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Written by Cathy Kelly

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CATHY KELLY

Once in a Lifetime

HARPER

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For Dylan, Murray and John, with all my love

Prologue

Star Bluestone had talked to bees all her life. She talked to her flowers too, murmuring to the rare yellow poppies she'd nurtured from seeds gathered in the old Italianate garden thirty miles away across the Wicklow hills. She and the young Kiwi gardener there had such great chats, he walking her through the orchard and reaching up to cradle a baby apple bud the way another man might touch a woman.

He understood that people who loved the soil talked to their plants and to the bees whose careful industry made their flowers bloom. Even though he was only thirty to Star's sixty years, he didn't think she was an eccentric old lady. Rather, he was impressed by Star's encyclopaedic knowledge of plant life. His earnest, handsome face became animated when they talked.

When she watched this kind boy, Star always remembered fondly that good gardeners make good lovers. Nobody capable of the tenderness required to separate delicate fronds of fern for replanting would ever be heavy-handed with another person's body.

It had been a few years since Star had lain in a man's

arms. She'd had many lovers, but the one she would remember for the rest of her life, the one whose memory was imprinted upon her skin, hadn't been a gardener. He'd been a poet, although that wasn't how most people knew him. To the world, he was a conventional man, handsome, certainly, with beautiful manners and an important job waiting for him. To her, he was the man who sat with her under the stars and recited poetry as he traced his fingers along her face and talked about their future.

That had been over thirty-five years ago. Star talked to flowers and her beloved bees in their white hives back then too.

When she'd been growing up, her school friends hadn't understood why Star did this, but they didn't question it. After all, Star was different in most things. So was her mother. *Their* mothers didn't grow herbs with such skill or know how to brew potions of feverfew and camomile to soothe menstrual cramps, nor did they stand gazing up at the Midsummer moon.

Eliza Bluestone did, and that it picked her out from all the other mothers in the small town of Ardagh was both a blessing and a curse to Star. The blessing was the knowledge her mother gave her. The curse was that knowing so much made her separate from all her friends.

Eliza mightn't have *told* her daughter all the wisdom in her huge, midnight-dark eyes, but that knowledge somehow transferred itself to Star anyhow.

When she was a lithe young girl of twenty, and wanted to dance with her friends and flirt with young men, being wise was an impediment. She just *knew* that few people would be lucky enough to meet their soul mate in a pub ten miles from their home. Finding the right man to be her husband was going to be hard because the Bluestone family – which meant Star and her mother – were hardly

conventional and it would take a strong man to love them. In the same way, she knew that her friends would not all have the joy and happiness they expected in their lives, because not everybody could. It was obvious. To imagine anything else was folly.

Though, Star, like her mother, couldn't actually predict what would happen in the world, she had enough wisdom to understand the rules of the universe. While her friends threw themselves blindly into everything and were surprised when the man they'd met at the club hadn't called, or shocked that other people could be bitchy, Star was never surprised by anything.

As she grew older, Star's ability with her flowers and her garden grew. Talking to her plants wasn't the whole trick: caring for them with reverence was and Star did that, plucking weeds from around the orange-petalled Fire Dragon so it could breathe again, moving the old red-currant bush away from the dry soil beside the shed, pausing occasionally in her labours to listen. For Star loved music. She never grew tired of hearing the distant singing of the church choir, even though she had never set foot in the building – this was another thing that set her apart from her friends. Star's church was the trees and the mountains and the mighty roar of the sea. And although she loved church music, she loved the music of nature better. The song of the bees was, her mother had taught her, the Earth's song. Melodic and magnetic, with the bees moving to some ancient dance they'd moved to long before man came calling. And was there anything more uplifting than the sound of pigeons under the eaves, skittering about and squabbling as they sheltered from the rain?

It was raining now. As Star lay in bed, she could hear the raindrops bouncing off the window panes. As usual, she had woken at six a.m.; in summer, she would have risen

immediately to make the most of the golden sunrise, but on this cold February morning, dawn was at least two hours away – and it promised to be a murky one.

Danu and Bridget, her two cats, stretched on the bed beside her, making their morning noises. Bridget was a showy white ball of fluff, her magnificent fur requiring lots of brushing. Danu, the smaller of the two, was a rescued tabby who'd been given to Star the year before, the moment exactly right because Moppy, Bridget's sister, had just died. Life had an odd way of doing that, Star knew: giving you what you needed when you needed it. Not *wanted* – your want didn't come into it. Want and need were very different things.

Star lay in bed for a while, stroking the two cats, and staring out of her window at the dark shapes of the trees and shrubs in her garden. She could see the red maple tree she'd planted when she was twenty and lost in love.

'Plant something to remind you of this,' her mother had said, and Star had been surprised.

'I'll always remember,' she'd said simply.

Everyone said she was at the peak of her beauty then, lush like her mother's precious peonies, full-lipped, and with hair of spun gold – the Bluestone women always had golden hair, no matter what their fathers looked like – that fell about her slender waist. She'd secretly picked out her wedding dress with her best friend, Trish, and she knew that Danny and she would be so happy if they rented the house on the hill road. From there they could see the town and the sea, and he could be at his father's garage, where he was one of the mechanics, in five minutes.

Still, she had liked the idea of a tree for them both and planted the red maple.

But, 'I'm too young to settle down,' Danny had told her not long after the tree was planted, when its roots had barely

had time to unfurl into the earth and Star was still patting it each morning with joy at all it represented.

‘That’s not what you said before,’ Star replied, knowing in a painful instant that the wedding dress, a jewel she’d mistakenly thought was meant for her, would remain on the rail in Brenda’s Boutique.

‘It’s my mother,’ Danny said reluctantly. ‘It’s about the business, too. She said –’

‘She said you needed a better wife if you want to expand the garage. She said she didn’t want you marrying one of those atheist Bluestone women with their strange herbs and their unnatural hair.’

Star wasn’t bitter towards Danny. It wasn’t his fault. She should have known that he wasn’t a strong enough man to turn the tide of public opinion. Even in the mid seventies, when the rest of the Western world seemed to be enjoying free love and the Pill, the more conservative parts of Ardagh ate fish on Fridays, blessed themselves when they passed the church and remained unsure of the Bluestones.

Old Father Hely, the parish priest, and Sister Anne, headmistress of the Immaculate Mother of God Convent, had both been remarkably understanding about Eliza’s preference for her daughter not to practise the Catholic traditions. Learn them, yes. Eliza was all for learning and tolerance. She was fascinated by all religions: Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, Buddhism, everything out there. But not practise. Eliza saw the central truth in the world around her, a world that had been there longer than any man-made religion.

‘We’ll take care of Star in school,’ Sister Anne said firmly. ‘You might not come to our church, but you understand Christianity, Eliza. I know how kind you are to those who need it. There are plenty here in town who trot along to

Mass every day and still don't love their neighbour,' she added grimly.

'Indeed, you're right, Sister Anne. Nobody in this parish will ever hear me say a word against you,' agreed Father Hely, who'd studied too much Christian history, from the Crusades to the Inquisition, to be doctrinaire when it came to unusual Eliza Bluestone with her earthly wisdom and her home-made elderflower wine.

However, not everyone in Ardagh agreed with Father Hely and Sister Anne, and many of the people who went to Sunday Mass and hung holy water fonts inside their front doors disliked the Bluestones because they were different. And clearly Danny's mother fell into this category. Star hadn't realised before quite how strong this dislike was. She herself didn't care what or whom anyone worshipped and was astonished that other people could object to her views.

'You'll always have your tree,' Eliza told Star the night Danny broke the news there would be no wedding. Mother and daughter sat in the hand-hewn walnut love-seat in their garden that overlooked the sea, and sipped rosehip tea.

Star gazed gloomily at the tree. And then looked around at all the other trees in the five-acre plot. The house, a higgledy-piggledy concoction of white clapboard with slanting roofs and an oriel window, was surrounded by trees: smooth-skinned, tall ashes, swooping willows, a graceful plane tree, a crowd of copper beeches by the vegetable garden, and another sharp-leaved maple that turned blood red in the autumn.

'We have lots of trees,' she said, suddenly understanding. She got up to touch the other maple. 'You once said this was my dad's tree?'

Star's father had been the sort of man who preferred

travelling to settling down. India was his favourite place in the whole world, especially the beaches of Goa, where a man could lie in the sun and not have to think about anything except what the human race was *for* and other philosophical questions.

‘I loved your father,’ Eliza said.

‘But he left?’

‘I planted the tree when we were in love,’ Eliza answered.

‘Then he left.’ Star got it. ‘What about the other trees?’ she asked, wondering how they’d never discussed this before. But then, her mother was a gentle and slow teacher: the lesson came when the lesson came, it would never be forced.

‘Two more I planted, both before you were born, before I met your father.’

Three loves.

‘And all these other trees?’ Star gestured.

‘My mother’s, her mother’s, all the Bluestone women have planted trees for as long as we’ve lived here.’

Star laughed then and ran around the garden, touching her hands to the bark of each of the precious trees. She loved this link with her female ancestors. It was like holding hands with all of them, listening to them laugh and talk, strong women who’d seen so much.

The trees, plants and flowers of her wild garden that gave such comfort to Star eventually provided the raw material for her livelihood. She designed and made tapestries embroidered and appliquéd with wools and silks hand-dyed from natural dyes. Star’s eye for nature meant her pictures were landscapes of hills and woodland glades, sometimes with a brightly plumaged bird peering out from the undergrowth, or a blossoming creamy magnolia positioned against a backdrop of verdant green, even the misty shape of a unicorn in the distance. For many years, she had sold her work in a tiny craft shop on the outskirts of Wicklow town and just

about made a living out of it. Then someone had brought one of her tapestries to the attention of a buyer in Kenny's department store in Ardagh.

Kenny's were always on the lookout for new talent, the woman said, and Star's exquisite artisan works would complement their homes department perfectly. The store didn't deal in paintings: too complicated and time-consuming, but the Bluestone Tapestries were exactly what they were looking for. Within six months, Star's tiny business had become a thriving cottage industry. That was five years ago. She had three employees now and they'd been working flat-out to complete their latest order for Kenny's, which was where Star was bound that morning.

There were twenty hangings of all sizes ready in their moss-green tissue paper. She was dying to see what Lena, the buyer and one of the store's directors, would think of her new departure, a large mermaid tapestry. Star hadn't worked on many sea pictures before: the pigments were hard to make. It was easy to mix up rich loden greens and dusty ochres, but the pure blues and aquas for sea pictures had been more difficult. When she'd got into sea tapestries, she'd finally begun using hand-made dyes bought from artisans, although she still used the heads of pure blue hydrangeas to make rich blues, and her blackberries summoned up an inky purple that spoke of the ocean depths. Star had been in two minds about selling the mermaid tapestry at all. It would have looked so perfect on the wall in the kitchen, under the rail where the copper pots hung. But she'd hardened her heart and packed it up. The Bluestone Mermaid, with her foamy sea-green eyes and skeins of pale hair, needed to be out spinning her magic on someone else's wall.

Star fed the cats, then made herself breakfast of fruit and yogurt, and stewed a cup of mint tea which she drank in the

tiny conservatory. Breakfast over, she dressed. Her toilette never took long: she would shower, brush hair that was still as blonde as it ever had been, albeit with many strands of white, and apply a little kohl on her dark eyes. It was an unusual combination: pale hair, olive skin and dark eyes. Her old friend Trish, whom she sometimes bumped into in the supermarket, had grown round, and always wanted to know how Star remained as slim as ever.

‘It’s nothing I’m doing,’ Star would say. ‘My mother was the same, you remember.’

Trish nodded, remembering. And Star could almost read Trish’s next thought, which was that three children made a person put on weight, and Star, after all, had no children, and no grandchildren, and what was the point of being slim and sixty if you hadn’t the pleasure of a family?

Star would have loved to have children: the feel of a small, trusting hand in hers, a little girl of her own to sit with in the walnut love-seat and teach to plant trees. But that hadn’t been her path. She’d been given the gift of creating works of beauty, and the gift of making plants grow. Once, it might not have been enough. Now it was.

Besides, the women she’d helped in her life were almost like children to her. Star’s talent for collecting lost souls had given her mothering instinct a powerful outlet.

She dressed with speed, her clothes the colours of the garden she loved: pastels in spring, warm rosy hues in summer, golds when the leaves were turning in autumn, and the cool shades of a snowy landscape in winter. Today, it being February, she dressed in a cream woollen dress with a grey fitted coat and black high boots. She swept her hair up off her face and fastened it in a low knot at the base of her neck. Her everyday uniform was very different, loose skirts or jeans and T-shirts, but today, she needed to appear the smart businesswoman.

Kenny's department store was an institution. The word had become a cliché, but Kenny's truly was one. Established in 1924, when Europe was recovering from the Great War and Ireland was emerging on to the world stage, after the ravages of the Civil War, Kenny's became the local byword for style. It was the place where all were welcomed, the moneyed classes and those who hoped one day to belong to the moneyed classes. Old Mr Kenny's dictum was that every customer was to be treated with courtesy, working man and titled lady alike. Its combination of elegance and egalitarianism contributed to its success.

Over the years, so much of Ardagh had changed: entire streets had been transformed as old family businesses made way for high street chains and big conglomerates. The Classic Cinema, where Star and her friends had eaten popcorn and screamed their way through *Jaws*, was now a car park, and the Soda Pop where they'd drunk cheap coffee and occasionally had enough money to indulge in the house speciality – a banana split – had been demolished and a supermarket built in its place.

But Kenny's never changed. It had been updated, with plenty of money spent, but the place looked and felt essentially the same: a graceful old-style Edwardian shop front that took up an entire block, with glossy small-paned windows and swing doors ornamented with shining brass fittings. A curlicued sign hung over every door: *Kenny's – Established 1924*.

Star left her car in the car park behind Kenny's, walked around to the delivery door at the back and pressed the bell. It was over an hour to opening, and most of the staff wouldn't have arrived yet, but Lena had promised to be at the delivery door at eight. The door buzzed and Star pushed it open, pulling the small wheelie trolley, with its precious cargo of tapestries, behind her. The place was dark and there was nobody visible, so Star wasn't sure

who'd buzzed her in, but she began to walk in the direction of the back stairs to the offices, looking around for signs of life. The doors to the stairs were locked when she tried them. The only bit of light was coming from the double doors that led on to the shop floor. Perhaps that's where Lena was.

Star pushed open the doors and breathed in the magical scent of Kenny's.

After the gloom of the delivery area, it was like entering a beautifully lit jewel box. In the distance, she could hear the faint drone of a vacuum cleaner. The lights were on in the shop and the scents of perfume mingled with the smell of furniture polish and a faint hint of warm pastries wafting down from the café upstairs. She left her trolley against a wall and began to walk through this paradise, enjoying the sensation of being there all on her own.

Lena often chatted about the various departments. How David Kenny, the current owner, had said he wanted a very distinctive jewellery area, with unusual pieces from local craftsmen and women as well as the big brands. It was the same in the fashion department: there was a small section where young, just-out-of-college designers could display their clothes. The perfume and cosmetics halls, the most valuable space per square metre in any department store, were filled with all the usual brands, but pride of place went to Organic Belle, a range of skin products made entirely in a small village in West Cork.

'David has a great eye for the next big thing,' Lena confided. 'Nobody had heard of Organic Belle when he brought them in two years ago; now they're big in Los Angeles and some famous hotel chain wants the range in all their spas. They're going to be huge. You should try the products. We've a lovely woman who works there, Charlie Fallon. She could help you.'

Star sensed that Lena thought she was the epitome of an eccentric artist, partly because she lived in such a remote spot, and partly because Star had said she rarely visited Kenny's. Lena, who lived and breathed the store, and didn't see how anyone else could fail to adore the place, was shocked.

'You mean, you don't shop there?'

'I was there twice last year,' Star pointed out.

'But that was to see me,' Lena said.

Consequently, she did her best to sell the notion of Kenny's to Star, highlighting bits she thought Star might like, which included anything vaguely natural.

Passing the Organic Belle counters, Star inhaled the subtle scent of the brand's best-selling balm: an instantly relaxing combination of lemongrass and lavender.

Star had seen Charlie, the woman Lena had spoken of, on one of her earlier visits. Although she didn't exactly resemble her mother, Star was pretty sure that Charlie was the younger daughter of Kitty Nelson, a stalwart of the women's feminist movement in the seventies and someone Star had known many years ago. It was the eyes: ever so slightly cat-shaped. But while Kitty's eyes had been feline in every respect, particularly when it came to men, Charlie's were soft and gentle. She would be a very different sort of woman to her feisty, femme fatale mother, Star instinctively felt.

Beyond the Organic Belle counters, lay the entrance to the food hall, and even though all the boxes of sweets and cookies were packed away, the lingering aroma of caramel and butter filled the air.

'I love the food hall,' Lena had explained, determined to make Star into a Kenny's fan. 'We sell proper food there. David realised there was a vast market for ready-to-eat gourmet food and since we've started selling the locally

produced “I Made It Myself, Honest” range, sales have been enormous.’ People loved the food, Lena went on: simple produce expertly cooked with zero additives.

On her previous visits, Star had been into the homes department, which sold Irish pottery and glass. Star could never resist pottery, but she hadn’t been into the lingerie department, despite Lena explaining about their biggest seller: a range made by a former home economics teacher from Dublin who was fed up with trying to get comfortable suck-it-all-in underwear for women over size 18, and had designed her own range.

‘Fabulous idea,’ said Lena. ‘She made it all on her sewing machine, but when she went round the shops trying to get business, David was the only one to bite. And now look at it. We can’t keep it on the shelves and all the big stores in London want it too. What other man would see that there was a need for that?’ Lena asked.

Star smiled. Lena would have died with embarrassment if she’d thought she was implying that slender Star needed control pants.

‘And it’s not as if he has any experience with a wife at home looking for control pants every time she needs to dress up,’ Lena went on. ‘He’s married to Ingrid Fitzgerald, for heaven’s sake – she’s only a size 12. Has an incredible figure. So it’s pure business sense on his part. You have to admire that, don’t you?’

Star rarely watched television. She *had* one, but it was ancient and she really only turned on for the news. Even so, she knew who Ingrid Fitzgerald was. In a world where many political television interviewers were male, Ingrid stood out as the best of them all: highly intelligent, poised and adept at getting answers to the hard questions. And beautiful, too. Not the fleeting type of beauty that came from fluffed-up hair and a carapace of make-up, but a real, deep-down kind

– lovely bone structure, intelligent eyes and an expressive, warm face.

And the thing was, Ingrid looked as if she was as lovely inside as she was out. Star had always been a very good judge of that. They were similar in age too, although Ingrid might be younger, Star thought. In another world, they might have been friends. Ingrid had two children, grown-up now, and her daughter, Molly, shared a flat with a girl Star had known when she was just a baby. Natalie was twenty-three now: Star kept count.

Natalie had nearly been born in Star's house, and Star would never forget the frantic dash to hospital with Des, while Dara lay on the backseat howling in pain. Star had been one of the first people to hold the tiny baby with the head of curly dark hair and she'd felt what she always felt when she held a newborn – that they knew all the wisdom of the world.

Star had been part of Natalie's world for little more than three years before Dara had died. Star, like everyone else in Dara's circle of friends, had sworn to abide by Dara's rules about her little daughter.

'Let me go, don't try to hold on to the past,' Dara had insisted, fearing that the memory of her dead mother would darken Natalie's future.

'She deserves to know who you are,' Star had pleaded. '*Were,*' she amended sadly.

Dara had shaken her head fiercely. 'It's better this way,' she said. The past could destroy people, and she didn't want that for Natalie. What she wanted for her daughter was a new life with her father. 'Des is wonderful, he'll bring her up so well. Perhaps he'll marry again, and they'll be much happier without me like a spectre in the background.'

And so everyone who loved Dara had promised her that they wouldn't be a part of little Natalie's world, telling her how like her mother she was or recounting tales of the days before she was born. Though Star had only known Dara a few years – since that rainy day she'd found her lying in utter despair on the coast road – she was one of the few people who'd heard the heartbreaking story of Dara's earlier life.

'The past hurts,' said Dara, determined to spare her beloved daughter the pain.

'But knowing can bring about healing,' Star replied. 'You can transcend the misery: you have.'

But Dara was firm. For Star, who lived on instinct, staying out of Natalie's life as she grew up had been one of the hardest vows she'd ever kept.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the double doors on to the street swinging shut. A blast of icy February air whirled in, along with a man in a long grey overcoat, the collar turned up. He was tall and broad-shouldered, and he walked at speed, as if there wasn't enough time to do all he wanted in life.

From her position beside a display of jewelled clips and silk-flower hairclips, Star watched David Kenny pass through his department store. He didn't survey his surroundings the way she imagined he normally did, those clever eyes noting every detail and marking it down in his memory if something needed to be changed. His eyes were focused on something else entirely, something inward. The closer he got, the more she could see the tension in his face. His hair was greying, salt and pepper around the temples. Distinguished, Star thought; that was the word for it. He reached the stationary escalator in the centre of the store and instead of climbing up, showing how fit he undoubtedly

was, he jabbed a red button. The escalator hummed to life and he stood in perfect stillness as it bore him up to the next floor.

Star had heard that David Kenny, like his father before him, made a practice of walking through his beloved store every day, making sure all was well. All might have been well in the store this morning, but watching him now, Star was certain that all was not well with David Kenny.

Most people wouldn't have noticed. Only someone who knew him well could detect the strain on his carefully composed face. Once, she'd known David Kenny better than she'd known any other human being. Now, the closest she got to him was when she reached a hand out in her garden and touched his tree, a rowan that had grown tall and strong in the thirty-five years since she'd planted it. She hadn't talked to him since then, though she was sure he was well aware that she was Bluestone Tapestries. Lena's initial attempt to arrange an introduction had been gently brushed away, with Star explaining that she 'didn't do corporate stuff'.

'Oh, but David meets *everyone*,' Lena said.

'Not me,' Star replied, smiling to show that she was happier that way. And she was grateful that David appeared to accept this, for he had made no attempt to meet her.

It wasn't that she was angry with David. No. It hadn't ended that way at all. It just wasn't meant to be for her and the passionate young poet who'd written verses to her beauty, and made love to her as if he'd found his life's meaning when their bodies were together. No, she wasn't angry with him. Her life had worked out in its own way. Until now, she'd imagined David's had too.

But seeing how tense he looked, she wasn't so sure.

An old saying of her mother's came to mind: 'What's meant for you will find you.' Many people took that to mean good

things, but Star was enough of a student of the universe to know that it could mean bad things too.

Whatever terrible sadness was touching David, Star hoped he was able to deal with it.