

as  
the  
light  
fades

*a novel*

CATHERINE WEST



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Published in association with Books & Such Literary Management, 52 Mission Circle, Suite 122, PMB 170 Santa Rosa, CA 95409-5370

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ISBN (Print): 978-1-09-145323-4

## *one*

Liz Carlisle never imagined she'd be back in this place. Certainly never dreamed she'd actually enjoy the simple act of walking the dogs around the Nantucket neighborhood she'd grown up in. Yet here she was.

Everything was different now. Renovations at Wyldewood, the rambling estate that Liz and her four siblings called home, were well underway. Her brother David and his wife Josslyn were overseeing the work on the house as well as running after their toddler twins, and her sister Lynette was still in Africa, so the task of trekking out with the family's two labs had fallen to her. Truthfully, any excuse to get away from the noisy house, now more of a construction zone than anything, was most welcome.

She studied the mottled branches above her as she waited for Diggory and Jasper to finish sniffing around the tree's roots. The leaves were showing off in a dazzling display of golds and reds, a shock of color that would inspire any artist. Not so long ago, Dad would have found joy in capturing the beauty of the scene on paper. These days he showed little interest in art. He showed little interest in anything.

Their father's slow decline was just one more thing she had no control over.

Liz sighed and breathed in the crisp air. Fall had taken its time this year, but today the salt-kissed island breeze held a chill that hinted of first fires and frosty mornings.

Could she survive winter on Nantucket?

The cold she could handle. She'd grown up with it. But the dreary, dull days, nowhere to go, no city lights, no nightlife . . . well, maybe she wouldn't miss that so much. She did miss her daily routine though. Rising at dawn to get in an hour at the gym before heading to work, being pulled along on the crowded sidewalks of the Financial District, the smell of smog and coffee and fresh bagels in the early morning air. The pinch of pride as she entered the shining glass building on Slate Street, riding the elevator up to the twenty-

second floor to her corner office with a view of New York Harbor. Not that she'd ever really appreciated the view.

Liz shoved her hands deep in the pockets of her red leather jacket and put those thoughts away. That life was behind her. Time to move on.

She'd had little choice.

"Come on, guys." Liz urged the dogs forward and turned in time to see a black Jeep crest the top of the hill. Late afternoon sun filtered through the trees, and she squinted as the Jeep approached, weaving a little too dangerously for her liking. Her pulse picked up and set her on immediate alert. Somebody might have had a bit too much to drink this afternoon. Odd for an off-season Tuesday, but not unheard of.

The vehicle jerked left, veered across the road and back again.

Liz scanned the area for children or unsuspecting cyclists. Thankfully, the roads weren't that busy now, most of the island's summer residents and tourists having reluctantly made their way back to the mainland.

A striped cat suddenly scooted out from under the wild rose hedge to her left, and Liz held her breath. "Seriously?"

Sure enough, the small animal raced for the road, straight across the Jeep's path. Tires squealed and skidded, sending sand, crushed shells, and small stones every which way as the vehicle lurched off the road onto the nearest lawn, finally coming to a crunching stop at the base of an old black oak.

"Stay." Heart pounding, Liz hastily tied the dogs' leashes around a low hanging branch, not terribly confident of their obedience, but they were close to home. She raced down the hill, glanced back to see the two dogs settled under the tree, then pressed on toward the Jeep, hoping there wouldn't be blood. She hated blood.

There was no sign of the cat, so she assumed it was safe. The Jeep didn't look as bad as she feared. She hoped the driver was okay. Liz stepped over tire marks embedded in the grass and the bedraggled remains of what had been the last of summer's magnificent display of roses. Evy McIntyre's prize-winning roses, to be precise.

The door on the driver's side opened with a slow creak. Liz stopped a few feet away and watched a pair of skinny legs clad in tight jeans and clunky black boots emerge. And then a young girl stood before her.

A kid. Barely sixteen, if that.

Great.

Liz swallowed her first response and stepped closer. She gave the vehicle a cursory inspection and saw the airbag hadn't released. No blood on the kid. No bruises that she could see. "Are you all right?"

"Uh huh." The girl was a wisp of a thing, big dark eyes rimmed in heavy

makeup and shoulder-length jet-black hair framed an almost ghostly-white face.

Liz stepped closer and put her game face on. “Have you been drinking? Drugs?”

The girl’s eyes widened, her pale cheeks pinking. “What? No!”

“Are you old enough to be driving?” Liz had to ask. “Do you have a license?”

“What are you, a cop?” Defiance flashed in the dark eyes and Liz scowled. She had no time for teenagers, especially not ones looking for trouble.

“I’m a lawyer, and I can smell a lie a mile away. So think carefully and answer the question.”

“Um . . .” The girl scuffed her boots on the grass and lowered her gaze.

Liz knew what was coming. “I’ll take that as a no. Does this vehicle belong to you?”

“Not exactly.” The teen twisted her neck from side to side, glanced at the front of the Jeep and then at the desecrated garden, turning back to Liz with a dramatic eye roll. “Well, that freakin’ cat should have stayed put.”

Before Liz could reply, the front door of the house flew open and Evy McIntyre stood on the wraparound porch of her impressive three-story home. It was one of the larger houses in the area. Evy came from old money and owned an art gallery in town where she showed, and sold, many of Liz’s sister Lynette’s paintings. Lynette and Evy had formed an unlikely friendship over the last year, but Liz hadn’t seen much of the eccentric older woman since Lynnie left for Africa.

“What in heaven’s name happened here?” Evy quickstepped it toward them in high heels, sequins on her teal blouse sparkling, a bright pink silk scarf flapping behind her. “Elizabeth?”

“Hi, Evy.” Liz pulled her cell phone from the pocket of her jeans. “I was walking the dogs and this . . . happened. We should call the police. She doesn’t have a license and the vehicle might be stolen.”

“No, please, no cops!” The girl’s eyes flared. “And it’s not stolen.”

Evy scanned the surrounding area and her garden, what was left of it, eyes widening at the sight of the crushed rose bushes. She took a slow breath and set a steely gaze on the girl. “Are you responsible for this tragedy, young lady?”

The girl stepped back a bit. “I guess.”

“You guess. Are you hurt?”

“No.”

“You, Elizabeth? She didn’t run you over along with my poor roses?” Evy’s thick eyelashes batted dramatically and Liz squelched a smile.

“Fortunately, I was on the other side of the street. She swerved to avoid a cat.”

“Really?”

“Yes!” The girl nodded vehemently. “I swear that’s what happened! I’m a good driver. I wouldn’t—”

“You can’t be a good driver if you don’t have a license!” Liz sputtered. She caught herself before totally going off on the girl. She could see the kid was shaken and a little scared, despite her bravado. “Do you even have a learner’s permit?”

“Uh . . .”

“Just as I thought. You know—”

“A moment, Elizabeth.” Evy held up a hand to Liz, then turned back to the girl. “Name?”

“Mia Stone.”

Liz gauged the fear in the teen’s eyes. “Evy? Shall we call the police?” She waved her cell phone at the older woman.

“Please don’t call the cops!” Tears formed and her bottom lip began to tremble. “I’ll do whatever you want to make it up, pay you back, just . . . no cops.”

“Are you kidding me?” Liz stared. She was a good little actress this one.

Evy tightened her lips, ignored Liz, and focused on the girl. “Young lady, you’d better come into the house. We will call your parents. And then I will determine your fate.”

Oh, come on, Evy. She’d be making the kid hot chocolate in a few minutes. Liz stifled words she really wanted to say and put her phone away. “Evy, do you want me to stick around?” Liz didn’t think the kid was capable of doing the older woman any harm, but these days one couldn’t be too careful.

Evy simply smiled and shook her head. “We’ll be fine. Thank you, Elizabeth.” She ushered the girl toward the house without so much as a backward glance.

“You better call the cops on her,” she huffed, half-tempted to do it anyway. But Evy wouldn’t appreciate that, and the less involved Liz stayed the better. And maybe the kid deserved a break. Liz rolled her eyes. A few months ago that thought wouldn’t have occurred to her. But these days she was more aware of the importance of second chances. So she left the girl’s fate in Evy’s hands, went to retrieve the dogs, and headed home.

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Liz stepped over planks of new wood and two toolboxes on her way through the house to the kitchen. Wyldewood was a hive of activity, the construction crew making good headway on the renovations that would convert their childhood home into a B&B. In a way, she was sorry to see the transformation. But that was life. Things changed.

Her life certainly had.

She'd hoped to have a plan in place by now, to know what her next move would be. Maybe even a new job. Yet here it was, the last week of September, and she still didn't have a clue what the future held.

The crew was packing up for the day and she waved to a couple of the guys as they left. She found David and Josslyn in the kitchen, wrestling the twins, Brandon and Bethie, into the banquet eating area for supper.

David slid in beside Brandon and gave him a stern look. "Eat. No more fussing."

Liz could have sworn the almost three-year-old gave an eye roll. She grinned and took the plate Josslyn offered. Meatloaf, mashed potatoes with gravy and peas. That was a few extra pounds staring her in the face. "Thanks. Looks great." She longed for a slab of salmon or tuna with organic greens, but since she'd never mastered any culinary skills beyond ordering off the menu in her favorite restaurants, she couldn't complain. She grabbed a bottle of water and joined her family.

"How was your walk?" Josslyn asked as she cut Bethie's meatloaf.

"Interesting." Liz reached for the pepper mill and relayed the events of the past hour. "Evvy was not amused, I can tell you. But at least the kid wasn't hurt."

"Who was she?" David shoveled food into his mouth, concern furrowing his brow. "Anyone we know?"

"Mia Stone? I didn't recognize her. Evvy shooed me off, you know how she is. I don't think she was planning on calling the cops. I would've."

"Already got her tried and convicted, counselor?" David stilled his fork with a smile.

Liz shrugged. "If you can't do the time, don't do the crime."

David laughed and continued eating. "I know a Matt Stone. Doesn't have kids though."

"Well." Liz sighed. "I'd guess that young lady is going to be in a heap of trouble tonight, whoever she is."

Later, after they'd cleaned up and Josslyn hustled the twins upstairs for their bath, Liz retreated to the back porch. She liked it out here in the early evening. Liked watching the sun go down. Another anomaly she'd never imagined. Back in New York, she'd usually still be in the office at this hour, or

just heading out for drinks or dinner.

David came outside carrying two mugs, sat beside her, and gave a long, tired-sounding sigh. “Coffee?”

“Thanks.” Liz took the mug he offered, inhaled, and sipped with a satisfied smile. “Ah. You used the beans I bought.”

David smothered a yawn, a deep chuckle on its heels. “How can you tell?”

Liz breathed in the welcome aroma. “I live in New York. I know my coffee.”

“Lived.” He turned his head, worried eyes settling on her. “Right?”

Liz stared back at him through the silence. “Yes, lived. Thanks for the reminder.”

“Sorry.” David blanched. “I just . . .”

“You worry. I know.” Liz averted her gaze and studied the pink hue over the ocean. Not so long ago, she’d hated the sight of the sea. Hated this house, everything and everyone in it. Well, perhaps ‘hated’ was too strong a word. She’d lived here her whole life until she went to boarding school at fourteen. Now it seemed things had come full circle. Wyldewood had become her refuge.

“So. Made any plans yet?” David took on the tone that reminded her of their father.

The questions she wrestled with daily returned for another round.

Was she really ready to leave New York? Her career? The life she’d built there . . .

A life now in shambles.

“No plans.” Liz drank too quickly, blinked moisture she’d blame on the temperature of the coffee if he noticed, and placed her mug on the wide arm of the bench. The once-dark teak had softened to gray, weathered with age. Liz ran a finger over the names carved into the wood so long ago and smiled at the memories. Though she and her four siblings hadn’t been close in later years, their childhood had been filled with happy times.

A breeze cooled her heated face. Hard to believe summer had passed so quickly. A summer none of them would forget anytime soon. Decisions had been made, together, as a family. Liz couldn’t remember the last time that had happened. Probably never.

The plan to convert their sprawling rundown home into a B&B had been forged, loans eventually secured, and construction was now underway. Which was all well and good, but she still had to live here.

She crossed her legs and faced David’s questioning gaze. “To be honest, I’m not sure what to do next.”

“Stay here. Start over here, on Nantucket.” He smiled as though it was the

simplest thing in the world.

Liz made a face. “And do what? I’m not sure there’s a huge need for corporate lawyers on the island.”

“Didn’t you tell me you were considering taking a break from law? I mean, not that that kid could tell today.”

“Very funny.” Why in the world had she shared that thought with her brother? “Fine. I wouldn’t mind taking a break, but I still need a job. I’m not about to join the construction crew.”

“I’d actually pay to see that.” David’s laugh was wicked and Liz elbowed him.

“Don’t hold your breath, big brother. Maybe I could see if Jed would hire me down at The Longshoreman. With Linnie gone, he’s probably in need of extra help.” David laughed harder and Liz grinned. “I suppose you’d pay to see that too?”

“You waiting tables in that dump? Absolutely.” He sobered and sipped from his mug. “Listen, Liz . . . I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but . . .”

His hesitation made her stomach churn. “What now? Is Linnie all right?” Anything could happen to her over in Africa. Or it could be their younger brother. She’d thought he was staying out of trouble now, but who knew. “Is it Gray?”

David held up a hand and shook his head. “Linnie’s fine. Gray’s fine. It’s just . . . I met with the architect this morning. He needs to get started on the second floor sooner. Like next week.”

Liz took a breath. “The second floor. Where I’m currently living.”

“Yeah.”

“Great.” She stared at her socked feet and picked dog hair off her jeans. Jasper and Diggory paced the porch and settled at the foot of the steps. Waves crashed against the cliffs below the garden, and a few gulls flew off into the darkening sky with mournful cries. “Well. I suppose I could go back to New York. I could find another job there.” But the thought terrified her.

“And I’ll repeat what I said last night,” David growled. “Men like your ex don’t give up. He’ll track you down.”

“If he wanted to track me down, he’d have done it already.”

“Doesn’t matter. If he makes any contact, I know what’ll happen. You’ll get sucked back in.”

“I won’t.”

“Elizabeth.” Her brother gave a low curse. “If I had a dollar for every time you’ve said that over the past couple years . . . Look, I’m not trying to be difficult, but come on. Is it worth the risk?”

Liz slipped her trembling hands beneath her legs. No, it wasn’t worth the

risk. Going back wasn't going forward. It was giving up.

At twenty-nine, she'd certainly expected to have her life in better order, maybe even be married. No kids, of course—she wouldn't go completely crazy. But a few months into their two-year relationship, the first time Laurence had shown his true colors, Liz discovered dreams didn't always come true.

She drank the remainder of her coffee and sighed. "I can't afford a place of my own here." Who was she kidding? She wouldn't be able to afford New York either.

David frowned. "I thought you had a good amount put away."

"Some. But Laurence still has a lot of my money." She hated talking about her ex-boyfriend. Hated even thinking about Laurence Broadhurst.

"How much money are we talking?"

"Enough, David." The actual amount filled her with self-loathing, and David's dark look did nothing to abate the feeling. She'd been paid well over the few years she'd served as legal counsel at Laurence's investment company. She did have a tidy amount tucked away, but the rest was in a joint investment account. She'd trusted Laurence, and that had been her biggest mistake.

"I never said I was smart." But she should have been. Instead of listening to logic, she'd been swayed by her heart and had to live with the consequences of that flawed decision.

"Okay." David groaned and shook his head. "And you're going to get it back how?"

Liz watched a line of ants disappear through a crack in the cement below her feet. Thunder rumbled overhead with the threat of rain. "I don't know yet. I don't suppose I could just ask for it." Legally, Laurence wasn't entitled to any of it. But she'd given it to him freely. A court case would be complicated, and costly.

David blew out a breath. "You could threaten to expose him. He owns the business. It's a big company. He's not going to want bad press."

It was something she had considered, but only briefly. "It's my word against his, Davy. I can't prove how many times he slammed me against the wall."

David hesitated, rubbed his jaw, and picked at a hole in his jeans just above the knee. "Gray has pictures." He spoke quietly, as though the words pained him.

Liz stiffened and a shiver shot through her.

An unwanted memory surfaced. Pictures. Spread out in front of her in a darkened room. Fear fierce and damning took hold that day, so many years ago, and the prickling on the back of her neck said it still held its ground.

“Liz?” David touched her arm and she startled. “Are you all right?”

She nodded. She had to get past this. It didn’t matter. That part of her life was long buried. “Gray has pictures? Of me? How?”

Her brother met her eyes. “When you came home over the summer, that last time Laurence beat you up, Gray snapped a few shots. He was discreet about it, but he . . . we . . . thought you might need them one day.”

*“Look at yourself, Elizabeth! Is this what you call love? If it is, you’ve got a pretty warped idea of the concept.”* The words Gray spoke that awful night still rang in her head, still stung and brought a fresh wave of panic. She *had* believed Laurence loved her. The last incident had been the final tipping point. Prior to that, it was mostly verbal lashings, angry outbursts. Sometimes he got physical, but not always. She accepted his tearful apologies, took the lavish gifts he offered, and pretended it was all right. Denied the truth to friends and family for far longer than she should have. She’d made up excuse after excuse.

Even told herself she deserved it.

But that night . . .

Fresh fear coiled tight and set her pulse racing. The very idea of confronting Laurence Broadhurst, the man she’d once thought hung the moon, was more than she could handle.

“It wouldn’t be enough.” Liz exhaled and glanced upward. “We couldn’t prove it was him.” Didn’t want to try. They said healing would come in time, but she wasn’t counting on it. “I’ve got enough in savings for now, until I make some final decisions.”

“Okay. No pressure.” He sent her a small smile. Liz understood his heart. David took his role as the oldest Carlisle sibling seriously, but with only two years between them, Liz knew she was the one he confided in. And he’d always looked out for her. Stuck up for her when the others teased her for always having her nose in a book, always studying, being the brainiac of the family. David had been there when she needed him. Until she’d finally pushed him away, afraid of what he’d do if he found out how bad things really were.

He had found out anyway, and their relationship had suffered for it.

“I’m sorry, Davy.” She wiped her eyes. “This isn’t easy. I’m walking away from everything I’ve worked so hard for. You know?”

“What was it worth if it didn’t make you happy?”

The question wound around her like a scarf pulled too tight. What was happiness, really? Liz wasn’t sure she’d ever found it. Wasn’t sure she’d recognize it if it came up and kissed her full on the lips. Happiness, true love, romance . . . those were the things of fairytales, movies, and Nicholas Sparks novels. Real life was cut and dry. Work hard, have a little fun, no harm done, but in the end, nobody really wins. Happy endings didn’t actually exist.

Childish laughter floated down from the windows above the porch.

David glanced at his watch. "They'll be coming down to say goodnight. But listen, earlier when I said I knew a Matt Stone? He's a friend of mine. He's got a place on his property he was talking about renting. I don't think it'll be too expensive."

"Oh." Liz sighed. Perhaps she could just move in with her father at the nursing home.

With everything going on at the house, moving Dad was the best decision, but also the hardest they'd had to make. They'd all wanted to keep him here as long as possible, but as nice as the idea was, his progressing Alzheimer's made the move the only logical choice. And not having Lynette around when it happened made for a far less dramatic transfer.

"Do you want his number?" David pressed. "Check the place out?"

"Who is this guy? You're sure that kid from this afternoon doesn't belong to him?"

"Nah. He doesn't have a family. Matt's from Boston. Used to come over for summers every year when we were kids. Moved over the beginning of summer. I thought he was only here for the season, but he told me he's teaching art at the high school now, so I guess it's permanent." David fished out his phone. "The place is out by Jetties Beach. Belonged to his grandparents. I haven't seen it in years, but he's a decent sort. I think it'd be worth having a look."

"A decent sort?" Liz scowled.

"You might have even met him. Yacht club crowd. Crewed with him a couple races." David smiled at her apprehension. "He's all right, Liz."

"Married?"

"No."

"David . . ."

He held up a hand. "From what I understand, the place is completely separate from the main house. You'd probably never see each other. I think it'd be okay."

"I don't know." She didn't need okay. She needed Fort Knox.

"I'll come with you to see it if you want."

Liz stretched her arms above her head and groaned. "I can go by myself." Not that she wanted to, but honestly. How long could she live constantly looking over her shoulder? "Text me the number. Since I'm soon to be homeless, I don't have much choice." David winced and she regretted her words. "Oh, relax, I won't pitch a fit. The renovations need to happen. I'll be all right."

"Hey, you two." Josslyn poked her head around the door as the twins

charged across the porch. “We’ve come to say goodnight.” Dressed in cozy pajamas, squeaky clean and beaming, their childhood innocence tugged at Liz’s heart.

David put his phone away and picked up Brandon, while Bethie skipped over to Liz.

“Up, Iz.” She raised chubby arms and looked up at Liz with an imploring gaze.

As usual, she couldn’t resist Bethie’s smile and lifted her into a hug, not even pulling back when her niece hugged her neck and planted a kiss on her cheek. She smelled like shampoo and Mr. Bubble. “Are you all ready for bed? Do you want me to read you a story?”

“Yay!” The little girl nodded enthusiastically. “*Cat in the Hat!*”

Liz followed them in, the sound of her own laughter ringing in her ears and surprising her. She’d better call this Matthew Stone, at least have a look at the house or apartment or whatever it was. And perhaps this was the push she needed. If she was going to start over, she had to take the first step.

“Auntie Iz?” Bethie snuggled against her and whispered in her ear as they approached the staircase.

“What, Bethie?” Liz whispered back, smoothing down the child’s unruly blond curls.

Bethie giggled a bit, pressed her nose to Liz’s and hugged her neck harder. “I love you, dat’s all.”

It was their favorite saying of late.

*I love you, that’s all.*

Liz’s eyes burned, but she nodded, smiled, and let a little hope in. “I love you too, Bethie.”

Yes, she would survive this. She had to.