

NANTUCKET
SECOND *A Novel*
CHANGES

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1

Claire Shipman stopped walking to admire the sunset's pink and orange streaks that painted the sky over Nantucket Harbor. She slid her hands into the cozy pockets of her puffy jacket and shivered. It wasn't that cold for late March, but it was windy. She didn't mind though and took a deep breath of the crisp, salty air. She'd been walking the beach for a half hour and was almost back to her mother's house. It had been quite a week. She was grateful to be home, staying with her mother for the foreseeable future. She was in uncharted waters after her husband of seventeen years asked for a divorce the same day she discovered she was unexpectedly pregnant.

When she reached her mother's house, she recognized Rachel's car in the driveway. Claire checked the time. It was a few minutes before seven. Rachel was early, and she was

never early. They'd been best friends for as long as Claire could remember, since they were in elementary school on Nantucket. After college, Claire, along with most of their graduating class, moved off-island. But Rachel stayed and married Jared Thompson, her high school boyfriend.

Rachel and Jared started dating when they were both fifteen, and everyone thought they'd break up when they went to college. Everyone except Claire. She wasn't surprised that Rachel never wanted to date anyone else. Rachel and Jared were best friends and perfect together. They married right after graduation, had two kids, both of whom were in college now, and Jared ran his family's real estate and property management business. Rachel worked in the office a few days a week.

Claire had moved to Manhattan and shared an apartment in Murray Hill with two other girls. It was tiny and more than she could easily afford, but it was everything she'd dreamed of. She'd landed an assistant to an assistant job at *Vogue* magazine, and while the pay was horrible and most of it went toward rent, she felt incredibly lucky each day as she went to work. She worked long hours, but the work was so glamorous and inspiring. Being surrounded by fashion all day and writing about it was amazing. She also handled plenty of less exciting assistant work, like grabbing coffee for her bosses, but she didn't care.

And it was on one of those coffee runs, just a few weeks into her new job, that she first met Ellis. He literally ran into her as he was rushing into the coffee shop and she

was juggling a tray of assorted drinks. They all went tumbling down the front of his sleek suit. Claire found herself apologizing, even though it had been his fault. His wavy brown hair, slightly crooked grin, and dancing hazel eyes made her catch her breath. He'd insisted it was all his fault and bought her a new round of coffees. They chatted while they waited, and the spark was instant. So when he suggested dinner, she'd happily accepted.

After a whirlwind six months of dating, Ellis proposed, and they married a year later. He was eight years older and turned thirty the year they married. The wedding was on Nantucket in June, and Rachel was her maid of honor. Rachel liked Ellis but had asked Claire if she was really sure, as they hadn't been together all that long before deciding to marry. Claire had no doubts though. Ellis dazzled her in every way. He was fun, outgoing, and successful. He did something in finance that Claire didn't fully understand, but it paid well. A year after they married and a month before Claire gave birth to their daughter, Lily, they moved to the Upper East Side, to a roomy three-bedroom apartment on Fifth Avenue, near Central Park and the Met.

It was a wonderful place to live, and for many years, Claire was happily married. Rachel visited at least once a year, and they did all the touristy things—went to Broadway shows and to sample sales and for long walks in the park. And every summer, Claire and Lily spent two months on Nantucket at her mother's house. Ellis usually flew out to join them every other weekend and for a week

in July. Her mother made the trip to Manhattan at least once a year as well. It was an easy flight from Nantucket after a quick stop in Boston. Claire never imagined then that at age thirty-nine, she'd be living on Nantucket again—single and pregnant.

She took a deep breath as she pushed open the door to her mother's house. Rachel knew what had happened. She'd been one of the first calls Claire had made. But they hadn't seen each other yet, and Claire knew she'd be talking through it with Rachel again—trying to make sense of it all.

She stepped into the kitchen, her favorite room in her mother's house and where they spent most of their time. Marsha Whitman loved to cook and had remodeled the kitchen when she inherited the house from Claire's grandmother a few years ago. It was mostly creamy white, with shimmery pale blue glass subway tiles on the walls. The countertops were honed Calacatta marble, which wasn't all that practical in a kitchen that was used often, but her mother had always wanted marble.

The island was the star of the kitchen. It was V-shaped with two levels, with the stovetop on the lower level so her mother could cook and have a view of the ocean while chatting with people seated along either side. Rachel was sitting there now and stood when Claire walked in. She rushed over and pulled her in for a hug, and Claire's eyes immediately welled up. She'd thought she was all cried out. When they pulled apart, she noticed that Rachel's eyes were damp too.

“It’s so good to see you. How are you?” Rachel’s worry was evident.

Claire smiled and tried to reassure both of them. “I’m okay. I’m glad to be home.”

“Have a seat and relax. The buffalo chicken dip is ready.” Her mother pulled a pan out of the oven and set it on the island counter while Claire shrugged off her coat and settled into the chair next to Rachel. Her mother set a bowl of tortilla chips next to the dip. “I picked up a bottle of nonalcoholic chardonnay. Do you want to try a glass?”

“Sure.” Claire appreciated that her mother was fussing over her. It was nice to be home and to feel loved and taken care of.

Her mother handed her a chilled glass of wine, and they all tapped glasses as they often did when they got together. Although this time, they weren’t exactly celebrating anything. But still, the familiar gesture lifted Claire’s spirits. Rachel and her mother were drinking Claire’s favorite chardonnay, Bread and Butter. She took a sip of the nonalcoholic one, expecting it to be terrible, and was pleasantly surprised that it wasn’t awful.

They dug into the dip, and after catching up on local gossip, Claire’s mother announced that she was heading out.

“I’m off to meet Carol for a drink downtown. When you two are ready to eat, everything is done and keeping warm in the oven. The guac and salsa are in the fridge.” They were having turkey tacos.

“Thanks, Mom. Are you sure you don’t want to eat with

us first?” Claire knew there would be plenty of food. There always was.

“No. I’m sure we’ll have a bite at LoLa. I’ll see you later, honey.”

Claire knew her mother was giving her space to talk with Rachel. Plus, Claire had already gone through it all with her, trying to make sense of what had happened. Her mother had been sympathetic, of course, but she didn’t understand what had gone wrong in Claire’s marriage.

“Sometimes people grow apart,” was her conclusion. And it was something her mother was familiar with. She and Claire’s father had divorced when Claire started high school. He hadn’t cheated, but neither of them had been happy for several years, and her father was anxious to move off-island. He was a union electrician and went to Boston, where there was more steady work and where his brother lived. Boston was close enough that Claire saw him every other weekend at first and then one weekend a month after the first year. Even though it wasn’t all that far to Boston, it was still a bit of a project to get there, as she usually flew and he picked her up at Logan Airport.

Claire had mostly loved her weekends visiting her dad. He’d lived just outside Boston in Everett for years, and they almost always went into town—to have lunch or dinner at one of the many Italian restaurants in the North End or to a baseball game at Fenway or basketball or hockey at the Garden. Her dad loved sports, and it was fun to share that with him. He’d remarried a few years ago and moved to a

two-bedroom condo in the Back Bay. Claire hadn't talked to him yet—it was still too fresh. And she knew he'd invite her to visit anytime, and she would, but not just yet.

“So start from the beginning and walk me through everything,” Rachel said, as Claire knew she would.

“I can't believe it's only been a week since it happened.” Claire had only just flown into Nantucket the day before. She took a deep breath and went back in time to a little over a week ago.

Claire and Ellis entertained often. Claire usually enjoyed arranging events like this one, which was to raise money for a local charity that helped women start over and provided them with temporary shelter and business clothes for interviewing. They were also celebrating a huge win for Ellis's employer. They'd recently landed a new client who was so happy with their work that he'd doubled the amount of his initial investment in their funds.

Claire worked with a caterer that she'd used many times before to design a tempting menu of passed appetizers and a carving station. They also had freshly rolled sushi and signature cocktails. A florist delivered several arrangements of mostly white flowers, which were scattered around their kitchen and huge living room, which was open concept with plenty of room for thirty to forty people to mingle. French doors in the living room opened into a library that

Ellis sometimes used as a home office. Bookcases filled with leather-bound classics lined the walls, and the dark wood floors gleamed in the candlelight. Several buttery-soft leather club chairs scattered around the room offered quieter spots for breakaway conversations.

Claire had been looking forward to the party. But in the week prior, she started feeling uneasy and even a bit queasy. Things hadn't been good with Ellis for well over a year. And if she was being honest with herself, it had been even longer, but she just hadn't realized that they were growing apart until it became obvious.

Ellis had always been a workaholic, but almost two years ago, he started putting in longer hours than usual, sometimes coming home at eight or even nine o'clock. He always called her ahead of time to let her know he was working late, so she never thought much of it. She knew it was the nature of the business. There were also the nights that he wine and dined clients and stayed out even later. He'd tell her all about those dinners the next day, the wines they'd had and the incredible steaks and the after-dinner bourbons. Those dinners were more frequent this past year, and he didn't share the details with her as often. In retrospect, there were signs that she'd failed to recognize at the time.

So she was aware that she and Ellis were spending less time together. He spent more time working, and she had Lily and all her many activities. Claire also kept busy with the group of moms she'd befriended. They were mostly stay-at-home mothers with husbands who had important,

well-paying jobs. They belonged to the same clubs, worked on the same charity events, went to the same book club.

It was mostly fun, and Claire had made some close friends, but none as close as Rachel. They'd never lost touch and spoke almost every day. They'd chatted the morning of the event over coffee before Rachel headed off to work. Claire had told her then how she'd been feeling off and wasn't as excited as usual.

"I'm just exhausted. I think I might be coming down with something. I'm hoping the nausea will calm down some before the party."

"Nausea. Is there a chance you might be...?" Rachel didn't say the word, but Claire knew what she meant and laughed at the thought.

"It's doubtful. I'm on the pill for one thing. And I don't think we're having sex often enough these days for it to be a possibility."

"When was the last time?" Rachel pressed.

Claire thought for a moment. "A little over a month ago. I was finally feeling myself again after having a sinus infection, and we went out to dinner and had some good wine." Ellis had just closed a new client and was in a celebratory mood. His excitement was contagious, and Claire relaxed, and they had a great night all around.

"Okay. But were you taking an antibiotic? That can cancel birth control, I've heard."

"Oh. I never thought of that." Claire had a sudden sinking feeling. She went to Duane Reade immediately after

the call and bought two pregnancy tests. And then she put them on her bathroom counter and went about her day. She was feeling a little better, so she was hopeful that it was just a stomach bug. She wasn't ready to take the test until later that day, after she'd showered and changed and was carefully applying her makeup. Ellis was on his way home, and their guests were due to arrive in forty-five minutes. She opened the first pregnancy test, peed on the stick, and waited.

When she saw the result, she immediately opened the second test, went through the motions, and waited for those results. The second test confirmed what the first one said—she was pregnant.

Claire considered telling Ellis before the party but couldn't bring herself to do it immediately. He'd arrived home in a hurry and quickly showered and changed before people started arriving. It still hadn't fully sunk in that it was real, and Claire wanted his full attention. So she waited. She sipped club soda with a splash of cranberry and lemon and smiled and made small talk all night. Finally, a little after eleven, the last guests left.

One of them was a pretty young woman who Claire hadn't seen before. Ellis had introduced her as Rebecca, the office's new receptionist. It was her first job out of college, and Ellis had gushed that she was doing a great job. He'd mentioned something about her father owning a big company but wanting Rebecca to get experience somewhere else before joining his firm. Rebecca basked in the compliment,

and Claire had thought it was cute at the time. Rebecca looked about the same age as Claire had been when she first started working at the magazine—when everything about living in the city was all shiny and new. When Rebecca said goodbye, she didn't look at Claire, only at Ellis, and her gaze lingered for a long moment before she left.

"I think she might have a crush on you," Claire teased him.

She expected him to laugh, but instead he looked away, then ran his hand through his hair. He seemed uncomfortable, so Claire decided to change the subject.

"We need to talk actually," she began.

He looked relieved, which surprised her. "I agree. I've been waiting for the right time to talk to you too."

"You have? What about?" She began to feel uneasy again as Ellis paced back and forth in the room that still needed to be cleaned up, dishes washed and things put away.

"I think we should consider a divorce."

His words knocked the breath out of her. She knew things hadn't been great between them for a long time. But she'd assumed it was a natural evolution of a marriage. When she met with her mom group, most of them had similar issues—their husbands worked too much, and the romance was gone.

"Why?" she'd managed to ask as a terrible thought rushed in. "Is there someone else?"

Ellis looked away and couldn't meet her eyes. He avoided answering that part of her question. He sighed heavily. "It

just seems like we want different things these days. Like we've grown apart. It happens."

Claire frowned. She didn't disagree, but she sensed there was more. "Is there someone else?" she asked again.

He nodded. "Someone at work. I didn't mean for it to happen, but we spend so much time together, and she makes me feel young and invincible."

Claire's jaw dropped. "Is it Rebecca?"

He ran his hand through his hair again. "It is. I didn't expect it to go anywhere, but she's crazy about me for some reason."

"So that's why you want a divorce, to be with a twenty-two-year-old receptionist?" Claire felt an intense rush of pain at the betrayal. "How long has this been going on?"

"Only for about six months or so. I thought it would be a quick fling. I know that's horrible of me, but I didn't intend for it to turn into anything serious."

"But it has?" Obviously.

He nodded. "Yes, and we just found out a week ago that she's pregnant."

Claire felt unsteady and grabbed hold of a chair by the island and sat. Ellis sounded excited about Rebecca's pregnancy. A wave of intense sadness rushed over her, followed by anger.

"What do you want me to say to that? 'Congratulations?'"

He flinched at her bitter tone. "No, and I'm sorry. I know it's really shitty of me. But you have to admit, things haven't been good with us for a long time."

She nodded. “Yes, that’s true. Especially these last six months while you’ve been sleeping with your receptionist.” She narrowed her eyes. “Was there anyone before her?”

“No, of course not.” Ellis couldn’t look at her though, and she knew it was likely that Rebecca wasn’t the first fling he’d had in recent years. She felt stupid that she’d never suspected a thing.

“Well, I have some news to share too. Remember our fun night about a month ago, when we went to that cozy Italian restaurant?” She paused, and Ellis nodded, waiting for her to continue. “Rebecca’s not the only one who’s pregnant. I took a test right before the party.”

Ellis’s jaw dropped. “Seriously?” He ran his hand through his hair and started pacing again. After a long, uncomfortable moment of silence, he stopped and faced her. “Okay, let’s try to work this out. I want to be there for you and our baby.”

Claire shot him a withering glance. “And what about Rebecca?”

“I’ll figure something out. I’m so sorry, Claire.” He did seem sorry, but it was far too late for that.

“If you think I’d give you another chance after this, you’re crazy. Go be with Rebecca. And you can clean up this mess too. I’m going to the Four Seasons.”

She’d stormed out of the room then, quickly packed an overnight bag, called the hotel to make a reservation, and then called an Uber. Forty-five minutes later, she was in a hot bath and on the phone with her mother first, and

then Rachel. Both of them had told her to come home to Nantucket. She'd spent the next week packing, and she'd told Ellis to spend the week elsewhere. She'd broken the news to Lily the next day, and she was devastated. She was also torn whether to stay and finish out the school year or go with Claire to Nantucket and start at a new school.

"How's Lily doing?" Rachel asked.

"She's having a hard time with it. She's not speaking to Ellis."

"Good. I bet he hates that."

Ellis adored Lily, and he hated when anyone was mad at him. Claire knew it was probably difficult for both of them right now. "I told her she's welcome to come here at any time and go to Nantucket High School."

"That's a big change."

Claire's eyes welled up again. "I know. I wanted her to have the choice to finish out the year. I'd love to have her here. I just couldn't stay there."

"No. Of course not," Rachel reassured her and then changed the subject. "So did you bring everything? All your fancy clothes, shoes, and purses?"

Claire grinned. "Yes. I shipped it all here and spent most of yesterday unpacking the boxes and storing everything in one of the spare bedrooms. Not that I'll need most of it anymore." Life on Nantucket was more casual.

"There are still events here. Charity things at the country club and all those festivals—the film and wine festivals are coming up in May and June."

“That’s true. Do you still belong to the country club?” Nantucket had several really nice country clubs.

Rachel nodded. “Yes, Jared has gotten into golf. He plays in a men’s league. He finally convinced me to join the ladies’ league, and it’s actually fun. You’ll have to come and play with us sometime. Or at least come to an event.”

“Sure, that sounds fun.” Claire’s stomach flipped. The nausea attacks caught her by surprise. They were not limited to morning. She reached for a tortilla chip, and after a few minutes, the feeling passed. The thought of golfing was not appealing in the slightest.

“Oh, and I thought you might like to join my book club. We meet the third Wednesday of every month. We’re reading a classic, Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca*. Have you read it?”

Claire cringed at the name. “No, I haven’t. I’ve always meant to. I’d love to join you. I’ll head to Mitchell’s Book Corner tomorrow and pick up a copy. That will give me something to focus on.” She smiled. “I’ll have plenty of time to read.”

“Good. Did you and Ellis talk at all about your settlement? Will you be okay, money-wise?” Rachel asked.

“We didn’t talk about it, but I would assume it will be fine and fair. I didn’t want to go there yet. I did call a lawyer though, here on the island. It’s someone my mother knows. Sloane is supposedly a shark. We’re meeting next week.”

Rachel nodded. “Okay. I’ve heard Sloane is good too.”

Claire grinned. “I also cleaned out our home safe and

took all the cash that was there. It was only a thousand dollars, but it felt good to stuff it into my purse.”

Rachel laughed. “You still have all your credit cards too?”

“I do. I was thinking I might want to find a job of some sort. It will be nice to earn a little money. I haven’t worked in years though. I always kept busy in the city, but here it feels like I will have a lot of time to fill.”

“Well, you could always sell some of your designer stuff if you need money fast,” Rachel joked.

“I could,” Claire agreed. “Hopefully I’ll never have to do that. I’m sure I’ll get a fair settlement from Ellis—alimony and child support.”

They spent the rest of the evening eating her mother’s delicious turkey tacos and chatting about everything under the sun. There was never a shortage of conversation when she and Rachel got together. By the time she left, a little before nine, Claire was happily exhausted, and while still somewhat in shock about the turn her life had taken, she felt a sense of calm and peace to be home on Nantucket.

2

“It’s still legal here in Mass.” Carol picked up her pinkish margarita. She liked it on the rocks, hint of salt on the rim, Grand Marnier instead of triple sec, and a generous splash of Chambord liqueur. Marsha often ordered it that way too, as it elevated a basic margarita. The Chambord gave it just enough delicious raspberry flavor without being too sweet. Margaritas were a festive drink though, and Marsha was feeling a bit more serious. She splurged on a glass of Hall, a complicated organic cabernet with a smooth finish.

They were sitting at the small bar at LoLa 41 on Beach Street. It was one of their favorite bistros and quiet on a cool night in March.

“I know. But Claire didn’t even mention that as a possibility. It won’t be easy, now that they’re getting divorced,

but she has my support.” Marsha sipped her cabernet and thought for a moment. “I doubt that even crossed Claire’s mind. You know how long they tried after Lily. She didn’t think it was possible, so in a way, this seems like a miracle. Though the timing could be better. She’s still reeling from how Ellis blindsided her.”

Carol pursed her lips at his name and lifted her margarita. “You know I never liked him.”

Marsha smiled. “No, you never did. You thought he was too smooth.”

“*Slick* is a better word. There was just something too polished about him. His hair was always locked into position and never moved. Did you ever notice that?”

Marsha laughed. “Claire said he used more hair products than she did to get that effect. Ellis does have good hair.” It was thick and had a bit of a wave. At Claire’s wedding, Marsha noticed that most of the guys he worked with styled their hair similarly. And she knew Ellis spent a lot of money on expensive suits. He’d told Claire it was essential, as his role was client facing.

“How is she?” Carol asked.

“Still in shock. She told me that things hadn’t been great with them for over a year now. It sounds like they were growing apart, moving in different directions. But still, she had no idea what Ellis was up to. It’s a lot to process, especially as his young girlfriend is also pregnant.”

Carol shook her head. “That’s ridiculous.”

“It’s a mess,” Marsha agreed.

“But at least she has you. It will be nice to have her here. And it will be good for her.”

“I think so too. She said she wants to find work, but I think that will be more of a challenge than she realizes. Nantucket doesn’t have anywhere near the same kind of opportunities as New York. Especially this time of year. And she hasn’t needed to work since she married Ellis.”

“She did some stuff for the magazines though, didn’t she?”

Marsha nodded. “She did right after she had Lily. That slowed to the occasional writing assignment. I don’t think she’s done anything in several years now. But maybe she can start up again.”

They shifted the conversation as their food arrived, an order of truffle fries and two sushi rolls, one spicy tuna and one shrimp.

“How’s Stu?” Marsha asked.

Carol’s eyes softened, and her smile lit up her face. “He’s great.”

Carol’s second husband, Stu, was the love of her life. She’d met him a dozen or so years ago when she’d thought she’d never find love again and had announced to Marsha that she was resigned to being a cat lady. The following week, she met Stu at a friend’s Sunday football gathering. He was on Nantucket for a building job. He worked as a general contractor and had an established business on Cape Cod. They’d hit it off immediately, Stu focused on finding more projects on Nantucket, and there was no shortage of work. They moved in together a year later.

As they finished up, Carol asked her about Warren.

“Your plans are on hold now. How do you feel about that?” Carol set her drink down and watched Marsha closely.

Marsha picked her wine up and took her last sip.

“My plans can wait for now.”