

the bookstore
on the beach

*For whatever we lose (like a you or a me),
It's always our self we find in the sea.*

—**e.e. cummings**

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Tuesday, June 8

Today her daughter was returning for the summer. Mary Langford gazed eagerly out at the street in front of her small bookstore, looking for a glimpse of Autumn's car and, when she saw nothing except a large family going into the ice cream parlor at the end of the block, checked her watch. Three-thirty. Autumn had called at lunchtime to say that she and the kids were making good time. They probably wouldn't be much longer.

"You've been quiet today," Laurie commented from where she sat behind the counter, straightening the pens, tape, stapler and bookmarks.

Mary turned from the large front window she'd recently decorated with posters of the hottest new releases. "I worry when she's on the road for so long."

"She'll make it, and it'll be great to see her and the kids. They haven't been back since Christmas, have they?"

“No.” She picked up the feather duster and began cleaning shelves—a never-ending job at Beach Front Books, which she and Laurie owned as 50/50 partners. Autumn lived in Tampa, Florida, far enough away that it wasn’t easy to get together when Taylor and Caden were in school. “And I doubt they’ll come back for the holidays this year.” Fortunately, they were more consistent about returning for the summer—except for last summer, of course, which was understandable. Mary hoped she’d be able to count on that continuing, but with the kids getting older, nothing was certain. Taylor had only one more year of high school before heading off to college. Caden had two. Mary feared this might be the last time, for a while, they’d all be together in Sable Beach.

“You could go visit them,” Laurie pointed out.

Autumn had invited her many times. Remembering the arguments her refusal had sparked over the years caused Mary’s stomach to churn. She wanted to go to Tampa, wanted to make it so that her daughter wouldn’t have to do *all* the traveling. Autumn had been going through so much lately. But the thought of venturing into unfamiliar territory filled Mary with dread. Other than to go to Richmond occasionally, which was the closest big city, she hadn’t left the sleepy Virginia beach town she called home in thirty-five years. “Yes, but you know me. This is the only place I feel safe.”

Laurie rocked back on the tall stool. “Well, if the fear hasn’t gone away by now, I guess it’s not going to.”

“No. I don’t talk about it anymore, but the past is as real to me now as it’s ever been.”

Although the store had been busy earlier, what with the influx of tourists for the season, foot traffic had slowed. When that happened, they often talked more

than they worked. Beach Front Books wasn't Laurie's sole source of income. Her husband, Christopher Conklin, was a talented artist. He painted all kinds of seascapes, and while he wasn't in any prestigious galleries, he sold his paintings in a section they reserved for him in the store as well as online.

But Mary, who'd never been married, had no other support. Beach Front Books didn't make a large profit, but no one loved the escape that books provided more than she did, and the store garnered enough business that she could eke out a living. That was all that mattered to her.

"Autumn gets so mad that I won't go out and see the world. Visit. Travel. That sort of thing," she murmured, wishing she didn't have the scars and limitations that had, at times, put such a strain on their relationship. "She keeps saying I'm too young to live like an old lady."

"She has a point."

Mary sighed. "I'm not young anymore."

"What are you talking about? You're nine years younger than me. Fifty-four is not old."

That was true, but she'd had to grow up far sooner than most people. "I feel ancient."

"Next year, you should go to Tampa, if they ask you."

She shook her head. "I can't."

"Maybe you'll prove that you can."

Mary couldn't help bristling. She didn't like it when Laurie pushed her. "No."

"Autumn doesn't understand, Mary. That's what causes almost every fight you have with her."

"I know. And I feel bad about that. But there's nothing I can do."

Laurie lowered her voice. “You could tell her the truth...”

“Absolutely not,” Mary snapped. “Why would I ever do that?”

“There are reasons. And you know it. We’ve talked about this before,” Laurie said, remaining calm, as always. That was one of the many things Mary liked about her—she was steady and patient, and that steadiness somehow helped Mary cope when old feelings and memories began to resurface.

In this instance, Laurie might also be right. Mary could feel the past rising up from its deep slumber. Maybe it *was* time to tell Autumn.

But there were just as many reasons *not* to—compelling reasons. And the thought of revealing the past, seeing it all through her daughter’s eyes, made Mary feel ill. “I can’t broach that subject right now, not with what she’s been dealing with the past year and a half. Besides, it’s been so long it’s almost as if it happened to someone else,” she said, mentally shoving those dark years into the deepest recesses of her mind. “I want to stay as far away from that subject as possible.”

Laurie didn’t call her out on the contradiction her statement created. And Mary was glad. She couldn’t have explained how it could be real and frightening and always present and yet she could feel oddly removed from it at the same time.

“Except that it *didn’t* happen to someone else,” Laurie responded sadly. “It happened to you.”

The scent of the ocean, more than anything else, told Autumn she was home. She lowered her window

as soon as she rolled into town and breathed deeply, letting the salt air fill her lungs.

“What are you doing?” Taylor held her long brown hair in one hand to keep it from whipping across her face as she looked over from the passenger seat.

Autumn smiled, which was something she knew her children hadn’t seen her do enough of lately. “Just getting a little air.”

“You hate it when I roll down *my* window,” Caden grumbled from the backseat.

“I’m hoping I won’t be so irritable anymore.” For the past eighteen months, Autumn had been mired in the nightmare that had overtaken her life. She almost hadn’t come to Sable Beach because of it. But when her children had each pleaded with her, separately, to ask if they could spend the summer with “Mimi” like they used to, she knew they needed some normalcy in their lives—needed to retain at least one of their parents. Her grief and preoccupation with her husband’s disappearance had probably made them feel as though she’d gone missing, too—at least the mother they’d known before. She hoped by returning to the place that held so many wonderful memories for them all, they’d be able to heal and reconnect.

It wasn’t as if she could do anything more for Nick, anyway. That was the ugly reality. She’d exhausted every viable lead and still had no idea where he was. If he was dead, she had to figure out a way to go on without him for the sake of their children.

The second she spotted the bookstore, the nostalgia that welled up—along with memories of a simpler, easier time—nearly brought her to tears. When she was a little girl, she’d spent so many hours following her

mother through the narrow aisles of that quaint shop, which looked like something from the crooked, narrow streets of Victorian London, dusting bookshelves or reading in the nook her mother had created for her.

She'd spent just as much time at Beach Front Books when she was a teenager, only then she was stocking shelves, ordering inventory, working the register—and, again, reading, but this time sitting on the stool behind the counter while waiting for her next customer.

God, it was good to be back. As hard as she could be on her mother for her unreasonable fears and idiosyncrasies, she couldn't wait to see her. Until this moment, she hadn't realized just how much she missed her mother. So what if Mary was almost agoraphobic with her unwillingness to leave her little bungalow a block away from the sea? She was always there, waiting to welcome Autumn home. Maybe Autumn had never had a father, or the little brother or sister she'd secretly longed for, but she was lucky enough to have the enduring love of a good mother.

"There it is." She pointed to the bookstore as she slowed to look for a place to park.

"We're not going to the beach house?" Caden asked, looking up from whatever he'd been doing on his phone.

"Not right now. First, we're stopping to see Mimi and Aunt Laurie. Then we'll take our stuff over to the house."

A glance in the rearview mirror showed her his scowl. "I hope it won't be too late to go to the beach," he said.

"I'm sure we can manage to get there before dark," she responded as she wedged her white Volvo SUV between a red convertible and a gray sedan and grabbed her purse.

Taylor spoke, causing her to pause with her hand on the door latch. “You already seem different.”

“In what way?” Autumn asked.

“Less uptight. Not so sad.”

“Coming here makes me happy,” she admitted.

“Then why were we going to skip it again?” Caden asked.

Autumn twisted around to look at him. “You know why.”

A pained expression claimed her daughter’s face. “Does this mean you’re letting go?”

“Of Dad? Of course she’s letting go,” Caden answered, the hard edge to his voice suggesting he considered the question to be a stupid one. “Dad’s dead.”

“Don’t say that!” Taylor snapped. “We don’t know it’s true. He could be coming back.”

“It’s been eighteen months, Tay,” Caden responded. “He would’ve come back by now if he could.”

“Stop it, both of you.” Autumn didn’t want them getting into an argument right before they saw her mother. They were at each other’s throats so often lately; it drove her crazy to constantly have to play referee. But she could hardly blame them. They’d lost their father, and they didn’t know how or why. And she had no explanation. “Life’s been hard enough lately,” she added. “Let’s not make it any harder.”

“Then *you* tell her,” Caden said. “Dad’s dead, and we have to move on. Right? Isn’t that the truth? Go ahead and say it—you *are* letting go.”

Was she? Is that what this trip signified? If not, how much longer should she hold on? And would holding on be best for them? She couldn’t imagine her kids would want to spend another eighteen months swal-

lowed up by grief and consumed with seeking answers they may never find. Taylor was seventeen, going to be a senior and starting to investigate colleges. Caden was only a year behind her. Surely, they would prefer to look forward and not back.

Regardless, Autumn wasn't sure she *could* continue to search, not like she had. She was exhausted—mentally and physically. She'd put everything she had into the past year and a half, and it hadn't made a damn bit of difference. That was the most disheartening part of it.

"I'm continuing to hold out hope," she said, even though everyone she'd talked to, including the FBI, insisted her husband must be dead. It was difficult to see the idyllic, two-parent upbringing she was trying to give her kids—something she'd never had herself—fall apart that quickly and easily, and the heartbreak, loneliness and frustration of looking for Nick, with no results, created such a downward spiral for her. She knew it had been just as painful for her children. That was why maybe she *should* let go—to provide the best quality of life for them as possible.

"What does that *mean*? Are you going to keep looking for him?" Caden pressed. "Is that how you're going to spend the summer?"

He could tell something had changed, that coming here signified a difference, and he wanted to reach the bottom line. But Autumn wasn't ready to admit that she'd failed. Not with as many times as she'd tried to comfort them by promising she'd have answers eventually.

She opened her mouth to try to explain what she was thinking in the gentlest possible way when she

spotted her mother. Mary had come out of the store and was waving at them.

“There’s your grandmother,” she said.

Thankfully, her children let the conversation lapse and got out of the car.

“Hi, Mimi.” With his long strides, Caden reached Mary first. Although he wasn’t yet fully grown, he was already six-one. And Taylor was five foot ten. They were both tall, like their father.

Mary gave each of the kids a big hug and exclaimed about how grown-up they both were and how excited she was to see them before turning to Autumn.

“You’ve lost weight,” she murmured gently, a hint of worry belying her smile before they embraced.

“I’m okay, Mom.” Autumn could smell a hint of the bookstore on Mary’s clothes and realized that was another scent she’d never forget. It represented her childhood and all the great stories she’d read growing up. She’d once hoped to read every book in the store. She hadn’t quite made it, thanks to new releases and fluctuating inventory, but she’d read more books than most people. She still considered books to be a big part of her life. “It’s good to be home.”

“Laurie’s dying to see you. Let’s go in and say hello,” Mary said and held the door.

As soon as the bell sounded, Laurie hurried out from behind the register. “There you are! It’s a good thing you came when you did. I was afraid it would drive your mother crazy waiting for you. She’s been so anxious for you to arrive. We both have.”

Taylor allowed her aunt to give her an exuberant squeeze. “I’m glad we got to come this year. Where’s Uncle Chris?”

“Probably on the beach somewhere, painting. You know how he is once the weather warms up—just like a child, eager to get outdoors.”

They took a few minutes to visit the small section of the store dedicated to Christopher’s work so they could admire his latest paintings. Autumn was especially enamored with one he’d done of the bookstore that portrayed a child out front, hanging on to her mother with one hand and carrying a stack of books with the other. That child could’ve been her once upon a time. She almost wondered if his memory of her had inspired it, which was why she decided, if that painting didn’t sell before she left, she’d buy it herself and take it back to Tampa.

Fortunately, she had the money. As a corporate attorney, Nick had always done well financially. After the first few years of their marriage, which he spent finishing school, they’d rarely had to scrimp. But it was what he’d inherited when his father passed away that’d really set them up. After Sergey’s death, Autumn had quit working as a loan officer for a local bank and, for the past ten years, had focused on her family, her home, gardening and cooking. Her financial situation was also one of the reasons she rejected the idea that Nick might’ve left her for another woman, a possibility that had been suggested to her many, many times. Why would he leave his children, too, and walk away without a cent? Sure, they’d had their struggles, especially in recent years, when his work seemed to take more and more of his time and attention, but neither of them had ever mentioned separating.

“This is amazing,” she exclaimed as she continued

to study the little girl in the painting. "I love Chris's work."

"The last original he donated to charity went for six thousand dollars," Laurie announced proudly.

"Who bought it?" Autumn asked. If whoever it was lived in Sable Beach, chances were good she'd know him or her.

"Mike Vanderbilt, over at The Daily Catch. He was drunk when he got into a bidding war for it, and now it's hanging in his restaurant. I think he's glad to have it, but I imagine he also sees it as a reminder not to raise his paddle when he's been drinking."

They all laughed to think of the barrel-chested and good-natured Mike letting alcohol bring out his competitive nature.

"His wife must be doing well, then," Autumn said. "She's still in remission?"

Laurie shot Mary a surprised glance, and it was Mary who answered. "I'm afraid not. She was when he bought that painting, but they received word just a couple of months ago that Beth's breast cancer has come back."

"Oh no," Autumn cried. Everyone knew the owners of The Daily Catch. They did a lot for the community. And it was her favorite restaurant. When she was home, she ate there all the time. "What's her prognosis?"

"Not good. That's why Quinn has moved home from that little town in upstate New York. He helps his father with the restaurant these days. I'm sure he's also here to spend time with his mother before...well, before he has to say goodbye to her for good."

"Quinn's home?" Autumn said. She wasn't expect-

ing that; the mention of his name knocked her a little off-kilter. When he was a senior and she was a junior, she'd given him her virginity in the elaborate tree house that was in his backyard, even though he hadn't been nearly as interested in being with her as she was him. And then he'd broken her heart by getting back together with his girlfriend, the same woman he married five years later. "So his wife and kids are here now, too?"

"No, he doesn't have any kids," Laurie said, chiming in again. "And he and Sarah—what was her maiden name?"

"Vizii," Autumn supplied.

"Yes. Vizii. They divorced almost two years ago. You didn't know?"

"How would I?" She'd seen nothing about it on social media, but then, Quinn had never been on social media, and she'd never been able to find Sarah, either—not that she'd checked recently because she hadn't. "I haven't seen him since he was working as a lifeguard at the beach after his first year of college and he had to swim out and save me from drowning." She didn't add that she'd faked the whole episode just to get his attention. She was mortified about that now and cringed at how obvious it must've been to him.

"I'm surprised the gossip didn't reach you all the way down in Tampa," Laurie said. "For a while, it was about the only thing anyone around here could talk about."

But who would tell her? Her mother wasn't much for gossip, which was ironic, considering she'd lived in Sable Beach for so long. The town where Autumn had been raised took talking about their friends and neighbors to a whole new level.

“Why would his divorce be such big news?” she asked. Besides being one of the most popular boys in school, Quinn had been handsome, athletic and at the top of his class—undoubtedly one of Sable Beach’s finest. But still. Divorce was so commonplace it was hardly remarkable anymore. And Quinn was thirty-nine. He’d been gone from this place—except for when he visited his folks—for twenty-one years. How could what was going on in his life be such a hot topic?

Laurie tilted her head toward Taylor and Caden in such a way that Autumn understood she was hesitant to speak in front of them. “There were some... extenuating circumstances. Have your mother tell you about it later.”

“I want to hear,” Caden protested.

“Why? We don’t even know him.” Taylor jumped in before Autumn could respond, then Caden snapped at her to shut up and they started arguing again.

“Don’t make Mimi regret inviting us.” Autumn rolled her eyes to show how weary she was of this behavior.

“Should we go over and get you settled in?” Mary asked. “Laurie offered to close the store tonight, so I’m free to start dinner while you unpack.”

“Sure,” Autumn said. Once Caden and Taylor got to the beach, maybe they’d mellow out and fall into the same companionable rhythm they usually achieved when they came to Sable Beach.

Her mother’s house seemed the same, except that its shingle siding was now white instead of green. It had needed a fresh coat of paint, and the white looked clean and crisp. But as much as she loved the update, Autumn was relieved to find that nothing else had changed. Visiting Mary was like going back in time.

Not many people could do that twenty years after they'd left home.

Because it was such a small cottage, Caden had to sleep on the couch, Taylor took Autumn's old room next to Mary's, and the three of them shared the only bathroom, which was off the hallway. Autumn slept above the detached garage, where she had her own bed and bath, thanks to Nick. Because he'd typically had to work when she brought the kids, he'd never spent more than a few days at a time in Sable Beach. That had caused more than a few arguments over the years, so she'd readily agreed when he'd insisted they have their own space for when he did come. She'd thought it might mean he'd accompany them more often, or stay a little longer when he did. It made no difference in the end, but he was the one who'd hired an architect to create the plans to finish off the top of the garage, even though it had been Autumn who'd picked out the finishes and colors.

A wave of melancholy washed over her as she left the kids with her mother to get settled in at the main house, let herself into the garage and climbed the narrow stairs at the back to the apartment, where she'd be living for the next few months, by herself. As often as she'd been here over the years, it felt strange to know that Nick would not be visiting. At times, she was still so lost without him.

"Where are you?" she whispered as she walked around, touching the things he'd touched. She'd come for Christmas without him, but she and Taylor had shared her old room in the house. They could do that for a week or so but not for three months—not without wanting to turn around and head straight home.

She stopped in front of the dresser, where her

mother had put a picture of her family. She'd known her husband was getting involved in something secretive, that a friend who was with the FBI had recruited him for his knowledge of Ukraine. Because his parents had emigrated from there, he'd known the language, was familiar with the customs and still had a few relatives in the country. That made him useful in what had become a very troubled region.

Although he couldn't tell her exactly what he was doing for the government, she guessed he was working in counterterrorism, probably trying to infiltrate various radical groups. She'd read that the FBI sometimes used civilians who were particularly adept with computers, or had some specific knowledge or ability, to assist them.

Maybe he'd become a full-fledged spy, and whoever was on the other side had discovered his activities. The FBI claimed they hadn't sent him to Ukraine to begin with, but she'd discovered that he'd flown into Kyiv before disappearing and had no idea why he'd go there if not at their request. If he wanted to reacquaint himself with his uncle and cousins, he would've told her. Besides, the family he had there claimed they hadn't heard from him. She'd traveled halfway across the world to speak to them face-to-face—not that the long, tiring trip had accomplished anything.

She lifted her suitcase onto the bed and was unpacking her clothes when her mother came up. “The kids would like to go to the beach before we have dinner, but I told them I'd rather they not go alone.”

“Mom, they're sixteen and seventeen,” she said. “Kids that age go to the beach by themselves all the time.”

“Still. I don't mind walking down with them.”

That was her mother's polite way of saying she was afraid they wouldn't be safe and felt the need to watch over them. Mary had always been overprotective. But Autumn managed not to say anything. What would it hurt for their Mimi to walk down to the water with them? There was no need to transfer the suffocation she'd felt to her children, especially because they'd had to put up with so much less of it. "Okay."

"Would you like us to wait for you?"

"No, I'll find you in a few minutes."

With a nod, her mother turned to leave but paused before descending the stairs. "It can't be easy for you to stay out here, knowing that Nick won't be coming. Would you rather we make other arrangements, like we did at Christmas? Have you stay in the house with us?"

Unless Nick suddenly showed up, she'd have to brave it at some point, wouldn't she? It might as well be now. "No. There's not enough room. Taylor and I both need our space."

"If you're sure."

"Mom?"

She looked up. "Yes?"

"Before you go, tell me what Laurie was referring to at the bookshop."

"About..."

"Quinn and Sarah," she said.

"Oh. No one really knows exactly what happened," her mother said.

"There must've been a story circulating." And she was eager to focus on something besides her own troubles for a change. She could see Nick's rain boots in the corner of the room and knew there would probably come a time—in the not-too-distant future—when she

would have to make the difficult decision about what to do with them.

She couldn't even imagine that. But she had a whole houseful of his belongings in Tampa, and if he didn't come back, she'd have to decide what to do with all of it. Should she box it up and put it in storage? Stubbornly continue to wait? And if so, for how long?

Her mother seemed as reluctant as ever to repeat gossip, but she must've understood that what'd happened to Quinn might create a good distraction, because she finally relented. "Sarah claims he was having an affair, which caused her to fly into a jealous rage and stab him."

This was not what Autumn had expected. "Did you say *stab* him?"

Her mother frowned. "I'm afraid so."

"But...he must be okay. Laurie said he was here, helping his father run the restaurant."

"She didn't hit anything vital, thank goodness. But I heard he spent a few days in the hospital, so his wounds weren't superficial, either."

Autumn whistled as she imagined how bad their marriage must've been for something like that to happen. "I thought they'd be happy together. They dated for so long before they got married. It's not as if they didn't know each other well." She sank onto the bed next to her suitcase. "Did he admit to cheating?"

"Not that I know of."

"But you think he did—cheat, I mean."

"I wouldn't be surprised. *Something* had to have made her react so violently."

Mary never gave the benefit of the doubt to a man. Autumn had noticed this before and assumed her fa-

ther was to blame. Although Mary refused to talk about the past—went rigid as soon as Autumn mentioned her father—there were times, more of them as she got older, when she found herself wondering who he was and what he was like. Before Nick went missing, she'd told her mother that she was tempted to try to look him up, and Mary had been so appalled—that Autumn would have any interest in him when he was such a “bad person”—that she'd dropped the idea.

It was something she thought she might like to revisit, though. Times had changed. Nowadays, a simple DNA test could possibly tell her a great deal. And there were moments when she felt she should be allowed to fill in those blanks.

But she hated to proceed without her mother's blessing. She owed Mary a degree of loyalty for being the parent who'd stuck with her.

Finished unpacking, she put her empty suitcase in the closet while trying to ignore Nick's snorkel gear, which was also in there, changed into her bathing suit and cover-up, slipped on her flip-flops and grabbed her beach bag. She was on her way down the stairs when she heard her phone buzz with an incoming call.

Assuming it would be her mother or one of her children, wondering what was taking her so long, she dug it out of her bag so that she could answer. But according to Caller ID, the person attempting to reach her wasn't a member of the family. It was Lyaksandro Olynyk, the Ukrainian private investigator she'd hired to look for Nick.

It was seven hours later in that part of the world. Why would he be calling her in the middle of the night?

2

Taylor stretched out on her towel. It was late in the day, so it wasn't as warm on the beach as she would've liked, but she was glad to be out of Florida, to have a break from her regular life. She was tired of being the girl whose father had gone missing. Tired of how everyone acted because of it. Tired of seeing her mother show up at school for one of her volleyball games with dark circles under her eyes, her mind thousands of miles away. Tired of the constant arguments with her brother because they suddenly couldn't get along.

Tired of it all.

Losing her father was bad enough without the other stuff. She just wanted to run away or be someone else for a while.

Thank God her mother had agreed that they could come to Mimi's. Sable Beach was better than Tampa. For one, she could breathe here. The place was so small she wasn't quite as invisible as she wished she

were, but most of the people in town only knew her as Autumn's daughter or Mary's granddaughter, so she could hide behind her mother and Mimi most of the time. And when they weren't around? She could handle the occasional superficial interaction. It was the constant pretense that was so hard. Smiling. Getting up and going to school every day. Feigning interest in conversations, events and high school drama that no longer interested her.

Now she could save all her energy for the acting she had to do for her own family.

Before she left, her friends had said she'd probably get bored and start begging to come home. They'd been joking, but she hoped they were right. Maybe if she did get bored, *really* bored, she'd be able to make herself go back to Florida after the summer was over. Otherwise, she was going to ask her mother if she could move in with Mimi and finish high school in Sable Beach. She hated to hurt Autumn. But she couldn't seem to relate to anyone anymore. She had to escape the past eighteen months.

Her phone chimed, but she didn't bother to pick it up. She didn't want to hear from her old friends, who cared so much about stuff that seemed stupid to her. A man had gone missing. A husband, a father and a good lawyer. How could life go on as if that was nothing? Couldn't they see that he'd taken a huge part of her with him?

Caden leaned around Mimi, who was sitting between them. "Can't you hear that?" he said, obviously irritated.

Rather than admit that she'd heard the ringing of her phone, too—because then he'd only demand to

know why she wasn't answering—she picked it up so she could see the screen.

She'd missed a call from her best friend, Danielle Kent, who'd followed up with a text message.

Answer your phone! You're not going to believe who I just saw at the mall.

Who?

Oliver Hancock.

She didn't want to talk about Oliver. Danielle and her other friends assumed she liked him—he probably did, too—because she'd had sex with him at a party two weeks ago. But that incident held no meaning for her. She'd simply been trying to shock herself into feeling *something*.

Too bad that night hadn't fixed anything. Even when she'd been with him, she hadn't felt anything. She'd just stared at the ceiling, totally numb, wishing he'd hurry up and finish. Although she'd been vaguely aware that they hadn't used a condom, she'd also been too reckless to do anything about it—couldn't bring herself to care—and now she had to worry about the possible consequences.

Can't talk right now. What'd he say? she wrote back, acting interested only because she knew Danielle would expect her to.

He wanted your number!

Taylor grimaced.

Did you give it to him?

I did.

“Shit,” she muttered.

“Something wrong, honey?” Mimi was wearing a long turquoise beach dress, her knees pulled into her chest and rope-like sandals on her feet. Taylor had always thought her grandmother was beautiful in an ethereal, almost untouchable way. With silver hair, light blue eyes that slanted slightly upward and high cheekbones, she could’ve been a model. She was definitely prettier than the grandmothers of Taylor’s friends, but Mimi was also a lot younger than most of them. She’d had Autumn when she was only sixteen.

Taylor hated that she might be following in her grandmother’s footsteps and having a baby when she was way too young. She knew better and should’ve been more careful. “No. Nothing.” Why say yes? Where would she even begin to explain?

This was where the acting came in...

Caden got to his feet, caught her eye and jerked his head toward the water. “Want to go for a swim?”

She knew part of the reason they fought so often was because she’d withdrawn from him. But she couldn’t help it; she was hurting too badly to try any harder than she was. “No.”

She could tell he was disappointed. Even Mimi glanced over as though she wished Taylor would change her mind. So she forced herself to relent. “Okay,” she said grudgingly. “Go ahead. I’ll be out in a sec.”

“Are you excited for your senior year?” Mimi asked

as they both watched Caden run into the ocean and dive beneath the surf.

Taylor turned off her phone and slipped it into her bag. She didn't want anyone to touch it, including her grandmother and especially her brother, if, for some reason, he came out of the ocean before she did. He'd be disgusted if he learned what she'd done with Oliver. Since she wasn't even attracted to Caden's ex-best friend, she was disgusted at herself. "Yeah," she lied. "I'm looking forward to it."

"Where would you like to go to college?"

Her grades had fallen so much she wasn't sure she'd be able to get into college—although she had done surprisingly well on the SAT. That could save her, providing something else didn't get in the way, like a *pregnancy*. She wished she knew when to expect her period, but she hadn't been paying any attention to her monthly cycle. Since she'd broken up with her boyfriend just before Christmas and had gone off the pill, there hadn't been any reason to. "Mom said that Old Dominion is only two and a half hours from here. Maybe I'll go there, so I can drive over and see you whenever I have the time."

"I'd love that," Mimi said. "It would be great if Caden chose Old Dominion, too."

She stood and dusted the sand off her legs. "He's hoping to get a water polo scholarship, so I doubt we'll go to the same college." That was another reason she was pulling away from her brother. They were going to be separated soon, regardless, and she couldn't face another loss, had to be more prepared for the next one.

"Of course." The bangles on Mimi's wrist jangled as she shaded her eyes. "How's your mother been doing?"

Taylor could tell by the tone of Mimi's voice that this wasn't a casual question. "I couldn't tell you. She doesn't talk to us about how she's feeling."

"Because she doesn't want to make what you're going through any worse," Mimi explained, always quick to defend her daughter.

Caden came to the surface, threw back his hair and went under again.

"I think Mom's decided Dad's not coming back," Taylor admitted.

Mary blinked several times before speaking. "Do *you* think he might?"

Taylor's chest suddenly felt as though it was buried beneath a thousand pounds of sand. "No," she admitted for the first time and ran down to the water.

Mr. Olynyk had a thick accent, making it hard for Autumn to understand him. She'd spoken to him many times since she'd hired him over a year ago, before she went to Ukraine. But it'd been months since he'd had anything of substance to report. Although he claimed he was working with various contacts inside the SBU, the Security Service of Ukraine, she was beginning to suspect that whatever he could do had already been done. So many people—from various governmental agencies, as well as chat rooms and forums she'd visited while trying to get help online—had warned her about her vulnerability and how easy it would be for an unscrupulous person to take advantage of her. After all, how would she know if he was telling the truth?

Now that she was no longer in the country, she felt so out of touch, so helpless. But she couldn't go back. It had been hard to leave her children, who each

went to stay with a friend while she was gone so they could continue going to school. Not only had those three weeks seemed interminable, she also hadn't accomplished anything. She had a face to put with Mr. Olynyk's name and had spent some time with him. But that certainly didn't stop her from lying awake at night, imagining that he'd proved Nick was dead months ago but had decided not to say anything.

Meanwhile, she couldn't tell her children what'd happened to their father, and she couldn't bring Nick's body home, where she could give him a proper burial and be satisfied that, even though his life was over, she'd done everything she could. While she hoped that he was alive and would come back to her, if they found him dead, that would at least put an end to the questions that nearly drove her mad. Not knowing when to quit, when she'd fulfilled her duty to the love they'd shared, was one of the worst parts of what she was going through.

"Say that again?" she said, when Olynyk mentioned something about the Donetsk region, which was held by separatists.

"A friend of the man I told you about last time, Ananiy Kushnir, recognized your husband's photograph. He believes he saw him."

She clutched the phone tighter. It was dangerous to get her hopes up. How many times had she been through this? But she craved news of her husband so badly she simply couldn't avoid taking the bait. "How long ago?"

"Months. Many months. Nick was in the company of known rebel forces."

"You think he came to your country to infiltrate

the separatists.” This was a theory they’d floated before, but there’d never been anything to suggest it was actually true.

“Possibly.”

He’d called her in the middle of what would be his night to tell her *this*? Apparently, she’d imbued his timing with more meaning than she should have, because this sounded like more of nothing to her.

“You want me to keep going, yes?”

That was his way of asking if he should spend more time. And more time meant more money. Should she continue with this? Was he on the right trail, or was this “friend” fictitious?

“What could’ve happened to him?” she asked for the millionth time. This was always how their conversations went—she pummeled him with questions and he danced around in his efforts to answer them.

“He could be working somewhere. I am looking. But it’s very dangerous. The Russian government has sent many sabotage groups—you understand? Sabotage is the correct word?”

“Yes. I know what that means.”

“These groups, they work...um...how do you say... independent.”

“Independently,” she said.

“Very dangerous,” he repeated. “Maybe...maybe they don’t like your husband.”

“Are you suggesting that Nick might’ve become a target of one of these Russian groups?”

“Could be. If they deem him an enemy, they could... do anything,” he finished weakly.

Had they murdered him? It sounded like something out of a movie, not her *life*.

She gripped the railing as she sank down onto the wooden steps. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

She let every bit of the longing she felt fill her voice. “In your *honest* opinion, do you believe Nick’s dead?”

He hesitated as though uncomfortable with the question. Then he said, “I think...yes. Otherwise, I find him long time ago.”

It was one thing for her to say Nick was most likely dead. It was another thing entirely to hear it from someone who knew the area and the situation far better than she did. This one response sounded completely frank—so frank that along with all the other emotions zipping around inside her, she felt a degree of guilt for suspecting Olynyk of trying to cheat her. Maybe she just hadn’t asked the right questions.

“Where could his body be?”

“Anywhere. But you want me to keep trying to find it, yes?”

Squeezing her eyes closed, she let her head fall back. Now they were searching for a body?

God, what should she do?

Tears trickled from her eyes and rolled back into her hair while she struggled to decide. For the most part, she’d quit weeping at random moments. Having Nick gone had become normal. What was new was the realization that she’d come to the end of the road. It was time to give up no matter how difficult it was to let him go.

She thought of those rain boots in the corner upstairs. The fact that he would probably never come back to wear them made it almost impossible to speak. “I’ll send you another two thousand. That should take

you through June. But if you can't provide something concrete by then—something that shows you're on the right trail—that will be the end of it. Do you understand?"

"*Tak.*"

After the past eighteen months, she'd learned enough Ukrainian to know that meant yes. She also knew how to say thank you: "*Dyakuyu tobi.*"

"*Nemae problem.*"

No problem. She shook her head as she disconnected, but another call came in before she could finish going down the stairs. It was her mother.

"Are you coming?" Mary asked as soon as she answered.

"Yes. I'll be right there."

After Mary ended the phone call with Autumn, she leaned back, feeling the soft sand give slightly beneath her palms as she watched her grandchildren body-surfing in the ocean. She loved this small part of the world. Living in Sable Beach had brought her peace and safety. She walked down to the water almost every night to visit the sea and be heartened by its constancy and beauty. It was more of a mother to her than her own mother had ever been—her *real* mother, anyway. She loved watching the gulls swoop and land and study her as curiously as she studied them.

One gull who visited this beach quite often was missing an eye. He would cock his head and look at her with the eye he had left, but he wouldn't venture close, not as close as the others.

She felt a certain kinship with him. Although hers were less visible, she had scars, too. They both clung

to the sanctuary Sable Beach provided and weren't willing to trust too much.

Would the peace she'd found here last? Or was everything about to change? For so long, her secret had felt safe. But thanks to the interest Autumn had shown in finding her father—right before Nick went missing—and the technological advances that made DNA testing commonplace, she was on edge again, like she'd been in the beginning, always wondering what might sneak up from behind.

Taylor had mentioned something only two weeks ago that indicated Autumn had been talking about her father again. Mary could remember the exact words and even the tone of her granddaughter's voice: *I think it bugs Mom that she doesn't know more about her father's side.*

Mary had glossed over that statement by saying she didn't know anything, either, but she felt that was a harbinger of doom. The subject would come up again—this time with Autumn—and probably before the summer was over. Mary desperately wanted to stick with her story, to keep everything status quo, but she knew she couldn't get away with that, not when a simple DNA test could give Autumn the means to track him down and prove her a liar.

And if she came out and told her? What would Autumn do with the information? Mary was afraid she'd reach out to people she didn't want her to have any contact with—and was loath to allow back into her own life.

The thought of that nearly caused her to pump her fist at the sky and scream, "Over my dead body!" It was the fight in her that had carried her through those

terrible years. But despite all she'd done to protect Autumn and create a new life for them both, and despite all she might do to keep the past from catching up with her, in the end she might not have any say in it.

Secrets had a way of coming out.

"There you are!"

Mary turned to see Autumn trudging toward her and waved.

"Taylor and Caden are having a blast," she said as soon as Autumn arrived and let her bag drop onto the sand. Sometimes Mary marveled at the banal things that came out of her mouth when there was so much more going on inside her head.

Autumn slid her sunglasses higher on the bridge of her nose as she turned to watch her children out in the waves. "For once they're not fighting." Pulling a towel from her bag, she prepared a spot where she could sit down. "Sorry it took me so long to get here. That private investigator I hired in Ukraine called."

"Did he have any news?"

"Not really. Just more of the same. He's found someone who might've seen Nick. He's taking more pictures to show this contact or that contact. A friend in the government might be able to help. He's managed to speak to the person he told me about last time, so we can at least cross one more potential lead off the list. That's all I ever get."

Mary could see why she'd be discouraged. "He has to be methodical, I suppose."

"That's true, but it's been so long. Is this investigator doing anything that will make a difference?"

"Who can say?"

It was difficult to watch her daughter suffer. For a

long time, Autumn had been so intent on finding Nick that Mary could scarcely reach her. She was up night and day, always on the internet or the telephone, trying to get more information, to push the government to help her, to speak to people who might have more power, to circulate his picture around various groups in Ukraine, to find someone over there who might be capable and willing to look into his disappearance. It terrified Mary to think that Autumn's efforts might draw the attention of the wrong sort of person or persons. What if Nick had indeed infiltrated a terrorist group, and they were so bothered by Autumn's dogged efforts to track him down that they decided to put a stop to her nosing around—by putting a stop to *her*?

When Mary mentioned the possibility to Laurie, Laurie had said she shouldn't let her imagination run away with her. The odds of something that terrible happening were one in a million.

But Mary didn't care how remote the chance might be. The odds of what'd happened to her were just as slim—and yet she'd been that one in a million.

"Do you trust him?" Mary asked.

"I did at first. He's the one who gave me that fuzzy photograph taken by a security camera at the airport in Kyiv, remember? That was how I knew Nick made his flight and landed in Ukraine, which was huge."

Mary remembered. Autumn had made a big deal of that picture, calling out the FBI on social media, claiming they were trying to sweep her husband's disappearance under the rug. His "handler" had finally reached out and admitted that Nick had been doing a few "low level" things for the bureau but only online. They wanted her to accept that he'd gone to Ukraine

on his own and pipe down, but she kept saying she couldn't believe he'd do that—not without telling her he was going out of the country.

“Isn't there something more that could be done to track Nick's cell phone?” Mary asked. “I know I've asked before, but they can do so much more now than they could even a year ago. I see it all the time on those forensic shows.”

“His cell phone should've yielded more information,” Autumn replied. “Believe it or not, if it were an older model, it would've had a baseband processor that powers up every ten minutes or so to retrieve text messages—although not phone calls—and I would've had a chance.”

“But he didn't have an older model.”

“Of course not. He relied on his phone a great deal, always had the latest and greatest. He loves—” she frowned and cleared her throat “—*loved* technology.”

“But most people have new technology these days. And I've read about the NSA being able to track cell phones, even when they're turned off.”

“The new phones have a unibody design where the battery can't be removed,” she explained. “As long as there's a battery, a phone can be tracked even when it's turned off.” She grimaced. “But only if it's infected with Trojans. According to everything I've been able to find, that's how the NSA does it. Anyway, I've tried. There's nothing more I can do in regards to his cell phone. And everything Olynyk provided of any real significance was almost a year ago. Yet, I keep paying him.”

“Because you're hoping he'll eventually find a thread you can use to unravel the whole mystery.”

Autumn bit her lip. “Yes. But am I letting my at-

tention be diverted when I should be giving it to the kids instead? Am I throwing away money on a dream that will never come to pass? I need to know whether I should be chasing it.”

Mary heard the anguish in her voice. “I wish I could answer that for you. But only you can decide. It’s whatever you can live with, right?”

Autumn adjusted her sunglasses. It was too late in the day for there to be much glare, but she probably felt safer behind them. Mary understood the need to have a buffer of some sort once in a while. “I told Olynyk to continue to search for the rest of the month. Then I’m done. I have to make myself let go, have to stop letting Nick’s disappearance tear our family apart.”

“You’ve done all you could,” Mary said softly. “You’ve worked night and day, investigated every lead, spent a fortune.”

“I have, and yet...is it enough? There’s always more I *could* do. The items that remain just don’t come with much likelihood of being worth the time, angst or money. And my children deserve to have at least one parent fully present. At this point, to continue searching almost seems—” she wrinkled her nose “—selfish, I guess. That I’ll be indulging my own broken heart and thirst for the truth over what would be best for them.”

Mary studied her daughter. The golden brown of her eyes, hidden behind those sunglasses, as well as her long, dark hair came from her father. But the oval shape to her face, the way her eyes turned up at the outer edges and her prominent cheekbones were Mary’s. So was her thin build. She looked far more delicate than her own children. Taylor and Caden had

Autumn's eye color and the same thick, wavy hair, which Taylor also wore long, but those features were paired with their father's stubborn jaw and sturdy build. "What would Nick want you to do?"

She folded her arms atop her knees, rested her chin on them and stared glumly off for a while, presumably at the ocean and her children—although it was hard to tell because of the sunglasses. "He'd want me to take care of the kids. He was generous that way."

"But..." Mary could hear the hesitancy in her voice.

"As soon as I decide that's the course I should take, I think...what if he's alive? What if I'm giving up just a few weeks or months too soon? What if I could've found him if only I'd kept searching?" She gestured emphatically. "The possibility nearly drives me insane, keeps me chasing my own tail."

Mary adjusted her dress while taking a moment to decide how best to approach what she wanted to say. "I can't tell you how he'd feel," she admitted. "But I can tell you how *I'd* feel if I were him."

Autumn looked so tragic and forlorn sitting there on the beach with the wind whipping at her hair. "How's that?"

"I wouldn't want you to be sad, lonely or filled with regret. I'd want you to rebound and embrace the life you have, enjoy every moment of it. And I would want you to be available to Taylor and Caden."

A tear slid from beneath Autumn's sunglasses. She dashed it away with notable impatience, but then she sniffed and said, "Thanks, Mom. I'm glad we came."

Mary smiled at the one person who had, once upon a time, been her only reason for living. "So am I."

3

Is everything okay?

Nick? Are you there? Can you answer me?

I thought for sure you'd check in by now. Are you all right?

Please, babe. I'm going crazy. Answer me.

Seriously? You can't even let me know that you're okay?

WTF?????

What do I tell the kids? They're asking about you, can't reach you, either.

This can't be happening!!! Where are you?

Unable to sleep, Autumn sat in the window seat of the dormer that served as the only window in the small studio above her mother's garage, scrolling through the text messages she'd sent to Nick a year and a half ago. They started out conversational and friendly, quickly turned frantic, then angry and insistent before hitting heartbroken. The last one she'd sent: Please, babe! I can't live without you.

But she *was* living without him. She had no choice.

She sighed. It didn't matter which kind of text she sent, they'd all gone unanswered. So had hundreds of others over the months since then.

You bastard, she wrote to his FBI handler. She hoped having his phone suddenly light up or ding in the middle of the night might at least wake Richard Jenkins. He deserved it. He knew more than he was saying; she felt it in her bones. Whatever the FBI had asked her husband to accomplish had gone terribly wrong, and now those who were involved in sending him to Ukraine were worried about the liability. She didn't think they knew where he was *exactly*, but she believed they could've provided information—in the beginning, anyway—that would've given her some direction in her search. And that might've made all the difference.

Because she saw no evidence that her text had been received, she assumed Richard was sleeping soundly, as unconcerned as ever. "Psychopath," she muttered and tossed her phone onto the cushion beside her. Even after he got her message in the morning she wouldn't receive a response from him. He'd quit communicating with her months ago.

In order to get her mind off Nick, so that she might be able to sleep at some point, she crossed to the bed

and opened her laptop. She was curious enough about Quinn and Sarah Vanderbilt to want to learn more. No one could have predicted this wrinkle in his life; she was completely blown away by it. And thinking about his problems made her own a little easier to bear. She felt guilty acknowledging that, but “misery loves company” was a cliché for a reason. She felt less alone in her own suffering.

Quinn and Sarah had lived in upstate New York, where she’d heard on one of her many trips to Sable Beach over the years that he worked as a structural engineer. Because some areas of upstate New York were quite rural, maybe the stabbing incident had been remarkable enough to be reported in the local paper.

Sure enough, after about ten minutes of searching, she found a short article in *The Villager*, which touted itself as “Ellicottville’s Official Newspaper,” dated nearly two years ago.

Wife Stabs Husband Over Purported Affair

Last night police were summoned to the home of Quinn and Sarah Vanderbilt on Longwood Drive where they found Quinn Vanderbilt, a male in his thirties, suffering from multiple stab wounds. He was taken by ambulance to Olean General Hospital, where he was admitted and treated.

A spokeswoman for the hospital has reported that he is now in stable condition and is expected to recover. Mrs. Vanderbilt was no longer at the scene when police arrived, but one officer found her at a neighbor’s house. When asked why she stabbed her hus-

band, Mrs. Vanderbilt claimed he was sleeping with another woman.

Mrs. Vanderbilt will be arraigned on Friday. Her lawyer was not available for comment at the time of this printing.

Autumn scrolled through several other links, hoping to find more information, and located an even shorter article in the same paper, three days later.

Woman Who Stabbed Husband to be Arraigned

Sarah Vanderbilt is being charged with attempted murder in the stabbing of her husband, Quinn Vanderbilt, who was taken to Olean Hospital three days ago. Mr. Vanderbilt has since been released from the hospital but has yet to make a statement.

Katherine Wilson, a neighbor, claims Mrs. Vanderbilt showed up with a kitchen knife covered in blood, screaming that her husband didn't love her anymore. "She said she'd rather have him dead than lose him to another woman," Mrs. Wilson reported.

Mrs. Vanderbilt is expected to plead not guilty. If convicted, she could serve twenty years to life.

Twenty *years*? "Wow," Autumn said on a long exhale as she continued her search and found one final article, written a year later.

Vanderbilt Gets Ten Years

Sarah Vanderbilt was sentenced today for the attempted murder of former husband Quinn Vander-

bilt. Her defense lawyer argued that she was not guilty by reason of insanity, but the prosecution had several witnesses to testify that she was aware of her actions, including a neighbor who claimed she said she'd rather see him dead than let him leave her.

It took the jury only three hours to return a guilty verdict.

Quinn Vanderbilt attended the trial but refused to testify against his ex-wife. In a surprising move, he asked the judge for leniency during the sentencing phase of the trial, claiming Sarah needed psychiatric help.

Sarah Vanderbilt wept as she heard her husband read his prepared remarks. She called out, "I will always love you," as he left the courtroom.

The judge sentenced her to ten years.

Autumn set her computer on the nightstand and leaned against the headboard. Did Quinn's actions indicate he had some culpability in what happened? Maybe he *had* been cheating. It wasn't legal to stab an adulterer, but if he had gotten involved with another woman and broken Sarah's trust, the argument could be made that he'd wronged her first.

She slid down beneath the covers. She'd wanted him so badly when she was in high school that she couldn't help wondering how different things would be if he'd been interested in return.

Maybe they'd both be living different lives.

Mary jerked awake, skin clammy, heart racing. *Breathe.* It was only a nightmare, she told herself. It wasn't as though this was the first one she'd ever

had. But it had been a while since she'd remembered the details so clearly.

She looked around her bedroom, searching for movement or anything that might be out of place. Although she saw nothing alarming, she got out of bed and went through the house to double-check that all of the doors and windows were locked.

The wind tossed the chimes on the back porch and caused the screen door to creak. Those were familiar sounds during a storm, and yet, tonight they raised the hair on the back of her neck.

Did she also hear footfalls?

She moved the drape aside to peer out into the backyard. A jagged bolt of lightning lit the sky. Thunder boomed several seconds later.

She couldn't see anyone. But occasionally, on nights like this, she thought she saw his face at the window—
“Mimi?”

She jumped and dropped the drape. Taylor had come out. “Yes, sweetie?”

“Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you. I just wanted to see if you were okay.”

“Of course I'm okay.” Mary spoke softly so they wouldn't wake Caden, who was in the living room on the couch, and clasped her hands in front of her to hide a slight tremor. “It's only a little bad weather.”

“I know that. I thought I heard—”

“Someone trying to get in?”

As soon as Taylor's eyebrows snapped together, Mary regretted answering so impetuously. She hadn't given herself enough time to get over the residual effects of the nightmare.

“What? No! It sounded like you were crying out

for help. I thought maybe—” she fell silent, raked her hair back off her face and drew a deep breath before finishing with a reluctant “—you were having a heart attack or something.”

No one had ever accused her of crying out in her sleep before, not even when Autumn lived with her. But like Caden, Autumn had been a deep sleeper. Mary had always been grateful for that. Things would’ve been much worse if that hadn’t been the case.

Mary gestured at the window. “Are you sure it wasn’t the thunder?”

“I’m positive. I’ve been up watching the storm. I heard the thunder, too.”

Since she was unable to convince Taylor that it wasn’t her, she could only try to minimize the truth. “Well, then. I must’ve been having a bad dream. Because I’m fine.”

“You thought someone was trying to break in?”

“No.” She waved her granddaughter’s concern away. “That must’ve been what I was dreaming about. Don’t mind me. I’m still a little groggy.”

“Oh.”

Mary peered out the window again, this time craning her neck to be able to see the detached garage. “I wish there was room for your mother to stay in here with us.”

“I do, too. But she’s okay where she is, if that’s what you’re worried about. I just texted her to see what I should do, and she told me to get up and check on you.”

“She’s awake? It’s after two. I worry about her getting enough rest. But it’s daytime in Ukraine, so I guess that makes sense after all the late nights she’s put in the past eighteen months.”

“Are you saying she’s still searching? She’s not giving up on finding my father?”

Mary hated seeing the pain in her granddaughter’s eyes. “I’m saying her internal clock has got to be a little mixed-up. That’s all.”

“Then she *is* giving up.”

“Without new information, fresh leads, there’s only so much she can do, right? And she’s torn. She still loves your father very much, but she feels as though you and Caden have lost *two* things—Nick and the normal life you were living before he went missing. She can give one of those things back to you, if she lets go of the other.”

Taylor walked to the window and gazed out for a long time. “Have you ever felt so helpless you wanted to rant and rave and tear everything apart around you?”

Mary was thinking about her own nightmare—not the one that had awakened her tonight but the one she’d lived through at twelve years old—when she went over and pulled her granddaughter in for a hug. “Absolutely.”

“How did you get through it?”

“I decided I wasn’t going to let anything destroy me.”

Taylor pulled back to look at her. “And that worked?”

Mary cupped her cheek. “Sometimes determination is all we have.”

Autumn slept in for the first time in ages. With her kids having finals and the many events involved in ending the school year, they’d all been especially busy. She’d just come off several weeks of early mornings to go with her late nights, so although she’d slept until ten, she was still too tired to drag herself out of bed.

It was a relief to know that her mother was with her children. Even if she didn't go in right away, they'd be greeted with a smile and offered something to eat. Coming home meant she had some support. She could always count on her mother, and she was eternally grateful for that.

She told herself she'd walk over to the house in a few minutes. She wanted to lie in bed, hearing nothing and feeling no pressure, for just a little longer. But she fell back to sleep, and it was after noon when she stirred again. She might've continued to nap the day away except she heard footsteps on the stairs coming up to her room.

"Hello?" she called out and shoved both pillows against the headboard so that she could sit up and lean against them.

Her mother appeared, carrying a tray of food. "You're still in bed?" she asked in surprise. "Should I come back later? I thought you might like something to eat."

"No need to leave. I am hungry. But you could've called, and I would've come in. You didn't have to bring breakfast all the way out here."

"I don't mind. I bought this little tray at an antiques shop not long ago and wanted to use it. Isn't it cute?"

The white wicker tray held a china teapot and teacup with sugar and cream as well as a plate with a metal cover to keep whatever her mother had made warm.

"This is fancy." There was even a vase filled with roses and the local newspaper had been tucked into one of the side receptacles.

After settling the tray over Autumn's lap, Mary went to open the drapes.

Sunlight flooded the room, and Autumn closed her eyes and turned her face eagerly toward it. She felt as though she was rising from the dead—coming back to life after a long, dark period during which she hadn't even noticed if the weather was good.

"It's a beautiful day," her mother commented.

"I love summers here." Drawing a cleansing breath, Autumn opened her eyes and took the embroidered cloth napkin off the tray. Mary put such a nice touch on everything. Autumn was less whimsical and more practical in her approach to life. She was all about getting things done. But maybe that was why she admired her mother's careful attention to beauty and detail. Coming to stay in Sable Beach was almost like visiting a bed-and-breakfast. She'd been so busy being a responsible mother to her own children she'd forgotten how wonderful it was to be her mother's child—which, once again, brought a wave of guilt for wanting to find her father. Searching for him would feel so disloyal, which was why she hadn't done it yet.

"Why aren't you at the bookstore? I'm not keeping you from work, am I?"

"No. Laurie insisted I take the day off to spend with the three of you."

"Where are the kids?"

"Taylor's reading on the couch, and Caden's already down at the beach."

"Without you there to save him from drowning?" she asked wryly.

A scowl indicated her mother wasn't amused. "I offered to go watch him swim, and he laughed at me. He said he can't take me with him every time he goes

to the beach or there wouldn't be a girl within fifty miles of here who'd even look at him."

Autumn lifted the lid off her plate to reveal her mother's sourdough waffles with fresh-cut strawberries and whipped cream. "So you're allowing him to risk his real life to save his love life?"

"One has to have priorities."

That her mother had decided to join in on the joke made Autumn chuckle. "He's a strong swimmer, Mom. He'll be okay." And even if there was trouble, she doubted her mother would be capable of pulling such a large boy—the size of a man, really—out of the crashing waves. "This looks delicious. I bet the kids were excited."

"Fortunately, I had a feeling they'd request my waffles, so I was prepared." She sat on the edge of the bed while Autumn ate.

"I found an article last night on what happened to Quinn," Autumn told her after she'd swallowed a few bites.

"You searched for more information?"

She took a sip of tea and felt a sense of satisfaction as the warm brew hit her stomach. "I did. It kept my mind busy so that I couldn't focus on other things."

"Then I'm glad I told you about it. What'd you learn? Did I leave out anything important?"

She was teasing with that last question, but Autumn didn't react to it. "You didn't mention that Sarah went to prison for ten years."

"I knew they convicted her, but I don't remember hearing the length of her sentence." She crossed her legs. "That seems excessive, doesn't it?"

"According to what I saw on the internet, it could've

been twenty to life. That's the sentence for attempted murder in New York State. The only reason it was shorter was that it seemed to be a spontaneous act—and even Quinn pleaded for leniency.”

Mary smoothed the coverlet. “I feel so bad for her parents.”

“Do they still live here in Sable Beach?” Autumn used her fork to slide the mint leaves her mother had added for garnish off to one side.

“They do. Her mother's a big reader, comes into the bookstore quite often.”

“Has she ever mentioned her daughter?”

“Not since the stabbing. But I'm guessing Sarah isn't an easy subject.”

“And you prefer to mind your own business.”

“I wouldn't want to make her feel worse. I imagine things are bad enough. It can't be comfortable having Quinn back in town.”

“Do they blame him for what happened?”

“Who can say? Maybe. It's hard for a mother to see any fault in her own child.”

“It's always easier to make a villain out of the in-law. I got a taste of that with Nick's mom. She was so afraid of losing the number one spot in her son's heart that she did whatever she could to drive a wedge between us—complained about me constantly.”

“That could've been a big problem had she lived much longer than she did.”

“It was hard enough putting up with it for the first five years of our marriage. She almost managed to break us up. It drove me crazy how Nick allowed her to manipulate him.”

“He was just trying to be a good son,” her mother said mildly.

“It was more than that. He defended her against me because he couldn’t see how intentional it all was.” She shoved another bite into her mouth. “So some people are blind when it comes to their mothers, too.”

“Not necessarily,” her mother said.

Autumn was surprised that Mary had disagreed with her. “You and Laurie have always gotten along well with Nana, haven’t you? You’ve never said a bad word about her and love having her and Poppy come all the way from Montana to visit every Thanksgiving.”

Mary stood and crossed back over to the window.

“Mom?” Autumn lowered her fork. “Has something happened between you and Nana?”

When Mary turned, she looked tired and drawn despite her beauty. “No, of course not.”

“So what’s wrong?”

She lifted a hand to her head. “I didn’t sleep well last night—because of the storm—and woke up with a headache. That’s all.”

“Then *you* should be the one in bed, and I should be bringing you breakfast.”

“Oh, stop. It doesn’t hurt that bad. But I’d better take a painkiller before it gets any worse.”

“Okay. I’ll bring the tray over when I’m done.”

“That’d be great.”

She started down the stairs, but Autumn called after her. “If something was wrong, you’d tell me, wouldn’t you?”

Her mother’s footfalls came to a stop and Autumn imagined her turning to yell back up the stairs. “Of course I would. Don’t worry, honey. Everything’s fine.”

4

Mary took a second to compose herself before opening her own back door. That had been her chance. She could've explained what her mother was really like, why Mary had no contact with her, how Laurie, Laurie's son Jacob, who was ten years older than Autumn, and the woman Autumn thought was her Nana had come to be her family instead.

But Autumn didn't need her world to be torn apart right now. She was pale and had lost weight, and she was so exhausted that she had dark circles under her eyes. What she needed was peace, love, consistency, support and plenty of rest so that she could heal.

Once again, Mary had chosen to keep her mouth shut. But she knew Autumn was curious about her father. What if she got it in her head to take one of those ancestry tests that were advertised on TV all the time?

Mary was about to go back when the door swung open and her granddaughter came out wearing a visor,

sunglasses and a bikini with an orange sarong tied around her hips.

“There you are,” Taylor said when they almost collided. “Mom up yet?”

“She’s having breakfast.”

“It’s not like her to stay in bed. Is she sick or something?”

“No. She’s lost a lot of sleep over the past eighteen months and is catching up, that’s all.”

“Okay.” She anchored her bag on her shoulder so she could pull her ponytail tighter. “Caden just texted me. Said he’s met a group of kids our age at the beach and wants me to come down.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“We’ll see.” She didn’t seem completely convinced. “They need me to make the teams even for volleyball.”

“It’s always nice to meet new people.”

“Except... I didn’t come here to make friends. I just want to be left alone.”

Obviously, Autumn wasn’t the only one who needed to heal. “That’s understandable. Grieving makes it hard to socialize. But the right friend can help you through the worst of times.” Mary was speaking from experience. She had no idea what would’ve become of her had she not met Laurie when she did.

“That’s hard to believe,” she grumbled. “I’m so tired of the friends I have.”

“You’ve known a lot of them for years. What don’t you like about them?”

“Everything they say and do seems lame.”

“They haven’t experienced what you have.”

“I guess. Anyway, will you tell Mom where I am?”

“Of course. She’ll be in before too long.”

“Thanks.” Her ponytail bounced as she whirled around, clutching her beach bag, and Mary had to wonder how the secrets she’d guarded for so long might impact her grandchildren.

She battled a sinking feeling as she went inside to finish cleaning up. She was convinced they were all better off not knowing, which was why she hadn’t told them.

Hopefully, they’d have at least one more summer just as they were. After what’d happened to disrupt their lives already, she thought they deserved it.

The group Caden had met consisted of three girls and three boys. Taylor could see them lounging on the sand not far from one of the volleyball nets strung across this portion of the beach. The ball itself sat next to a tall, skinny dude with red curly hair and turquoise swim trunks.

Caden was far more outgoing than she was, so he was usually the one who made new friends and then introduced her. Although she’d never admit it to him, she appreciated that she had someone to make that process a little easier, but she still hated the part at the beginning, when she didn’t know someone and it was awkward and uncomfortable.

Once she realized that she’d be meeting more kids than she’d anticipated, she probably would’ve chickened out and turned back, except her brother spotted her right away, jumped to his feet and came jogging over.

“These guys are cool,” he said as he reached her and took her bag. He knew from experience that she was often resistant when it came to unfamiliar settings and people, that he had to ease her into it, so he’d gotten

good at it. She guessed he'd taken her bag as a way of committing her, since she'd have to ask for it back if she changed her mind.

"How do you know?" she grumbled, eyeing them warily. "You've barely met them."

"We've already played one game."

She slanted him a glance. "Really? One whole game?"

He ignored the sarcasm. "You never like anyone until you get to know them. Give these kids a chance, will ya?" He lowered his voice. "Besides, the girls are hot. I could really use you as a wingman. Chicks always feel more comfortable when a guy's got his sister around."

"Remember that you owe me a favor the next time we're arguing over who will ride shotgun," she muttered under her breath and braced for first contact—for her, the equivalent of having a bucket of ice water thrown in her face.

"You can have the front seat for the entire summer," he said magnanimously.

She would've made a wisecrack about the fact that he hadn't even bothered to negotiate—she would've settled for two weeks—but the others were getting up and coming toward them, and she was afraid they might hear.

"Hi," she said, feeling self-conscious as they drew close.

"This is Penn." Caden introduced the guy with the curly hair before indicating a much stockier boy, about her height, with blond hair and blue eyes. "Shawn—and Chester."

Chester had dark skin, brown eyes and a ready

smile. Something about his apparent friendliness helped make her a little less anxious. “Nice to meet you,” she said as Caden moved on to the girls, who were bringing up the rear.

“And this is Adrienne, Shawn’s twin sister. Don’t let her size fool you. She’s got a wicked serve, so be prepared for it. I’ve been bragging about how good you are. You can’t let me down,” he joked.

Blond like her brother, Adrienne was maybe five foot two and weighed less than a hundred pounds. For some reason, Caden was always attracted to that sort of girl—the petite kind that made Taylor, at five-ten, feel like Sasquatch. So Taylor guessed Adrienne was the one he was most hoping to impress. Until she looked into the face of the next girl—who was called Jasmine, she was told. Her name fit her well. She looked as though she was of Mediterranean descent and was so gorgeous with her long black hair, olive-colored complexion and liquid brown eyes that Taylor assumed she couldn’t also be nice—then felt guilty for making such an assumption when the girl smiled and said hello.

“I’m Sierra Lambert.” The last girl introduced herself before Caden could even get to her.

Sierra was attractive, too, but in a completely different way. She had short, spiky blond hair with dark roots, several piercings going up each ear, a nose ring and an intricate and very large tattoo of a tree climbing one arm. She wasn’t especially tall, only about five six, but she was lean and well toned. She reminded Taylor of how she’d imagined Lisbeth Salander in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* back when she’d read it. Bold. Smart. Determined. Self-sufficient. And somehow... exciting, probably because she seemed so daring.

“I like your tattoo.” Taylor was being honest; the artist had done a fabulous job.

“Oh yeah? That nearly got me kicked out of the house,” she said with a careless laugh.

“Why? Did you have to lie about your age to get it?”

“I did. But I’m seventeen, so it’s not as if I had it done when I was twelve or something. I don’t think waiting five months would’ve changed my mind.”

“It’s new?”

“I’ve had it for a while, but my birthday is coming up in August.”

“What’d your parents say when they saw it?”

“It’s just me and my dad. And you should see how tatted up he is! But with him it’s ‘do what I say, not what I do.’ He doesn’t consider tattoos to be feminine. Says I’ll never be able to catch a husband.”

“What do you say to that?” she asked, intrigued in spite of herself.

“The truth. I don’t think I want one. Do you?”

Caught off guard, Taylor stepped back. “Um, I don’t know.”

They all laughed at her answer but she’d never considered a future any different than her mother’s. She thought she’d go to college, meet someone, get married and start a family. What did Sierra plan to do that would be so different?

“Let’s start another game,” Penn said, tossing the ball in the air and catching it.

Taylor was eager to do that. She’d much rather play than stand around trying to talk to people she didn’t know. Sports created a sense of camaraderie with her teammates, which made things easier.

She took off her sarong as Caden dropped her bag near the spot where they'd left their own belongings.

"You're over here with me, Jasmine and Chester," Caden said as the others ducked beneath the net to go to the other side of the court.

Because Taylor wasn't warmed up, she wasn't able to contribute a great deal to the first game, but she did much better in the second. She loved volleyball, but that wasn't the only reason she was having fun. The longer she played with Caden's new friends, the more she began to agree with him. They were nice.

The only person she wasn't sure she liked was Sierra. She was different. But it wasn't only her piercings, tattoo and cocky attitude that set her apart. It was the way she watched Taylor that put Taylor on edge. Every time she looked up, she found Sierra staring at her with an inscrutable expression. What was she thinking? And why the interest?

When they finally dropped onto the sand where they'd left their towels, sweaty and exhausted from battling out a close three-game set in which her team had finally eked out the win—on her serve—Taylor was slightly relieved when Sierra didn't join them. She ran down the beach and plunged into the waves by herself, and eventually Penn and Adrienne joined her.

Taylor told herself that this was her chance to relax and get to know the others. But every few seconds she found herself glancing toward the ocean, searching for one person in particular.

Autumn enjoyed being at the bookstore anytime, but especially when she could be there by herself. On her second day in town, as soon as her mother and

Laurie went to the bank, where they were hoping to secure a business loan to put in a coffee shop upstairs, she stood behind the counter and smiled. Being there, gazing out the large front window at the town where she'd been raised, reminded her of when she was in high school. In the afternoons she'd drive her mother's car over, spread her homework on the counter and complete her studies between serving customers. Sometimes her mother and Laurie would be gone, taking care of various errands, but more often one or the other would be there with her. She didn't mind either way. She liked the atmosphere and the customers who frequented the store, and she was always excited when she finished her homework, because then she could read for pleasure.

She'd never forget wandering down the aisles, touching the spines of the books she'd already enjoyed. As an only child, the fictional characters they contained were her first friends, and even though she had plenty of real friends as she grew older, she was always eager to retreat into the imaginary world created by a good storyteller. She loved deliberating on which novel to choose next and felt such wonder at the possibilities. Each shipment they received had her rushing to unpack the boxes, especially if one of her favorite authors had a new release.

Maybe she should move back to Sable Beach, she thought. She hadn't fully realized how suffocating she'd found Tampa lately, but the freedom and happiness she felt here contrasted sharply with the miserable experience she'd been through. She wanted to leave all the upset and negativity behind and start over. It was possible that the only way to let go of Nick would be

to leave the home they'd shared and embrace a change of scenery as well as a change of pace. She was certain her mother and Laurie would welcome her help with the store. Since they already had their hands full, she could run the coffee shop, once it became a reality. Then they wouldn't have to hire someone else.

She'd always planned on coming back, anyway. She'd known Nick wouldn't be happy to give up the big city. At times, she couldn't help resenting the fact that he was so resistant to the idea and figured it would only be fair for her to have her way at some point. After all, she'd gone with him to Florida and stayed for the past sixteen years.

She belonged *here*.

The only thing stopping her from putting her house on the market right away was her children. It wouldn't be a smart decision to uproot them before they could finish high school. She had a feeling Taylor wouldn't mind. Since Nick's disappearance, her daughter seemed listless, as though she'd lost her anchor and was drifting this way and that. Autumn couldn't help worrying about her. But even if Taylor was willing to move, Caden relied on his friends a great deal, and he was doing well in water polo. She wouldn't take that away from him.

Two more years, she told herself. She only had to last a little longer. If Nick wasn't back by then, she'd sell the house and move home as soon as Caden graduated.

She was pulling the stool closer to the counter so she could sit down and dive into a book when the bell sounded over the door.

Autumn didn't immediately recognize her first cus-

tomers. The woman came in wearing a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses with a flowing cotton dress covering her ample bosom. But as she lifted her head, Autumn came to her feet. It was Mrs. Vizii, Sarah's mother. She'd aged since Autumn had seen her last, and she'd gained quite a bit of weight, but that beauty mark on her cheek was unmistakable.

"Oh!" Mrs. Vizii sounded slightly startled when she realized it was Autumn behind the counter. "Is Mary here?"

"No, she and Laurie had to take care of something, so I'm filling in. What can I help you with?"

The bell rang over the door before she could respond, and two more women, talking about sharks and whether it was safe to go in the water while they were visiting the coast, walked in. Mrs. Vizii seemed as shy of them as she was of Autumn, but the moment she realized they were just tourists, she visibly relaxed.

"Your mother told me she was waiting for more copies of Neil Gaiman's new book to come in. I was wondering if they had arrived."

She hadn't removed her sunglasses. Maybe she felt the need to hide behind them. After all, her daughter had been sentenced for stabbing her husband less than a year ago, and the scandal had to be pretty front and center again now that Quinn was back in town.

"Let me see." Autumn checked the computer. "Yes. They should be out on the floor." She walked over to the G's in general fiction and pulled a copy from the shelf. "Here you go."

"Thank you."

They returned to the register where Autumn started ringing her up.

“Where have you been living?” Mrs. Vizii asked.

Autumn gestured for her to insert her credit card.
“In Tampa.”

“Oh yes. Your mother mentioned that to me. Did you ever find your husband?”

“No.”

“What happened to him?”

“I wish I could tell you,” Autumn said and indicated that it was time for her to remove her card.

She took off her sunglasses and lowered her voice.
“Do you think he could’ve been seeing another woman?”

Autumn’s spine stiffened. She hated that everyone jumped to that conclusion. “No. Even if he was, I imagine he’d want half our assets, wouldn’t you? Without money, he’d have to work somewhere, and that should’ve made it possible for me to find him.”

“Have you hired a private investigator?”

“Yes. One here and in Ukraine, where Nick was last seen.”

She put her sunglasses back on. “Still,” she said, clearly unconvinced, “I’ve heard of crazier things. Your mother told you what happened to my daughter, didn’t she?”

She hadn’t said, “Your mother told you what my daughter did.” She’d said, “What *happened* to my daughter” as though *Sarah* had been the victim. “Just the basics,” she said so that Mrs. Vizii wouldn’t feel as though Mary had been gossiping about the incident.

“Well, be careful. As long as your husband’s been gone, you’ll be looking to start dating again soon, and there aren’t a lot of single men in this small of a town.”

Autumn put the Gaiman book in a bag with the receipt and handed it to Mrs. Vizii over the counter. “I’m

aware of that—and I'm not in any hurry to start dating. I don't even know if..." Her words fell off before she finished with, "If I'm free to start dating or still married." Knowing her husband could be alive and going through hell halfway around the world made it impossible to say that. It sounded so cavalier—as if it would be easy for her to walk away from everything they'd built together.

"If he's coming back?" Mrs. Vizii said.

A lump rose in Autumn's throat. She'd thought she was through with tears, but coming home and facing what felt like the final loss of her husband of eighteen years was dredging up all the pain she'd experienced in the early months—as well as the suspicion that maybe he *was* alive and well somewhere, enjoying life while she struggled to carry on without him. Was it possible he'd had a secret bank account? That he'd stockpiled enough money that he could seemingly drop off the planet?

She would've noticed that something was up, wouldn't she? He'd never given her any reason to doubt him. And she knew he loved Taylor and Caden, even if it was possible that he'd fallen out of love with her and she hadn't realized it. But insecurity could twist the clearest of evidence. "Yes."

"Well, if you *do* start dating, be careful. After what my daughter has been through, I wouldn't want you to get caught up with a certain gentleman who lives here."

The two women who'd wandered into the store left without buying anything. "Quinn's back?" Autumn asked as though she didn't already know.

"He is. And all the single women are flitting around him because he's so handsome. But fishing lures look

awfully attractive to the poor fish they hook, too,” she replied and walked out with her purchase.

Autumn sighed as she sat on the stool. She wondered what Quinn thought about his ex-mother-in-law going around town saying such terrible things about him. She was willing to bet he wished he could leave this place. But with his own mother stricken with cancer and his father in need of help with the restaurant, there probably wasn't much he could do.