

The Time in Between

Magdalene Series #3
By Kristen Ashley

Chapter One *Once Upon a Time*

The gate wasn't very welcoming.

To one side it had a sign tacked on it, which declared in neon orange on black, PRIVATE PROPERTY. KEEP OUT!

To the other side the sign declared, ABSOLUTELY NO TRESPASSING!

And down the rickety white fence that led either side of the gate, these signs adorned the peeling painted wood at odd but frequent intervals.

“In the end, Magdalene’s last lighthouse keeper was a little crotchety,” the real estate agent murmured under his breath, sitting beside me in his Chevy SUV as he drove us through the opened gate.

I looked beyond the gate to the lighthouse in front of us.

Unlike from afar, up close the outbuildings of the lighthouse looked as dilapidated as the fence. Their white paint and black trim flaking and faded, some of the red shingles on the roofs askew or missing altogether.

The lighthouse, on the other hand, was a gleaming white (with glossy black trim) beacon of beauty rising five stories in the air. The top two stories all windows, other interesting windows dotted here and there down its circumference. And to end, there was startling green grass that fed into gray rock cliffs that led to the blue sea and blue sky with tufted clouds acting as the backdrop for its magnificence.

And suddenly, seeing it all that close, I was finally becoming excited about this adventure.

It's a sign, my darling. It couldn't be anything but. You're meant to be in Maine. And when I'm gone, when you write the end to this chapter of your life, that's where your next chapter starts. The one that leads to a happy ending.

That was what Patrick said to me two days before he died.

And one could read from the fact that Patrick died that that particular chapter did not have a happy ending.

Now, when he said it, he'd been significantly drugged up due to the pain caused by the cancer eating away at his body, most specifically his brain. But in weeks where his lucidity wasn't exactly something you could count on, when he'd said that to me, his voice was firm and his eyes were clear.

"It's automated now," the real estate agent said, taking me out of my thoughts.

I looked to him to see we were parked and he was opening his door and lugging his large body out of the car.

I opened my door, following suit, and slammed it, calling, "I'm sorry? What?"

He looked over the hood of the car to me. "The lighthouse. It's automated now."

"Oh," I mumbled, the breeze blowing my hair and my scarf all around, plastering my jacket to me, taking my barely there word and wisping it away on the wind.

"Was automated in 1992," he shared. "That's when the old owner started to get crotchety. Tending a lighthouse wasn't the easiest thing on the planet to do. But when it was automated, it was just about keeping it maintained and making sure the generators were fueled in case the power went out. After years of having something to do, something important, all of a sudden he didn't have that. Because of what happened to him, I tell my wife, I don't care if I'm organizing kitchen cupboards. Give me something to do every day until the day I die."

He delivered this wisdom and then started trudging up to the gleaming black painted wood door at the side of the house.

It had a fabulous, old, black gooseneck light over the door.

Heck, even if the place wasn't *absolutely glorious*, which it was, I'd buy the damned thing because of that light.

"So that said," the agent went on as he inserted a skeleton key (yes, *a skeleton key*) into the keyhole in the door, "you decide to take that on, it's not tough." He turned his attention to me

before he opened the door. “It’s taking on other stuff, in all honesty, not that you won’t get the gist of it the second you walk in, that might be iffy.”

He then opened the door and it was like he didn’t. The gloom from inside slithered out and it was so intense, I actually leaned away from it.

He walked inside, the shadows completely engulfing him within seconds.

With no other choice, I followed him.

Gloomy it was.

And dirty.

And dank.

In fact it was dark, musty and smelled like wet brick and rot.

“Old guy died years ago,” the real estate agent said as he moved through the murk. “All his kids had taken off years ago too. They lived with his wife anyway after the divorce. This is no place to raise a family. She knew that. He wouldn’t leave it.”

He made a motion, and I blinked as sunlight made a valiant effort to pour through a bank of grimy windows that followed half the curve of the lighthouse when he shoved aside what seemed like a long vinyl curtain. A curtain which totally disintegrated at his touch, falling with a *whoosh* and a poof of dust to the countertop underneath it.

“Whoops,” he mumbled.

When I could focus again, first I saw an unadulterated (except for the filth) view of the sea that, even through filth, took my breath away.

Second I saw the agent’s eyes resting speculatively on me.

As my family situation was none of his business, I said nothing to him in response to his unspoken query.

“Anyway,” he continued, catching my hint of silence. “None of them wanted the place. But he’d let it go so bad,” he swung an arm out, “no one else wanted it either. It’s been on the market for nine years. There’s also been a referendum for the town to buy it every year since he died, but the cost and upkeep, they couldn’t absorb. Now the family’s dumped the price so low it’s almost criminal, what with two acres of coastal property coming with it. But there’s a rider on the deed, considering this is a historic site. Current buildings can be renovated at the owner’s

discretion if they retain the look they already have on the outside, but nothing else can be built and the lighthouse must remain.”

“So automation is very automated, considering no one has lived here for that long,” I noted.

He shook his head. “We’ve had volunteer keepers since then. Not that they have to do much, but the old girl needs to keep lighting so it’s gotta be looked after. In fact, it was getting so bad, the town paid for it to be repainted a couple of years ago. Other than that, as you can see...”

He didn’t finish that but did since he swung his arm out again to indicate the mess of the large, circular room we were in.

I took in the mess of the large, circular room we were in and at first saw nothing but the mess—decaying furniture, a soot-covered stone fireplace, a kitchen that might have been put in in the forties but had not only not been touched the last nine years, it perhaps had not been touched the last nineteen (or more).

Then I saw more.

The extraordinarily carved railing to the sweeping wood staircase that ran the curved side of the house. The red brick walls. The plank wood floors.

“Once upon a time, long ago,” the realtor was suddenly talking wistfully, “someone loved this place. Put that love into building it. Put that love into keeping it. Nine years and more when no one really gave a whit, and still you can see it once had a lot of love.”

Oh yes.

You could see that.

“It’s got a basement, more like a big crawl space,” the agent declared, surprising me with his quick change in tone back to businesslike and informative. “The furnace is down there. You can get down there through a door in the floor. The furnace was put in a while back, and full disclosure, though an inspection will catch it, it probably needs to be replaced.”

Through his words I stared at the fireplace, which scoured would be magnificent, and I noticed it didn’t have a chimney as such, but the smoke probably went out a vent in the wall.

“This floor has a powder room under the stairs,” the realtor kept on. “You can look at it if you want, but if you wanna save yourself that, I’ll just tell you straight, it needs to be gutted.”

I decided to take his word for it and told him that.

He looked relieved when I did before he stated, “Place has a garage, two car. Not in good condition, but think you saw that. Still, it’s close to the house and there’s a covered walkway to that door over there.” He pointed at a door that was across from the door we’d walked in. “Means you might feel a chill but you won’t get wet, unless it’s raining sideways, which happens.”

With a breeze that plastered my jacket to me on a sunny, early spring day, I did not doubt that.

“Garage has a loft space above it, which could be renovated as a studio rental if you’ve a mind to do that sort of thing. As for the property itself, it also has a building where the generators are stowed,” the realtor carried on. “Hook up for a washer and dryer and good space in there. Lots of it for storage. Which is good because there’s not a lot of storage in here for tools and Christmas decorations and whatnot.”

I glanced around seeing he was right. There wasn’t even enough cabinetry to house the things a decent cook would need in her kitchen. Though there was room for them. In fact, if you fought back the gloom, there was quite a bit of room.

“And there’s a place outside, could call it a studio, could call it a mother-in-law house,” he shared. “Whatever, it’s got goodly space, two bedrooms, big kitchen. Could be renovated to be a guest house. Or like I said, a studio if you’re artsy. Or you could rent it out like a B and B. I’ll show you all of that after we have a look at the lighthouse.”

“Thanks,” I replied.

“Now, since I mentioned full disclosure, you have to know it all,” the realtor continued.

Slowly, my eyes went to him.

When they did, he launched in. “Like I said, it’s automated. And like I said, you won’t really have to concern yourself with the functionality of that unless the electricity goes out, but then the generators automatically kick in. There are two. But you’ll need to keep fuel on hand to keep them going in case a blackout lasts awhile. And just to say, this is coastal Maine. We get weather. Blackouts can last awhile.”

When I nodded to share I took that in, he kept going.

“And if you’re, say, away on vacation, you need to make sure someone is playing backup in such a case.”

“Okay,” I replied when he stopped talking, thinking this probably wasn’t a good thing since I knew no one in Maine (or not anyone who wanted to know me) and thus couldn’t call on anyone to do something like that.

I also didn’t hold high hopes I’d make friends and win people. I hadn’t had a lot of success in that in my life.

And last, although Patrick believed it completely, I held no hope that the reason I was out there was going to come to fruition.

That being me having a happy ending.

That being what Patrick thought would *be* my happy ending.

Which might mean I’d have someone, a certain someone, or actually two (at least), even though I knew I never would.

However, if I bought that place and wanted to go back to Denver to visit the family, I could pay someone to look after it.

The realtor nodded, unaware of my bleak thoughts, and went on, “Some folks don’t put two and two together, but just to say, there’s a big honkin’ light on top of this building that flashes in a circle at night or during fog, going around every fifteen seconds. You’ll need blackout blinds everywhere if you’re like practically every other soul on this earth and will have trouble sleeping with a bright light flashing through the windows every fifteen seconds.”

“Blackout blinds probably aren’t hard to come by,” I guessed, and they probably could be made to look nice, or at least I hoped.

“Probably not,” he agreed. “But anyone who wants to live here and not go insane or end up a crotchety old curmudgeon with a bad attitude, and that may seem like I’m laying it on thick, but it’s all warranted with our old keeper, they’ll want to put in all new windows. This brick is solid. Nothing coming through.” He jerked his head toward a wall. “But if the foghorn needs to blow, it’s gonna *blow*. So soundproof windows or sound-lock panels you can put in when you wanna drown out the noise will be the way to go to get some peace.”

“That probably won’t be hard either,” I noted.

“It won’t be, but they’ll need to be custom so it won’t be cheap.”

I nodded.

Price was not an issue.

Thanks to Patrick, I had all the money in the world.

“Then there’s the tourists,” he told me. “Reason those signs are out there isn’t only because the old guy was crotchety, it was because people think lighthouses are public places. They show and knock on the door wanting a tour, wanting to walk around, taking pictures. Doesn’t help matters the coastal path is public land, but this lighthouse stands on private land. Walkers and bikers are supposed to go around the fence, but sometimes they aren’t big on doing that. So you’ll either need to be real patient, real friendly or you’ll need to build a decent fence. My guess, though, is you’re still gonna have to put up with some of the more persistent ones.”

Now that...

That was going to be an issue.

People weren’t my favorite things.

In fact, the last seventeen years of my life, I’d had precisely fourteen people (not all fourteen all seventeen years, and now one of them was dead so I only had thirteen) that I actually liked and wanted to spend time with.

The rest, I tolerated.

No.

That wasn’t right.

The rest tolerated *me*.

“Your land, your fence,” the agent stated. “That said, this is a historic site so if you’re thinking of getting this place and then building a ten-foot wall around it topped with razor wire, the town council is gonna balk. They’re a good bunch of folks with the best interests of Magdalene and its citizens in mind, so if you do something that will help you to have privacy but isn’t unsightly, they won’t have an issue.”

“Do I have to get approval for any plans I might have from them?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Not if it isn’t outlandish. Rider is relatively specific about a lot of stuff and mostly it’s to keep this place in keeping with the seascape, the coast, the town and its history. So if you buy the old girl, you’ll be legally bound by that rider to keep her within that purview. You build something outside of that scope, they’ll be within their rights to demand you tear it down and build something else. You stay inside that scope, you’ll be good.”

I nodded but remarked, “That seems rather loose for a historical site.”

“Like I said, town council is a good bunch of folks and they have been for a good while,” he shared, walking toward me. He stopped within three feet. “But they’re also pretty dogged about keeping Magdalene, Magdalene. Recently, the land west and south of this lighthouse was rezoned and is now unincorporated. But the coastal path leading up to it and the lighthouse remain under the town of Magdalene’s purview. This is because the town mostly exists on tourist trade and the lighthouse is an attraction. So if you push them, they’ll not hesitate to push back.”

I was surprised about that land being rezoned and wondered distractedly why that had come about. Everything for quite some distance around the lighthouse was undeveloped, making the lighthouse an undisturbed beacon not only from sea, but from every direction by land.

However, I was not surprised Magdalene existed on tourist trade. I’d found the day before when I’d arrived that it was huge, coastal postcard from the minute you saw the town limit sign (which could be on a postcard itself, it was so pretty) all the way down it’s meticulously preserved main street that traversed Magdalene Cove (containing wharf). Even the businesses and homes that dotted the sloping swell of land beyond fit the aesthetic.

“Wanna see the rest?” the realtor asked.

“Please,” I answered.

He led the way and I followed him up the spiraling, wood stairs that didn’t look rickety in the slightest.

Yes, this place had been built out of love.

We hit the second floor, which was one big room with one somewhat big window, another smaller fireplace and that was it. There was nothing else. Not a powder room. Nothing. Though there was an old, steel desk that whoever owned it surely bought it not actually wanting it.

Up we went to the third story and that was where things got interesting.

It was cut in half. There were two windows in what could only be the bedroom area (if the decaying mattresses and headboard were anything to go by), but these windows were half windows in a strange shape that looked like a shell and oddly set in the floor. Another window just like that in a dire bathroom that was rather small, no walk-in closet, no large bath big enough for two set in a platform. But the half circle space could be made pretty, and useful, should someone have the imagination to do it.

The bedroom part also had another, even smaller fireplace that, even in the current state of wreck of that room, was quaint.

After that, we walked up to the fourth floor.

And the instant I cleared it, I stopped dead.

Windows the entire circumference gave a panoramic view so stunning, it seemed like a miracle. Sea, cliffs, green forest and the picture-perfection of Magdalene were available to view unencumbered, and I knew that because I'd sorted myself enough to make a slow turn.

"This always gets 'em," the realtor murmured. "Can forget the mess downstairs the second you see this. Problem is, you gotta walk back downstairs to get out."

I didn't care about the other three stories.

I didn't care that I knew down to my soul Patrick was wrong, this was a fool's errand, coming out here to repair relationships that were irreparable, and live out the rest of my book of life.

There was one thing that room, that view, proved Patrick right about.

I was meant to be in Maine.

I was meant to be right there.

If I was meant to have no beauty in my life but the love of Patrick and his family, I was still meant to have this.

Because Patrick could give it to me.

And I knew in that second he was smiling down at me, happy as a danged clam and smug as heck, knowing he was right.

"The studio has a veranda so you got outside space if you're that kinda person who likes hanging outside," the agent carried on. "But I figure this is all the outside space anyone would need. Tell you, more than one showing, I thought it'd be worth the headache to put this place to rights just to have my morning cup of coffee sitting right up here and I wouldn't care I gotta climb three sets of stairs to get here."

He was not wrong about that.

And just then, I decided to have coffee up there every morning for the rest of my life.

"Whenever that notion overwhelms me, my wife disabuses me of it," he said.

I couldn't imagine.

She must never have been up there.

“Cross the way, that’s Lavender House,” he stated.

I looked “cross the way” as he was indicating, this being across the sun twinkling off the gentle waves rolling into the cove, to see a beautiful, rambling old home set back off a cliff. It was not nearly as magnificent as the lighthouse, but then again, I was standing where I was standing, so I’d think that.

“Almost as old as this place and just as pretty in its own way,” the realtor declared. “That’s private property too and always has been, like the lighthouse. And beyond that, that house you see that looks like it’s floating on the cliff, that’s Cliff Blue.”

I trained my eyes where he instructed and saw a breathtaking home the likes I’d never seen before. It was the modern yin to Lavender House’s yang, but even modern, it seemed somehow to fit perfectly where it was, like it had always been there.

“Prentice Cameron built that,” the agent said. “And if you don’t know who he is, Google him. Town council is choosy about what new plans they’ll approve to be built on coastal land. Think they all drowned in their own drool when Cameron came in to design and build that. It’s modern but pretty as a picture. Perfect.”

After saying that, he turned from his perusal of the landscape to me with an expression on his face that captured my attention, all of it, as he continued speaking.

“And I’ll just say, even in the state this is in, doing it with pride, this triumvirate of properties is what Magdalene is second most proud of, outside keeping the town as it should be. But they’re all private properties and the folks in town, they’re just as protective of them and their inhabitants as the owners, I figure. So, since this is open space and easily visible, not couched in trees like Lavender House, or in a private neighborhood like Cliff Blue, you might have your lookie-loos. But if anyone asks a citizen of Magdalene, all of us will do what we can to maintain your privacy.”

“That’s good to know,” I said softly.

He looked me up and down, turned his gaze through the expanse then gave his serious expression back to me.

“Been doing this job a long time. I can see when a buyer is interested and I can see when they’re interested in something that they know is gonna be a heck of a project, but that doesn’t

matter to them because they've fallen in love. And I see that last is happening with you. So I gave you full disclosure, now I'll give you full honesty."

"That would..." I hesitated because I wasn't sure my last wasn't a lie, "be appreciated."

He didn't hesitate.

"See, this is a lot of work and you got it in you to restore it, great. But there are buildings, land. Take an entire day even with a riding mower, probably, just to mow the lawn. And the townsfolk'd lose their minds, you mow over the tulips that coat the place come full-on spring. No one knows how those tulips got here, but Google 'Magdalene Lighthouse' and that's pretty much all the pictures you'll see."

God, I couldn't wait to see that and I was going to Google it the minute I got back to the inn.

"But you're a slip of a thing, apparently on your own, and this is gonna be a lot for you."

He lifted his hand and shook it at me even as he shook his head and kept speaking.

"I'm not being sexist. Like I said, I'm being honest. But more, it seems close to town, and it is, *ish*, you go the direct coastal path into town, which is just over two miles of walking. But by the roads, since it goes inland then eastward, it's over five miles to get out here and there isn't anything built within the first two, primarily because of that light and the horn I told you about. But also because Magdalene likes this view unencumbered, so a lot of that is parkland so it'd stay just that way. That means this is a lot more secluded than it looks from town."

This was not a deterrent.

This could be, in future, if things went awry (and they were probably going to go awry), a boon.

I'd need to be secluded, separate, *reclusive*.

But regardless, I was one of those people who could be good on my own. I hadn't had a lot of that in recent years, what with Patrick and his family, but when I had it, I could enjoy it.

And if I had this lighthouse all to myself, I had a feeling I could learn to love it.

"So, just to say, you should consider all that when you consider buying this," he advised. "But I'll also say I know you're from Denver. And I know New Englanders are considered unfriendly by folks out west. We're not. We're just different. We like what we know and *who* we know. We depend on tourists but, being honest, they can sometimes be a pain in the backside. But you move here, you'll be one of us. Simple as that. And to prove that's true, if you don't have

someone who's coming here with you to help you take this on, then I'll be the first to share I'm happy to look after the old girl when you're away. You just call on me. And if I can't, I'll help you find someone who can. We in Magdalene been looking out for this lighthouse for years. But if she comes with you, we'll look out for you too."

I stood there, immobile, and stared at him.

And I did this suddenly needing to cry.

He didn't know me. He didn't know my past. He didn't know how stupid I'd been.

So unbelievably stupid.

He didn't know.

So he couldn't judge.

Maybe this *could* be a new chapter.

Maybe Patrick knew exactly what he was doing in a variety of ways.

I fought back the tears as he concluded, "And that's not a gambit to get you to buy. You can't know I'm telling you the truth until you put me to the test. But just to say, feel free to do that. You'll learn soon enough."

I tore my eyes from him and blinked at the landscape, taking in a deep breath through my nose, recalling his name.

Robert.

Robert Colley.

"You wanna see the outbuildings now or you wanna go up and look at the lens?" he asked.

I wanted to look at the lens.

Then I wanted to go look at the outbuildings.

But I didn't say either.

I looked again to him.

"I'll be needing the name of a good contractor."

His eyes lit as he studied me and one side of his lips quirked.

"You'll need to be looking at the outbuildings, gal," he advised gently.

"Yes, you're right," I told him. "But I'll also be needing the name of a good contractor."

He continued to study me and he did this until I smiled at him.

And when I did, the half lip quirk disappeared and Robert Colley smiled back.

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