red-faced child.

Maggie Sherwood.

The girl howled. By the way she swung her fists, I knew it was less from the pain of Sister Catherine's grip and more from her own exasperation at not being able to free herself from it. The few knots I'd managed to untangle from her hair after chapel were back.

"What's going on?" I asked, though I wasn't sure Sister Catherine could even hear me over Maggie's shrieks.

Perspiration dripped down the nun's forehead. A few strands of hair had come loose from her wimple and lay matted against her skin. I'd never seen her hair before; I was surprised to discover it was red, like mine.

"This one," she spat from between gritted teeth, "has decided she'd rather spend the day in the company of Mother Superior than her peers."

“No I wouldn’t!” Maggie shouted. Her blonde hair lashed her face as she swung her head wildly.

Sister Catherine let loose a short, bitter laugh. “That’s where we disagree, Margaret. Because when a child decides to use her reader as a weapon rather than a tool for learning, it tells me that child has a need for higher companionship than her present company.”

“I didn’t hit her!” Maggie protested. “I only tapped her because she—”

“That’s enough, Margaret!” Sister Catherine’s voice echoed through the hallway. Even though I wasn’t the one in trouble, I felt my own spine go a little straighter. “I don’t want to hear another word. Mother Camillus will deal with you and your excuses from now on.”

“I didn’t—”

But Sister Catherine was done listening. Shoring up her grip on Maggie’s arm, she began to pull the girl in the direction of Mother Superior’s office.

“Wait!” I called. “Mother Camillus isn’t here!”

Sister Catherine paused, her posture stiffening. She turned back to me slowly.

“She—she’s at St. Patrick’s,” I stuttered. “I’m not sure when she’ll be back.”

Maggie had stilled. Her muscles were like noodles under the nun’s clutch, heavy with defeat and dread. She raised her head at the sound of my voice, and I noticed the tears leaving dirt trails down her face. Inside my chest, my heart cleaved.

“Gone?” Sister Catherine sputtered. “Then what am I supposed to—”

“I’ll take her.” The words came out before I truly understood what I was saying.

“You?”

“I . . . I . . .” I fished for an explanation, a reason, anything

that would allow me to get to Maggie. "I'm waiting for Mother Camillus too. She . . . has me scrubbing dishes until she returns. Margaret could do that as well. So you can get back to your class."

I could see the turmoil on Sister Catherine's face. She didn't like me. Oh, she was always polite, but I'd grown up in New York society; I could spot false civility a mile away. And Sister Catherine was as civil as they came. Leaving Maggie in my care would go against every prejudice she not-so-secretly harbored about me.

But being forced to return the child to the classroom would be even worse.

It was with a huff and no small amount of chagrin that Sister Catherine thrust Maggie toward me and stomped back into her classroom, slamming the door behind her for good measure.

I knelt in front of Maggie, sweeping the hair from her face. "Are you all right?"

She sniffed in response.

"Oh, Maggie." I wrapped her in a tight hug.

"Do I really have to scrub dishes?"

I pulled away, and her dark eyes met mine. They were red-rimmed and watery. Her face was splotchy, the lines of dirt from her tears having dried into streaks that looked like wrinkles. It gave her the appearance of a very tiny, very wild, old person.

I bit down on a smile.

"The dishes are done," I said, rising and pulling her hand into mine. Somehow, it was even stickier than before. "I need some fresh air."

Maggie broke into a wide, gap-toothed grin.

"Those waves have been calling to me all morning. Let's take a walk."