## CH APTER

*Nine*

*Pearl Beach, California Saturday, June 4*

*New Moon*

LENDER, WITH A white door and solid black facade, the shop’s exterior resembled a nun’s habit, the gold block letters on its sign

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a King James Bible. Nestled between an ice-cream parlor and the sea glass–colored caftans in the window of Misty’s*,* the Good Book was an ebony bead on a rosary of Swarovski crystals.

What if Gloria wasn’t really Jewish but rather a Christian mis- sionary heaven-bent on luring lonely, unemployed, out-of-towners into her frankincense-and-myrrh-scented trap? Or maybe this was a surprise party, set up by Dan, who wasn’t really in Java. And maybe Gayle was there, too, forked tail between her legs with a cake shaped like a giant apology.

M.J. inched toward the entrance. Then—

*Oof.*

The door flew open; a man, sharp-boned and smelling of waxy hair products bashed into her.

“Sorry, miss,” he said, smoothing his shellacked side part. “I didn’t see you there.” He placed a placard that read CLOSED FOR A

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PRIVATE EVENT firmly on the sidewalk. “We open tomorrow at ten.”

“Easton, it’s M.J., we met at Leo’s *shiva*.” He stroked a goatee that wasn’t there “I’m not here to shop. Gloria invited me.”

His suspicious, brown-eyed squint lowered toward M.J.’s un- adorned chest.

“Oh, right.” She reached into the pocket of her denim dress and flashed the ancient key.

“Follow me.”

The shop smelled dank and earthy, like Manhattan after a mid- day downpour. Over time, moist air must have penetrated the wood rafters and seeped into the cracks between the uneven floorboards.

“So, what exactly is this private event?” M.J.’s fingers stamped quotation marks around the words she needed him to define. “Is it a . . . Christian thing?” she asked, taking in the labeled bookshelves that stretched toward the back of the narrow space, even as church pews. There were seven: PRIDE, ENVY, GLUTTONY, LUST, WRATH, GREED,

SLOTH—one for every deadly sin. A pulpit furnished with a cash reg- ister faced them all.

“*Christian* thing?” Easton’s sharp Adam’s apple shook as he chuckled. “You obviously don’t know Liddy. That framed first edi- tion of *Are You There, God? It’s Me, Margaret*, is as religious as she gets.” He parted his velvet sport coat and patted the inside pocket. “This letter should explain everything. Not that I read it. It has a wax seal, so I couldn’t, even if I wanted to.”

The soles of M.J.’s feet itched with anticipation. “Can I—” “’Fraid not.” Easton buttoned his sport coat. “All four of you

have to be together. You’re the third to arrive so it shouldn’t be

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much longer.” He indicated the walkway between Gluttony and Lust. “Why don’t you put on that necklace and go back to the lounge. The staff room pantry is fully stocked, so think it and ye shall drink it.” Then with a backward tilt on the heels of his Oxfords: “I graduated bartending school last week.”

“Do you have prosecco?” He did.

“Could I get it in a rocks glass?” M.J. tapped the tip of her ski- jump nose. “It doesn’t fit in a flute.”

“As you wish.” Easton pivoted and headed for the door behind the pulpit marked HOLY WATER.

*Assholes*, M.J. thought as she ran her hand across the mess of sig- natures and cartoonish doodles that defaced splintering bookshelves. Was Liddy too strapped to replace them or too stubborn to let the vandals win? Either way, the Sharpie-wielding hoods had her beat. There was Stephen King, whose pretentious inky loop wrapped around his name like a lasso, the bulbous-nosed monster drawn by Maurice Sendak, Maya Angelou, *Angelou* underlined. She passed Shaun Tan, Kate DiCamillo, Dorothy Allison, Jonathan Tropper, Jeanette Walls, Adrienne Rich, and hundreds more.

*They’re autographs!* said the young girl inside M.J., tugging. *Who’s the asshole now?* She began turning M.J. in every direction, begging her to touch the names of her favorite authors, poets, and illustrators—the ones old M.J. forgot how to love.

Eventually, she emerged from the stacks and entered the lounge—a chandelier-lit reading area with black upholstered couches and red beanbags that faced the fireplace. Decorating in the devil’s colors was a nice sardonic touch. But the hearth—a mosaic of artfully burned book covers—was a masterpiece. *Catcher in the Rye*,

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*To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Lolita*, *The Joy of Gay Sex*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Forever*, *The Color Purple . . .* All of them titles that had once been banned. It was an installation befitting the Museum of Modern Art.

“This place is Las Vegas for librarians.”

A closemouthed, Pillsbury Doughboy giggle trickled out of the petite blonde in the polka-dot dress who was sitting stiffly on the edge of the couch. “So true, so true,” she said, then uncrossed her ankles and stood, right arm extended. “I’m Jules, Jules Valentine,” she announced with a honey-coated drawl. Her hand was cold and her bones were delicate, but her grip was firm.

M.J. introduced herself and tried to place what it was about Jules that seemed familiar. Wide blue eyes that blinked innocence, pursed lips, a sun-shaped face too big for her girlish frame . . . was it Tweety Bird?

“I guess you got Gloria’s invitation, too,” M.J. said, noticing the dangling key around Jules’s neck.

“Gloria? No, mine came from my coworker, Dotty Crawford.” “That’s how I know you!”

Jules stiffened even more.

“You work at the Majestic. You’re the, oh, what’s it called, the—” “Liaison of Love?”

“Yes! You were there when I—” M.J. pointed out the smile- shaped scar above her eyebrow.

“That’s right! You bonked yourself on the head with a beer can.” “It was sunscreen, actually.”

“Then, a handsome prince appeared from out of the fog and res- cued you with true love’s kiss.”

*Fog?*

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M.J. would not have been using sunscreen if there was fog. And Dan didn’t kiss her until later that night, which had more to do with tequila than true love. But correcting a liaison in the middle of her liaise was probably like waking a sleepwalker. What if she lashed out?

“Y’all are still together, right?”

“We are.” M.J. beamed. “I moved out here to be with him. Left my career and everything.” She edited out the whole Gayle- bifurcating-her-promotion part and how she’d still be in New York had that not happened, in favor of painting herself as the type of woman who gives it all up for the security of a man. Because M.J. built a career on knowing her audience and at the moment Jules’s Tweety Bird blues were thumping emoji hearts. “And we owe it all to that magical love dust of yours.”

“Don’t I get any credit?” rasped a woman from the Wrath aisle. “I found the prince and princess a reasonably priced beach house in the height of the market.”

*Shit.*

Britt shuffled into view: hair damp, skin tone uneven, eyes screaming for Visine.

“Y’all know each other?” Jules asked, wilting at the prospect of being left out.

“We’ve interacted,” Britt said, adjusting the built-in bra inside her maxi dress. Then to M.J., “Before I forget . . .” She began ferret- ing through her *My Other Bag Is a Birkin* tote and pulled out some- thing round and black with a winged logo stamped in its center. “My daughter almost swallowed it.” She tossed the thing to M.J., who made no attempt to catch it. It was probably one of those gag gifts

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that squirted fake blood. And unlike Britt, M.J. was wearing dry- clean-only.

“Take it,” Britt insisted. “It’s yours.” “What is it?”

“A car key.”

“It’s not mine. I don’t drive.” “Well, I found it in your cake.” “Y’all had cake?” Jules asked.

“No,” they both answered. Then Britt lifted the key off the floor, handed it to M.J., and told her to return it to the bakery because some poor pastry chef was probably going crazy looking for it.

The three women, now settled into the couches, began to fidget like strangers in the waiting room of a gynecologist’s office.

“My babies left for sleepover camp today,” Britt eventually said. “Eight weeks!”

“Sneezes H. Crust,” Jules gasped. “They’re only eight weeks old?”

“No, they’re twelve. They’ll be *gone* for eight weeks. Margot and Jasper. They’re fraternal twins.”

“I was just playing.” Jules winked. “Gosh, I couldn’t be away from Destiny for that long.”

“Dan’s on a surf trip in Java for ten days and I’m losing it,” M.J. said, trying to relate.

“Well, they love it, so . . .” Britt checked her phone. “Appar- ently, they’re having too much fun to text.” She lifted her gaze to the thicket of bookmarks that had been strung from the ceiling, taking a moment to watch them twirl in the air-conditioned breeze.

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“Is Destiny your daughter?” M.J. asked, wondering where Easton was with that prosecco.

“She is. Turned fifteen years old last month. We’re closer than two coats of nail polish.”

Easton charged into the lounge, a scientist with a life-saving an- tidote. “Who’s thirsty?” Three hands shot into the air. He went straight to Jules. “You and I should take up juggling,” he told her, setting down his tray on the coffee table.

“Why juggling?”

He crossed one leg revealing a blue-and-white polka-dotted sock, the same pattern as Jules’s dress. “Because we’re very coordi- nated.”

Britt and M.J. exchanged a horrified glance while Jules tittered with delight.

“What a pistol you are.”

“If I’m a pistol, what does that make you?”

“The Liaison of Love at the Majestic Resort and Spa,” she said, deciding that the flirting was over. “I coordinate weddings, propos- als, vow renewals, and flowers, now that Dotty is gone. As my hus- band always says: Cupid is as Cupid does.”

Easton glimpsed her right hand. A gold band, fine as baby hair, glimpsed back. “Husband?”

“Brandon. We were high school sweethearts.” She beamed. “Married fourteen years.”

Britt cocked her head. “And Destiny’s fifteen?”

“Yeah, well, we kinda ate supper before saying grace,” Jules said with a shoo-fly swipe of her hand. “But everything worked out. And things will be even better just as soon as he gets here.”

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Easton asked where he was.

“An hour south, in Oceanside. We moved there twelve years ago when Brandon got into MiraCosta College. One day I’m a wedding coordinator for the local church and the next, *poof* ! The Majestic of- fered me a job and a garden view villa. Brandon’s been trying to get here for five months, but his clients are having the hardest time let- ting him go.”

“Is he a therapist?” Britt asked. “No, a personal trainer.”

“So where does that leave you?” Easton asked.

“Ashley Madison,” said the curvaceous redhead as she emerged from Pride, her kimono dress straining to conceal her plus-sized cleavage. She wore a bronze-winged necklace, but no key.

“Welcome, Ashley, I’m Jules.” “It’s Addie.”

“I’m sorry.” Jules blushed. “I thought you said ‘Ashley.’ ”

“I did. Ashley Madison is a website for married horndogs who want a little extra on the side. Since your husband isn’t around I thought—”

“Too late,” M.J. said, remembering an old article in *City* maga- zine. “The site was hacked and its client list was exposed. It’s done.”

“Oh well.” Addie shrugged. “Hey, E, can I get a Macallan?” “Sure.” Easton handed her a key necklace. “As soon as you put

this on. Gloria said I should give it to you in person because you’d probably throw it out.”

“She was right. It’s hideous. I will take that scotch, though. In a to-go cup if you can.”

“You have to wear the necklace.”

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“Ew.” Addie winced. “Why would I do that?” “It says so in the invitation.”

“I get lots of invitations—can you be more specific?” “The one I slid under your door last week.”

“Never saw it.”

“If you didn’t get the invitation,” M.J. asked, “why are you here?” “I saw the PRIVATE EVENT sign and thought I’d score a free drink

before I went out.”

“She lives in the apartment upstairs,” Easton clarified. Then to Addie, “You have to stay if you want a drink. Those were my instruc- tions.”

“Stay for *what*?”

Easton removed the black envelope from his blazer. “Everything will be explained in this letter.”

Addie reached for the envelope. Easton offered her the key. “Those two aren’t wearing one,” she said.

Britt and M.J. quickly put on their necklaces. “You’ll get me that scotch?” she pressed.

Easton nodded.

“Fine.” Addie coiled the chain around her wrist and committed to the edge of the coffee table.

“Finally!” Jules snatched the envelope from Addie and popped the wax seal with her French-manicured nail. Then she inhaled her- self into perfect spinal alignment, cleared her throat, and read, “‘Dearest Easton, stop hovering and give the girls some privacy. They’ll holler when it’s time for you to return.’ ”

Easton bowed and backed out of the lounge. “As you wish.”

When the sound of his footsteps faded, Jules blinked back a tear and whispered, “That’s what Westley says to Buttercup in *The Prin-*

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*cess Bride*. It’s my favorite line from my favorite movie of all time and he just said it.”

“Nobody gives a shit,” Addie said. “Read the letter.”

Dear M.J., Britt, Addie, and Jules,

Question: What’s dirty, wet, and comes every fifteen minutes?

Answer: Our martinis!

So forgive the sloppy penmanship. We’re at a bar in Canal Saint-Martin where the croque monsieur is to die for and so is Thierry, the bilingual (and single!) sixty-six-year- old owner. Think iron footbridges, food markets, restaurants,

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boutiques, and the movie *Amelie*. And it’s only a five-minute

walk (ten with Dot’s bursitis) from our *magnifique* full-floor penthouse.

We thought vodka would make writing this letter easier. We were wrong. Nothing will make it easier. Because we have a fifty-four-year-old secret; a secret that contains hundreds of other secrets that contain hundreds more, and we are about to trust you with them all.

If the old saying is true and we are what we hide, then the four of us became who we are on Friday, May 18, 1962—the day Marjorie persuaded us to read *The Housewife’s Handbook on Selective Promiscuity*. The book was all about the author’s sex life and, well, it was so explicit, her publisher was sent to jail for selling pornographic literature. And if we, the good girls of Pearl Beach were caught reading it? Oh my. Gloria would have been banned from the PTA, Liddy excommunicated, Dotty

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left at the altar, and Marjorie’s bad reputation would have gotten a reputation. But did that scare us?

Damn straight it did.

So we wrapped the book inside the cover of *Prim: A Modern Woman’s Guide to Manners* and read it three more times. Why? Because the author, Rey Anthony, wrote about everything we felt and nothing we were allowed to admit. She had the same needs, curiosities, frustrations, and desires that we had. Turns out we weren’t sexual deviants after all; we were repressed! And that little green book of Marjorie’s set us free. So we wrapped and read hundreds more just like it and called our secret the Dirty Book Club.

We gathered every month, on the night of the full moon, in what we called “G-spots” because they’re the places that most husbands don’t bother with—the middle school roof, our Little League snack shack, the grocery store parking lot. While they thought we were at town hall meetings, we were naming their penises, copping to our fantasies, and whispering about the erotic passages in our

forbidden finds. We weren’t exactly burning our bras, but we were buying sexier ones. It was progress.

Today, sex is no longer taboo. The words *testicles* and *clitoris* won’t cause giggle fits. And you certainly don’t have to hide your erotica like we did. Today women are encouraged to “own” their sexuality: “Welcome to Bed Bath and Beyond. Interested in masturbating with us today? Then check out the new handheld MuscleProbe back massager on sale now in the wellness aisle . . .”

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So what can the DBC teach you that you don’t already know? You’d be surprised.

A dirty martini will make you admit things to other people, but a dirty book? That will make you admit things to yourself. Real things, honest things, things you wish you didn’t feel but you do. Each time you uncover one of these truths, a brick falls from the facade you’ve built around yourself and leaves a hole for the light to shine through.

Men are wonderful, but wood alone can’t cultivate that light. You need fire. You need girlfriends. Who are yours?

Our secret letters, our forbidden library—they belong to you now. Why have we named you the beneficiaries of

our bawdy pasts? Let the bricks fall where they may and you’ll figure it out.

Welcome to the Dirty Book Club.

The Ten Tenets

1. Trust each other.
2. Share everything when together; share nothing when apart.
3. Gather every full moon.
4. Wear your key.
5. Close each meeting with four lit cigarettes. Inhale and say: “The smoke entering our bodies carries secrets that will stay locked inside us forever.” Then turn the key around your necks and exhale. Four beams of smoke should cross, blend, and rise up as one. (Is it schmaltzy? Yes it is. We were kids when we wrote it. Forgive us. And about the cigarettes: light a goddamn

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smoke once a month. One puff won’t kill you. We’re still here, aren’t we?)

1. We had a rule: Whoever chooses the book, writes about the meeting . We thought it would be neat to read the notes when we were older and then burn them during some dramatic ceremony in the desert. Then

we got older and realized we didn’t want to relive our pasts and the desert is too hot. Besides, everyone we were hiding from is gone. So the letters are yours. You could add to them by writing your own, but we know how anti-paper you modern girls are, so we’ll let this one go. All we ask is that you start each meeting by reading them aloud.

1. Your books are with Easton. (In boxes, of course.) Make sure the seals have not been broken. He’s a curious one.
2. Membership is optional, substitutes are not. If one of you quits, all of you quit.
3. Once you have agreed to the above, Easton will bring the first box.
4. We saw Thierry first. He’s ours!

Times have changed, women have not. You’ll see.

—The DBC

ADDIE UNRAVELED THE key from her wrist and slammed it on the coffee table. “I’m out.”

Jules’s eyelashes fluttered. “You’re leaving?”

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“There is no DBC. The club, the secrets, the whole sisterhood- of-my-traveling-aunts crap—it’s bullshit. They made the whole thing up.”

“Why would they do that?” M.J. asked with a pinch of irritation. “Isn’t it obvious?” Addie rolled her eyes as they shook their

heads, no. “They want you to be my new best friends.”

“Us?” Britt swiped her bangs to the side. “What’s so special about *us*?”

“Nothing. That’s the point.”

They watched Addie nibble on her thumbnail, waiting for a punch line that never came.

M.J. thought of the team-building retreat she and her cowork- ers went on last winter, and how they were asked to describe her in a single word. They used: *witty*, *inspiring*, *talented*, *stylish*, *emaciated*, and *tone-deaf*. Now, only a few months later, she was *nothing special*? Is that how California saw her? Did unemployment matte her glossy finish or had she been born matte and *City* made her shine? “Explain.”

Addie leaned back on her elbows and lifted her face to the chan- delier. “You have a disease called ‘settling down,’ and Gloria wants me to catch it.”

“I haven’t settled down!”

“I have,” Jules said, “and I couldn’t be happier.”

“Same,” Britt added. “What’s wrong with settling down?” “The husband, the kids, Costco.”

“I love Costco,” Britt said.

“Yeah, well, while you’re pushing your giant cart through their giant aisles, I’ll be in Europe having sex with hot foreigners who can’t pronounce my name.”

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“You’re leaving the women’s clinic?” M.J. asked. “You know where I work?”

“You told me.”

Addie’s icy expression softened; melted by the heat of humilia- tion, or maybe, the warmth that comes from being heard. “I’m giv- ing my notice at the end of the summer and getting as far away from Pearl Beach as American Airlines and its Oneworld Alliance will take me.”

“Why?” Jules asked, as if offended. “What’s wrong with Pearl Beach?”

“Autopilot, that’s what. Everyone over thirty has the exact same life—marriage, babies, rescue dog, spin class, date night, school fund-raisers, girls’ weekends in the desert . . . I swear, if I go to one more bridal shower I’m going to shoot myself in the face with a Crate and Barrel registry gun. I need more.” Addie stood, moved by the force of her own conviction. “No offense.”

“Lots taken,” Britt muttered while checking her phone, a watched pot that refused to boil.

“So you think Gloria would create a fake club just to keep you in town.”

Addie popped open her clutch and pulled out a tube of red gloss. “You don’t know Gloria like I do.” She drew the spongy wand across her lips, then kissed the top of her hand to blot. “I grew up without a mother, so she was kind of it,” Addie said. “And she was a saint. So were Aunt Liddy and Aunt Dot. But I don’t need a mother anymore. I need a scotch.” She peered narrowly toward the front of the shop. “Easton!”

“You didn’t have a mother?” Jules asked, hand to heart.

“I was born, she died ten minutes later, her best friends took care

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of me while my dad was at work, the end,” Addie said. Not knowing that her words hit M.J. like a punch between the ribs. Because, yes, mothers did die, and it sucked in ways that Addie’s glib resignation couldn’t begin to describe.

“Do you think they wrote about her in their letters?” Jules asked.

“Maybe she was a member,” Britt added. “You know, back in the early days.”

“Okay,” Jules said, “I have got to read those letters.”

M.J. was equally intrigued: the secrets, the books, the history, the possibility of friends. But these girls? They seemed better suited for Oprah’s Book Club than Gloria’s. And what if she ended up going back to New York? The eighth tenet said, if one quits, everyone quits. It wouldn’t be fair.

Outside, a car horn honked.

“There’s my date!” Addie announced.

“David?” M.J. asked, remembering Gloria’s son and how he had bathroom sex with Addie at Leo’s shiva.

“David went back to Colorado,” Addie said, closing her clutch with a definitive snap.

“Oh, I thought he was your boyfriend.” “Nope, just a buddy.”

Another honk, this one longer than the first. “I better go.”

“Hold on a minute,” Jules said. “Are you really dating a horn honker?”

Confused, Addie nodded.

“Oh, shugah, you can’t. That man needs to go to cotillion and learn some manners.”

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“As long as he hits clit-illion first,” Addie said, fluffing her cleav- age and then turning to leave.

“Wait!” Jules said. “What about the you know what?”

“You mean the fake club?” Addie called over her shoulder. “I told you, I can’t do it. I’m leaving in September.”

*I might be heading back to New York, so I can’t do it, either*, M.J. wanted to say, mostly to show Addie that she *was* special, that she too was allergic to Costco. But that little girl tugging on her dress wanted to give the club a chance.