

CHAPTER 1
FESSENDEN

I slowly opened my eyes and sat up at my desk, a sharp pain radiating down my neck. One of my arms, a bony, lumpy makeshift pillow, tingled from bearing the weight of my head. I reached across my laptop for my phone to check the time: 2:13 a.m. I opened the laptop I had fallen asleep on, and up sprang my document, the unfinished chapter that was haunting me. I needed to finish writing this book. I needed to because it was overdue, and I needed to because I needed the advance. But panic was overtaking diligence.

I noticed I had a missed text from William, which filled me with the usual dread, but I opened it anyway: *Fez, please call back. I'm so sorry about this. At least let me come down and help you pack up the house. I'm trying to make this right. I really am. Please.*

I snorted at the phone. Too late, William. Way, way too late.

His text was an unpleasant reminder of what lay ahead today. I should have started packing and getting organized days ago, but I hadn't, and I was certain that Hazel hadn't started packing, either. Jesus! Hazel! When did she get in? Did I hear her come in? I was drawn to go check on her, but even more drawn to climb into bed and get at least a few more hours of

sleep, without which facing tomorrow—or rather later today—was going to be all but impossible.

A few short hours later, I woke up again, drenched with sweat, disoriented, and tightly wrapped in a twisted, damp knot of sheets. I heard the crows screeching their gritty, raspy calls. I reflexively reached for William, but his side of the bed was cool, crisp, and empty, something I was still not used to, even after all these months.

I pulled back my hand, untangled my feet from the sheets, and rolled over onto my right side to face the window toward Crow's Pond. The sky was hazy, the water still and pale; it was already hot. As the fog of sleep began to lift, something ominous started to creep in: a slow, dark, thick feeling of dread, and then, within a minute, I was fully engulfed. Today was, in all likelihood, our last day in this quirky, wonderful house. Three generations of my family here, and it all ended now when I would pack up the house and go, leaving a set of keys for a white-haired, ruddy-skinned real estate agent named Janet who was going to sell this house, *my* house. Thinking of this filled me with such a wave of fury at William that I wanted to throw something. *How could he have done this to us?* It's a question I've asked myself too many times to count.

I kicked the covers onto the floor as I abruptly stood up. I went into the bathroom, put on my blue terrycloth bathrobe, rust-stained from the hook, and headed out to wake up Hazel and remind her to start packing. In the light of day, I clearly recalled that she did not check in last night as she was supposed to, but I admonished myself not to bring it up. It was going to be a hard enough day without starting an argument and eye-rolling, which is how way too many days this summer had begun.

I walked down the stairs, the white-painted wood floors gritty from sand. Framed photographs lined the stairway wall. Already feeling nostalgic in anticipation of our departure, I stopped and looked at them. In one, Hazel, at the age of three, was sitting in a skirted bathing suit, on the little beach out back, plastic shovel

in her hand. William's protective hand was on her tiny shoulder. Hazel was staring straight at the camera, serious and focused, without a trace of a smile, her head cocked as if she was about to ask something. William was looking at her and saying something consoling or instructive, his tanned broad shoulders reflecting the bright, warm sun. In the background, a lime-green plastic pail, filled with sand, water, and skittering hermit crabs. My shadow evident on the sand, stretched thin and long.

I went down another step and looked at the next photograph, a formal family portrait taken in the living room here, circa 1969: my dear grandparents; my mother; my father; my aunt Bunny and her husband, Buck; and me—the entire family. All the women sitting stiff and erect, their identical bony, sun-freckled legs running parallel, primly crossed ankles, on straight-backed Hitchcock chairs. My beloved grandpa, my father, and Uncle Buck standing behind them with their hands resting on their spouses' shoulders. Me, aged seven, looking restless and uncomfortable, sitting on Bunny's lap. Two golden retrievers lying in front of Mimi on the threadbare needlepoint floral rug. Everyone was looking straight at the camera with faint smiles except my mother, who must have moved her head at just the wrong moment. Her face was a blur.

I moved down the creaking steps and out through the kitchen to head up the small hill to check on Hazel. The screen door slammed behind me, narrowly missing my heel. I could smell the heat, the dry, sandy dirt, and the black-eyed Susans as I traversed the slate stepping-stones.

I carefully pushed open the screen door to the Halfway House, our tiny guest cottage on the property, and saw Hazel sleeping on her side in one of the twin beds, the popcorn-crocheted coverlet pulled up to her chin, her dark hair a sweaty tangle around her pillow, a few stray strands stuck to her damp face. Her mouth agape, she was clearly sleeping deeply. I marveled at how young and sweet she looked.

On the bedside table, there was a photograph of her, taken a few summers ago. She was sitting at the kitchen table, holding one red, steamed lobster with a big smile on her tanned face. I picked up the small, framed picture and held it in my hand. Hazel was alone in almost every picture we had of her. We tried so hard to give her a sibling, but miscarriage after miscarriage before she was born, and also after her, stole those hopes. The last loss and the most devastating was when Hazel was four. I was six months pregnant, well past any date of worry, when I stopped feeling the baby kicking and shifting. I went to the doctor, fighting panic as he ran his ultrasound wand over and over my swollen belly, over the still heart, the lifeless baby, until he finally looked at me and said with sincere sadness, “Fez, I’m so sorry.” Even twelve years later, I felt that pain on a visceral level, as if it were some dense thing I carried in my gut, like a stone.

I had hated being an only child and wanted a big family so badly. I had begged my parents for a sibling, specifically a sister, whom I had imagined staying up late with and giggling with in this very room, but the mere request sent my mother sighing and slumping out of the room and garnered a set reply from my father: “Oh Fez, you funny thing. That ship has sailed.” I set the picture of smiling Hazel back on the bedside table.

A pile of clothes was on the floor: black T-shirt, faded black jeans, intentionally holey and worn, black underwear and bra on top, everything inside out and balled together as if she had peeled it all off in one rolling motion. I picked them up to move them and found they were damp. A fine film of sand fell to the floor. Obviously she’d been to the beach, but alone? She had no friends here last night. As safe as our little neighborhood was, I told Hazel I didn’t like the idea of her wandering around by herself, and I certainly didn’t like the idea of her swimming alone.

I sat on her small bed, the old springs screeching loudly in protest, but she didn’t stir, which gave me the chance to stare at

her sleeping face, something I have loved to do since the day she was born.

I remembered one summer when she was eight or nine and had been having nightmares for weeks. During this period, I would stay next to her until she fell asleep. One night, she awoke with a start shortly after she had fallen asleep.

“Mommy!” she said, scooting closer to me.

I stroked the soft hair out of her eyes. “Yes, lovey, what is it?”

She pressed herself into my lap as she recalled her dream, her voice raspy and soft. “I was sitting in a classroom, maybe in the science building or someplace like that, all ready to take the test.” She rubbed at her eyes. “I had my pencils sharpened and all in a row on my desk. You know the yellow pencils?”

“Yep. The yellow ones. Ticonderogas.” I nodded.

“Yes, those. Well, I don’t know what happened, but all of a sudden, I was naked in class.” She turned to look at me, actually mortified that she was unclothed in the dream. “Naked! I mean, I looked around the room and Janie and Gordon and Moira were all sitting at their desks, and they were wearing regular clothes, you know, school uniforms. Then when I looked at them, in all their school clothes, they noticed me, and I was really naked and they knew it and then I knew it and it was so, *so* bad. I couldn’t believe I had forgotten to get dressed! It felt so real, Mom.”

I pulled her closer, nuzzling against her silken hair that smelled like the baby shampoo she still loved to use. “I think, maybe, just maybe, you’re a little worried about the coming year. About being a fourth grader? Could that be it?”

She nestled further into my neck and murmured a hushed “maybe” and quietly drifted back to sleep.

That little girl had changed recently. The dutiful, hardworking child, always diligent and thoughtful, had become distant and detached. Her grades this past semester had dipped a bit to Bs, which shouldn’t have seemed like a problem except this was *Hazel*.

She had always gotten straight As with both raw intelligence and hard work, and William and I worried that a grade slip was worthy of our concern. In May when we got her report card, we asked her about her falling grades. She said that the schoolwork was just harder, more intense, and she was taking all honors and APs now, and that was *college level* and that she'd be back on track for junior year, when in her words, "stuff started to matter." We agreed; schoolwork *had* started to intensify, and Bs were still excellent. College-level courses as a sophomore! Of course she didn't have to get As. We let it go.

I gently nudged her. "Haze," I whispered. She didn't move. I put my hand on her shoulder, bony and sharp under the coverlet. "Haze, time to wake up." Nothing. Louder. "Hazel, we've got to pack, honey." She slowly opened her eyes and groaned.

"Mom, what *time* is it?" First sentence of the day, and I could see that she was already annoyed.

"It's about eight, but I want to go for my walk, and then we have to pack up the house and hit the road." I had decided that I wouldn't tell Hazel about having to sell the house until we had a deal in place. I didn't want her summer clouded by the news, especially with the separation.

"Shit," she said. "Really?"

"Yep, sorry, last day of the summer. I'm heading down to the beach. I'll be back in about an hour. Can you get started with your stuff and then help me in the main house when I'm back?" I leaned down to kiss her cheek and smelled two things instantly: smoke and the sickly-sweet smell of a hangover. Metastasizing sugar. I pulled back. "Hazel, what did you do last night?"

She looked at me and narrowed her eyes. "Nothing, why?"

"What did you do last night?" I repeated slowly, a feeling of dread building.

"Nothing, just hung out on the beach with friends."

"Which friends?"

"Ty and Bex." These were newer friends from a different crowd at school. They were around a lot this summer, but I didn't know them well. They never came into the house, neither in Boston nor here.

"Hazel, were you drinking?"

"Just a little. Nothing big. Just a beer." Could one beer explain that smell?

"Just a beer? *Really?*"

"Yes, Mom. *Really.* I don't even really like drinking. I just kinda had one so I wouldn't look like a loser." She looked right at me, and I could tell she was being sincere.

"OK. OK. Were you smoking? I smell smoke."

"No. Jesus, Mom, relax. We just had a little bonfire. We all probably smell like smoke. It was the end-of-summer party. Remember?" She looked straight at me. "Don't worry, Mom. OK? You're gonna make yourself crazy."

It's true. I felt crazy. Every time I worried about Hazel and her behavior, every single time I accused her of something related to parties, drinking, or smoking, she would deny it, and William would side with Hazel, thereby confirming my "crazy behavior" with comments like, "She's just a teenager. She's not doing anything we didn't do at her age. Remember?" It was true. Both William and I drank at her age. We went to parties. We smoked a little pot. But it felt different when it was my own child, my own little girl.

I looked at her closely. "OK, Hazel, but just so you know, I'm *never* going to stop worrying. *Never.* Especially with our family history. You understand that, right?"

She nodded, and then rolled over with her back to me, ready to settle back into more sleep.

I headed back out to the beach path, feeling a twinge of guilt. Though I walked for an hour each and every morning of the summer, rain or shine, a ritual maintained for more than twenty years,

today it felt like an indulgence. I should use this hour to work on my book, a last-ditch effort to meet my Labor Day deadline. I had been working hard this summer, really hard, but I seemed to be in a holding pattern, unable to finish, unwilling to stop the edits and the rewrites. My agent, Caroline, who was always patient and understanding, was neither of these things now.

Last week, she'd left me a stern phone message. "Fez, I know you are swamped. I know it's a bad time, but I really need to see what you've got. I don't care what shape it's in. I know *you* care, but I really don't." She took a breath and then added with emphasis, "*Don't let perfect be the enemy of good.*"

I knew what she meant. I *was* buried in the writing and the edits. I was adding new chapters, which may or may not have been necessary. I was making changes in the basic structure and layout of the book at this late date. I was, possibly, so buried in my edits, I was at risk of overediting, overthinking, and muddying what was once a clear and riveting biographical storyline.

In a message from earlier in the summer, she said, "I'm wondering if you're worried about the gap between books, but don't be. Maybe expectations will be high after a ten-year book gap, but you really have something here, and I think readers' morbid fascination with the story of this *gruesome mariticide* will be enough." She loved using that expression. *Gruesome mariticide*.

"The readers want to know Agnes Williams Black and her story. It's titillating. It's awful. It's completely engaging. And you're so close. So just write, edit, and send. Soon."

I wasn't ready, and I didn't want to send crap. I needed to make sure I earned a handsome advance from this book. I just needed another week, maybe two. When I was back home in Boston and Hazel was back in school, I could focus. But first I had to pack my clothes, toiletries, and all the food in the fridge and pantry. I had to clean the kitchen and bathrooms. I had to dust. I had to sweep and vacuum. I hadn't cleaned the house well in the three

months Hazel and I had been here. I had to put away clutter, so Janet could straighten up and "prepare, rearrange, tidy, organize, and *stage*" the house for going on the market. I was annoyed and overwhelmed just thinking about it.

But before any of that, I would walk. It was more important today than ever. When I got out to the beach, I turned back to face the old shingled house: the big picture window facing Crow's Pond, the grassy back terrace with its uneven pale-red bricks creating a makeshift seating area, the scrub pines, large hydrangeas and rugged *rosa rugosa* framing the yard. My grandparents' beautiful landscaping vision, colorful and stunning.

My grandparents bought this house and property back in the mid-1930s within a year of the completion of the Sagamore Bridge, which connected "mainland Massachusetts" to Cape Cod. My grandparents were young, gay, and excitable (Mimi's words), and Grandpa's inherited steel business was just beginning to boom. They were nearly untouched by the Depression thanks to a great deal of wealth set aside on both sides by careful and prudent parents and grandparents. They were not ostentatious in lifestyle but deeply embedded in generations of Episcopalian propriety and Boston Brahmin associations; no one misunderstood their breeding. When Grandpa showed Mimi the shingled home, sitting up high, overlooking Crow's Pond in Chatham on the elbow of lovely Cape Cod, she gasped and said, "Darling, it's perfect." And that was that. As a nod to the Anglo house-naming tradition, they named the house the Crow's Nest, partially due to its elevation and partly due to the thickly populated black bird population throughout the property. There were two other small houses on the property as well: the Halfway House and Quail House (also known as "Q"), another tiny cottage set up the hill from the main house. It was behind Q, high on the hill, in a little clearing overlooking Crow's Pond, where we scattered my grandparents' ashes one warm summer morning in 1978, both Mimi and Grandpa dying of different

cancers, just four months apart. She died first, and I guess he just couldn't live without her.

From my vantage point, I could see the circle of faded yellow lounge chairs, rusted and sand- and salt-encrusted patio furniture from the 1970s, the plastic woven straps fraying and stringy. I could never bear to get rid of those relics from my childhood, so they sat, old and tired on that bumpy brick patio.

An image came back to me suddenly and strongly: my mother lounging on one of those chairs, some forty years ago. Her cotton blue floral bathing suit faded and bleached from the sun and salty air, her skin ruddy and freckled, slippery with baby oil, and a plastic cup, wet with condensation, under her seat, partially hidden in the basket-weave shadows of the chair, the pale amber liquid just visible below the melting cubes. She was fast asleep, passed out from a cocktail hour that had started at breakfast. I was reading *The Secret Garden* at her feet when my grandfather walked past and stopped to stare down at her, in her oily, slick stupor.

"She'll wake up soon," I said, feeling a need to defend her. "She promised to take me clamming."

His hands gripped the coil of rope he was holding, his knuckles white and sharp. He looked sadly at me, then back at my mother and just shook his head and walked away. I will never forget the pained expression on his face.

It was later that summer, the one I turned twelve, when two important things happened. One, I realized my mother was a drunk. Not the kind who sat red-faced and bulbous-nosed, menacing and swollen at local bars, shouting at the Bruins games, although that would have been kind of fun. And not the kind who sat primly in the gleaming waxed mahogany bars of the city's elegant boutique hotels, sipping whiskey sours while enjoying some quartet playing nostalgic tunes. And not the kind who drank too much Suave Bolla at the dinner table, argued about the state of the Cold War and

Richard Nixon, and then went to work the next day smelling sweet and stale. No, my mother was just *out*. Listless. Slothful. *Torpid*.

She was the sort of alcoholic who drank vodka or scotch quietly all day long, every single day, out of a lovely plain crystal highball, right in her drapery-drawn bedroom. The highball had been handed down through generations of Brahmins before her who probably enjoyed their own sort of mind-numbing drinks. Mother smoked Salem mentholated cigarettes throughout the day, leaving her dry pink lipstick prints on the filters. Tiny crinkled piles of paper and plastic and tiny stubs of cigarettes smashed and broken in the glass saucer. It was a quiet, sad, tragic love affair, my mother and her refreshments. No yelling. No shouting. No friends. No revelers. Just her daily quiet decline into a fuzzy, muffled gray sort of place.

From what I could gather, my mother's drinking had begun when I was a baby, or it had worsened after my birth sometime. I always wondered if perhaps *I* was the disappointment that had set her on her course. The black-and-white photos of my mother before 1962 showed a woman smiling, laughing, in a group, with my father, with friends, on a sailboat, on the beach. They were married for nearly fourteen years before they had me. Mother never told me if she had miscarried or if they had simply waited to conceive or if they had never intended to have children. Maybe something she had hoped I would give her or bring her hadn't happened.

The other thing that happened that summer: my father left us.

He had met someone else. Her name was Rosie. She was blond, fiercely energetic, and sober. It was not lost on me that these were all the things my mother wasn't. They started their new life over together in a glassy condominium in Scottsdale, playing golf and tennis on the weekends and cloistering themselves from their disappointing past lives.

I guess Dad just hit the wall. Days and months and years of dealing with my mother must have felt like a never-ending loop of despair, disappointment, joylessness. Finally, after the exhausting task of enabling, fixing, cleaning up, and *carrying on*, he walked. I understood then and still do why he did it. I even understood his leaving her for someone else, but I never fully forgave him for leaving me behind. I couldn't see around his decision to leave a twelve-year-old in a house alone with a woman who couldn't get her own sorry ass out of bed except to replenish the scotch bottle under the nightstand, and the Salem cigarette cartons from the old, cracked walnut-and-gild dresser.

After Dad left, he tried to stay connected. I had to hand it to him; he really did. I guess maybe he felt bad about the way things turned out. He sent letters and birthday cards; I rarely read them. He left phone messages on holidays; I didn't always pick up. After I graduated from college and settled in Boston, I did see him nearly every June, when he came to town for an annual insurance conference. We would have awkward, stilted dinners at the Copley Hotel restaurant, or the Ritz's Tea Room, when he would update me on his and Rosie's activities, their shiny new friends, their trips to Palm Springs and Sarasota and Santa Barbara. He would ask me about my work, my friends, but he never once asked how I felt, or how I was coping, or how I got by. We had these summer dinners until Rosie called me one night, a few months after William and I got married, in 1989, to say her beloved Sully had cancer. He died four months later from a melanoma, received in part, from that new hot and sunny outdoor lifestyle he so enjoyed.

I shook my head as if to erase the memories and turned away, plowing swiftly through the thick sand, away from the house and the past.

Usually, during my morning walks, often in the early hours, the light was new and butter yellow. The shadows were long and the world sleepy and quiet, giving me the sensation that I was somehow

ahead of something. Today, though, the sun was brighter, whiter than usual, and the glare was causing me to squint and intensified the slight pinching headache right behind my eyebrows.

My eyes were drawn to something glinting and winking from the sand. An empty bottle of Popov Vodka, its red square label bright against the sea grasses, the clear plastic sparkling, twinkling, promising. Could this be a remnant of Hazel's night? I picked up the bottle staring at it, my heart beating thickly in my throat.

Just seeing that bottle brought back another flurry of memories; I had spent my childhood searching for my mother's half-filled scotch and vodka bottles and emptying them down the kitchen sink drain in some stupid, wishful ritual. I wondered if I was to be picking up bottles after Hazel now. Maybe Hazel's burgeoning problems had brought my mother up in my mind, or maybe it was the thoughts of selling the house, but she had become a milky specter this summer, more present than she had been in many, many years.

There were some wonderful memories in this house, but some hard ones too. It occurred to me, a tiny fleeting thought, that maybe it wasn't an altogether bad thing that we were selling the house, but I still couldn't forgive William. I thought back to last fall, what I ruefully think now as the beginning of the end, when William began to work much longer hours. He was gone before I woke up, and he returned long after I went to bed. He was stressed, frazzled, and exhausted. I, of course, assumed the worst: an affair. Little did I know that that would have been preferable to the truth, which I eventually discovered when I demanded that once and for all he explain his months of distraction, moodiness, and absence.

We sat down at the kitchen table one night when Hazel was out. I had poured each of us a fortifying glass of wine, which I had a sense I would need. "William, we need to talk. I need to know what the hell is going on."

William was thin, and the gray circles under his eyes were darkening. He didn't look well. He held his wine glass between two hands and looked down.

"Are you having an affair?" I knew the answer. Of course he was.

He looked up at me and started to say something. "What—"

I interrupted. "Please don't lie. I don't know what else to think. You're never fucking home. You say you're working all the time, but I just don't buy it." My voice was rising in volume despite my vow to stay calm.

In our Back Bay brownstone, on that beautiful day, with the maple trees' new citron leaves outside our windows making the world aglow in a cheery spring light, he told me what he had done. I saw the words leaving his mouth as if in a dream, spilling out messy and muted, nonsensical and confusing.

He explained that his advertising agency, the one he started fifteen years prior, the one in his own name, the one bound to succeed and thrive, was in fact failing. Fast. In September, he lost his two biggest clients. He had let people go then. He had taken out business loans to pay bills, and he had been doing all of this for nine months. The decline continued, and he panicked. In an attempt to save the agency, he had put our Chatham house, *my* Chatham house, my beloved Crow's Nest up for collateral against a loan, solely for the purpose of saving his dying company. He had forged my signature on the loan. He didn't tell me because he was afraid. He was ashamed of his failure. He thought he could turn things around. Then by March it was clear that the influx of money hadn't worked to fix the problems. The company continued to lose revenue. There was another series of unfortunate client departures, a dip in the economy and some uncharacteristically poor business decisions by William himself, which had all resulted in the precipitous decline of his once-promising business.

The large loan he took out against the Crow's Nest was a short-term fix, which, of course, had not worked. And now, *we* were in debt and unable to pay for the taxes, upkeep, and bills related to the Crow's Nest, which were significant, and ever-increasing. And despite my constant requests for him to dump the company and go back to work at an established agency with a guaranteed salary, he was still working laboriously to save that quickly sinking ship.

In the aftermath of his confession, my extreme disappointment, my rage, his shame, our burgeoning fights over money and bills grew, until, as my father had done years before, William left. He had to. I wanted him to. I was so angry I could not and *would not* speak with him, let alone figure out how we could fix our marriage, if that was even possible. He packed a few bags and moved in with his brother and sister-in-law in Wellesley. Hazel was standing with me when he left, stone-faced and grim.

"Jesus, Mom. Really? You're making him go?" I started to respond to Hazel, but she ran after William and hugged him on the sidewalk. She yelled up at me, now standing on the front stoop. "Have you ever heard of forgiveness?" Forgiveness? After nine fucking months of lies and deceit and failure? No, no forgiveness. How else was I supposed to react? I was furious, and I had every reason to be. The things I loved best about him, his stability and reliability, were gone, and with them, my family's home.

And now, all summer, in myriad text messages and phone calls, he was begging me to forgive him, begging for me to move past this, begging for me to somehow forget what he had done and have us come back together as if nothing had happened. Well, something *had* happened, and I knew I would never forgive him. And even if I could, how could I ever trust him again?

About a mile and a half down the beach was an old wooden dilapidated rowboat with aged, chipped turquoise and orange paint on its hull. It was turned upside down about fifteen yards past the high tide mark. The name on the boat was barely visible: *Turnabout*.

I always thought that old boat was the perfect marker for the half-way point of my walk. I touched the boat and its old khaki fraying bowline, and then turned around from there. I looped back toward home, the sun higher, the sky hazier, the gulls now dropping clams on the shore, diving down to collect the gooey meat from the fractured shells. Sometimes, during this second half of my walk, I would feel peaceful and light, almost floating, but today, as I approached the house, I started to feel tight and constricted.

I looked up and saw Nancy Knight coming down onto the beach from her house. I didn't want to see anyone, least of all her, the town gossip. She held up a hand to stop me.

"Fessenden!" She was wearing an old bathing suit and one of those bathing caps with rubber flowers flopping all over it. I could see a little of her short, white hair peeking out from the edges. She had the rubber strap clipped under her chin—for security, I guess.

"Hi, Nancy," I said through gritted teeth as she came closer. She had tried very hard to be friends with my elegant, understated grandmother, but Mimi never cared for her; she felt Nancy was both a snoop and a social climber. "Going for your swim?" I asked.

"Yes, dear, I am. You know me! Have to have my morning swim! It's how I keep my girlish figure!" She chuckled to herself as she looked down at her bony body. She shielded her eyes from the glare and quickly changed her expression to one of deep concern. "Fessenden, dear, did I hear a terrible rumor about the Crow's Nest?"

Last night's spaghetti churned in my stomach. "Um, yeah. We are listing the house this fall." I looked down at the watermelon-pink nail polish on her crinkly brown toes.

She rested her spotted hand on my forearm. "Oh dear, oh dear. This is just a travesty. Such a shame, such a terrible shame."

"Yes, yes it is," I agreed. I wanted to leave this conversation immediately and get back home. I didn't need Nancy Knight reminding me how fucking sad it was to sell this place.

"I just can't imagine how your grandmother would feel. Oh, and your grandfather. My gracious, they adored this place."

Thanks a lot, Nancy, I thought. Thanks a fucking lot. I wanted to look right into her pale gray-blue eyes set in her deeply wrinkled, tanned WASP-y face and say, "Shut the fuck up, Nancy," but instead I breathed in deeply through my nose, exhaled loudly and said, "Yes, well, it's disappointing for all of us." This was taking an enormous amount of restraint.

She furrowed her brow as if struggling with her next thought. "And I hear it's due to some...financial troubles?" She said the last two words in a loud whisper. I would have laughed at the theatrics if I weren't so pissed off.

I narrowed my eyes, looked at her, shaking my head, and said, "Yep. You heard right." And then I couldn't stop. I thought about stopping, but I couldn't. I raised my voice and continued, "You know what, Nance? Here's the whole story: William *fucked* up at work so badly we have to sell this house just so we can continue to stay in the brownstone and pay Hazel's tuition and eat organic food instead of Costco crap, and then William moved out, which *totally* sucks but was totally necessary because of the fuckup and all, and we're struggling to stay afloat and the Volvo needs new tires and something's up with Hazel and I can't finish my fucking book and we're probably all going to die of shame and poverty." There. Yes. Done. That felt *really* good. I nodded my head for emphasis, turned on my heel, and left her standing there slack-jawed and silent.

Fueled by my righteous indignation, I marched past the main house and up to the Halfway House. It was clear Hazel hadn't stirred, and my fury at Nancy was redirected at my daughter, who should have been packing by now.

"Hazel, wake up!"

She rolled over slowly, sliding something under her pillow. "Fuck, Mom, relax. I'm up."

“We have to get out of here. We have to beat the traffic, and I have stuff to do in Boston, and there’s so much to do here. Pack, pack, pack!”

“Calm down, Mom. Jesus, you’re always panicking. Just relax.”

“Haze, what did you just slide under your pillow?”

She looked squarely at me and let out a dramatic sigh. “My journal, Mom. Very private. We’re supposed to keep a summer journal for English.”

“Oh, OK,” I said, relieved and sorry I had even asked. I didn’t want to be the paranoid person I was becoming. “Do you need help packing?”

“Nope.” Then she gave me an empty, blank look before she started furiously tapping at her phone keyboard. This change in her, this growing separation and worsening connection between us, made my heart ache. It physically hurt. I wanted so desperately to reach her, to connect somehow, to have even the smallest and most benign of interactions. When she turned her back to me, I stared at her spine, tiny lumps of stacked bone, and realized our small conversation was finished. I left her and her phone.

I went into the main house, the screen door slamming again, this time catching me on the heel with a painful jab. I let out an angry, “Ow,” just as my phone buzzed loudly in my pocket. I expected to see William’s name on the screen, which I would have put through to voice mail, but it was Richard Lowell, a dear old friend of my mother’s and a family tax attorney who assisted me in all things legal, financial, tax-related, and especially Chatham-house-related. His father (Richard Lowell, senior) had been a great help to my grandparents in the same capacity.

“Hi, Richard,” I said. “Just packing up and heading back to Boston today. How are you? I don’t think we’ve spoken since April fifteenth. Sorry about that. Enjoying your Sunday?”

“Uh, yes I am. All is good. I’m fine,” he said perfunctorily. There was a long pause and a deep exhale. “Listen, Fez, I need to

talk with you about something rather sensitive. It’s really important. Any way you could meet me in my office...soon?”

“Um, OK. I have a few minutes to talk now.” I assumed it was about the house sale—William must have called him—and I wanted to get it over with. A tiny part of me even indulged a childish fantasy that he was calling me with a solution that had been worked out without me even knowing it.

“Actually, this one needs to be face-to-face,” he said solemnly.

My stomach clenched. “All right...is tomorrow morning OK? Hazel and I are closing up Chatham today, and I’m not sure I’ll be up for a meeting tonight.”

He paused and took a deep breath. “Sure. Come by the office around nine o’clock, and we’ll talk.”

“OK, see you then.” I hung up, dropped the phone on the bed, and threw myself into a frenzy, a whirlwind of frenetic cleaning, sorting, and packing that wouldn’t leave me time to contemplate Richard’s mysterious call, or the state of my marriage, or that this was our last day in this house.

As I brought the last bags and supplies up to the car, I started to move heavily, slowed by the surging wave of dread and sadness that began to fill me and weigh me down. After I put the last duffel bag in the back of my gray Volvo, and I looked back at the Crow’s Nest, the lovely little shingled Cape Cod house, I waved a little wave. My eyes were hot and filling when Hazel came out of the Halfway House with her two bags.

“This is it, Hazel. This is it,” I said, the emotion stuck in my throat.

“OK, Mom.” Her voice was flat. I hoped she was more tired than coldly uncaring. Usually, she was emotional about the end of summer; now, she just looked bored.

I closed the latch of the tailgate, our sandy bags piled up, and pulled away, Hazel slumped down next to me and was fast asleep by the time we reached Route 6.

That night, in the stale and dusty air of our Boston brownstone, the pigeons cooing and rattling on the eaves, after Hazel and I dumped every bag from the car onto the floor by the front door, I collapsed in bed, physically and mentally exhausted, and I was quickly overtaken by an unsettling dream.

I stood on the top step of a steep wooden staircase, my bare feet small and far beneath me, my toes curled over the lip of the step. Ready to dive, I bent my knees, leaned forward, and launched off the step, taking off with my arms splayed like Superman.

I immediately soared out straight, then dipped down low to follow the angle of the staircase. At the bottom of the stairs, the front door smoothly opened for me by an unseen doorman, allowing in neon-yellow sunlight, so bright I had to squint, as I soared out through the doorway and up, higher and higher. I looked over at my arms, which were now covered with beautiful overlapping glossy blue-black feathers, my sharp black beak visible straight ahead as I cut through the air.

I flew high up over the house, circling above the gray shingled roof, then out back over the grassy rectangle of a backyard, the sandy, dark beige beach, the dock, the float, and dipped down toward the bay.

The water was dark blue, almost navy, but sparkling with thousands of bright diamonds, winking and blinking and dancing in the morning sun. I saw something in the water, right in the middle of the small bay. Something white, ethereal, and delicate. I circled lower and lower until I could see it clearly. It was a nightgown, white and lacy, the sheer tissue fabric beginning to rot. I flew down quickly, diving steeply, and I pinched the nightgown with my beak and pulled upward. But it was wrapped around something...a body, reed thin, warm, newly dead, pale blue as sky. Black eyes stared out of a narrow, wan face, her throat rotted and chewed, a hollow spot where her neck should have been. My mother. She looked right at me and started to speak, but all that came out was a gurgling sound and a rush of foaming, black, salty water from her pale lips.

CHAPTER 2

HAZEL

Tonight was gonna be epic. It had to be; it was the last night of the summer, a pretty shitty summer, actually. It was so boring down here on the Cape, but it was awesome when Ty and Bex came to chill, like tonight. I planned to go out with a bang before I had to go back to school, the dreaded junior year with all that homework, SATs, field hockey, my mom breathing down my neck. All the bullshit made me sick just thinking about it.

Ty and Bex were driving down from Boston; I'm pretty sure Ty doesn't even have his license yet. Not even his permit, I don't think. I haven't seen it anyway. But his parents are always traveling for work, so he can sneak out and use one of their cars practically whenever he wants. He doesn't give a shit about rules or all the stuff you're supposed to do. He just lives his life in his own way, and I love that about him.

Ty FaceTimed. "We're close."

"Cool," I said. I was looking at his face on my phone. He was in profile; I guess Bex was holding the phone. Then he looked right at me and blew out a perfect, solid ashy-gray smoke ring. He did his sexy smirk thing, and I was in awe of his effortless cool.

"Be there in like ten minutes, I think," he said.