

A photograph of a wooden building exterior. A window with dark blue shutters is visible, with a white wicker star decoration inside. A wooden bench is in the foreground, and a blue sign hanging from the bench reads "Come WE'RE OPEN".

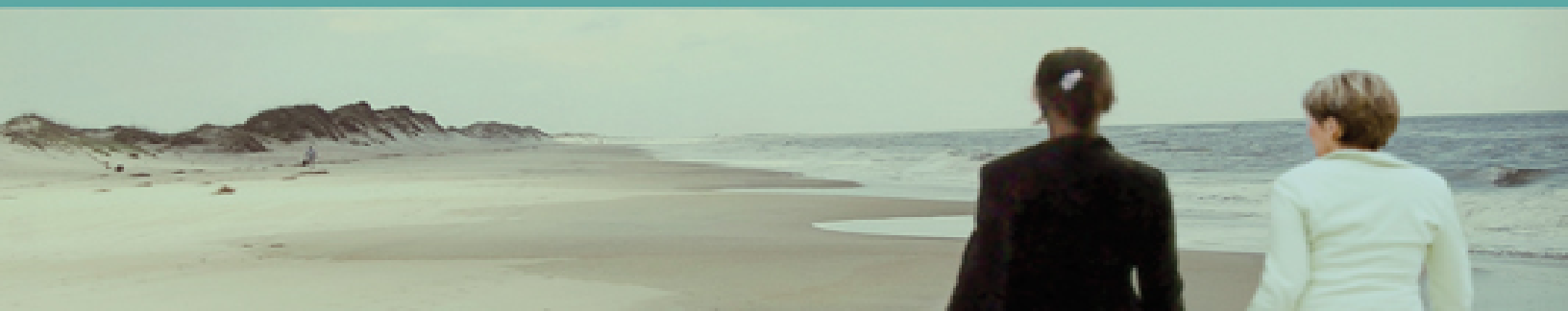
the
sea glass
sisters



NOVELLA PRELUDE TO
THE PRAYER BOX

LISA WINGATE

NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR





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sisters



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The Sea Glass Sisters

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*To Aunt Sandy,
for being the talented, creative, sweet soul that you are,
and for being the brains behind Sandy's Seashell Shop.
Without you, the Sisterhood of the Seashell Shop would not
exist.*

*And to Sharon,
for being Sandy's sister . . . and my mom.*

*May the two of you walk the shore side by side
sharing sister stories for many years to come.*

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CHAPTER 1

The more time that passes before it happens, the better. Usually that isn't the case on any given day of any given week. Life is all about running breakneck, half-exhausted, from one thing to another—the kids, the job, the bills, the PTA, the school concession stand, the cheerleaders' fund-raiser garage sale, the marriage . . .

Sometimes I wonder if she's sleeping under there—the *old* Elizabeth Gallagher, the woman who seemed to have it all together. Or was she always just a fantasy? A figment of the hype she created eighteen years ago, when an unexpected pregnancy led to a hurried marriage between high school sweethearts? She was so determined to show all the naysayers that she could make a go of it, defy the statistics. Create the perfect family. A life to be proud of.

Pride is a steamroller. It'll clear the path for a while, but sooner or later it'll shift into reverse, and then . . . look out. Maybe everyone else saw it coming, and that's why they're backing away lately.

And now *this*.

I gaze out the bay window of the house that was supposed to be our dream home. Even the oak trees have grown up now, resolving our original objection to building on two acres of centennial family farmland deeded to us as a wedding gift. The trees, once they grew, were supposed to make life in this house picture-perfect.

Fall leaves blow across what we lovingly call *the family compound*, the bits of seasonal color dancing into the yards of aunts, uncles, and cousins. Unfortunately, a layer of pretty colors can't fix what's wrong here. Nor can it remove the For Sale sign across the street—the one that makes me feel like a drugstore mannequin in a 1950s government staging area, about to unwittingly take part in a nuclear test. I'm just waiting for the bomb to drop. I know it's coming.

It couldn't possibly hit the mark on a worse day.

I'd like to get the kids off to school before it happens. See if I can cajole a hug—one that doesn't feel like it's just me hanging on. But chances are, if

they can slip by and get to Jessica's car, they'll be gone like bank robbers on the lam. They'll probably be rushing, in danger of getting a tardy, Micah complaining that his big sister has made them late by lining her deep-blue eyes and fluffing her golden curls. She reminds me so much of myself in high school, it almost hurts. Exchange the blonde hair for brown, and our cheerleading photos would've been almost interchangeable side by side.

As they swerve out of the driveway, she'll give her brother a dirty look, just like I would have. She's frustrated with him for horning in on her senior year by choosing to take extra courses and graduate while he should still be a junior. She doesn't want him in her car, and he's only there because we force her to drive him. She saved her money for the car, but we pay for the gas and the insurance.

The kids most likely won't even notice the sign across the road. The one that will bring a blinding explosion and a mushroom cloud of family fallout as soon as Uncle Butch sees it. There's no way he'll sit still for his sister selling that property.

I let my head sink to the table, let my eyes close next to the bowl of steel-cut oatmeal that is both breakfast and supper after working a night shift. Something mild that won't make me throw up once it hits my stomach, which has been churning since 3 a.m., halfway through my work hours.

There's a little girl missing this morning, and if I'd only been quicker, if I hadn't screwed up, vapor-locked for the first time ever, my mind whirling in a pool of exhaustion and family issues when the call came into the 911 dispatch center, that girl might be home right now. Safe in her mother's arms.

Instead I'm petrified that the worst has happened, and it's my fault. If a child isn't found within the first three hours, the chances are immeasurably less.

I hear the call again as sleep mist floats over my mind. I re-create the moment in my thoughts, try to alter events, to fix the damage.

The caller is sobbing, panicked, alone in the Cappie's Quick Mart parking lot, except for a kindly trucker who has seen her screaming hysterically and stopped to investigate the problem.

"Sh-sh-she was h—!" The word *here* disappears into a moaning howl, animal-like. "Jus-s-st you . . . Sh-sh-she . . . she was . . . sleeping . . . in the

seat. In back, with . . . with the babyyyy. I only went . . . just one mm-minute . . . Mm-maybe two . . . in . . .”

I try to calm her down, to discern what has happened, exactly. She’s been hysterical for several minutes, difficult to work with, though I’ve managed to get her name, the name of the store, and that this is a possible abduction, then send the information through Computer-Aided Dispatch. Response units are on the way, but the Cappie’s Quick Mart is out on Old Collier Road, not close to anything. It’ll take a while.

The caller is slurring her words. I’m beginning to suspect that she’s drunk or on something. But she could just be emotional. I do the thing that 911 operators are trained to do. I use her name, Trista. She sounds incredibly young, and so much like my Jessica. I wonder if she is the missing girl’s sister or babysitter or friend or mother. I’m still trying to establish what has taken place.

There’s adrenaline rushing through me, but my mind hasn’t kicked in the way it should. It’s like a disk drive spinning and spinning but not coming up with the correct response. I reach for the scripts on the shelf above the desk—the ones we use with new operators doing on-the-job training.

So many of these instances turn out to be nothing, I think. I’ve said it to trainees before. Often the child either has been picked up by another family member or has wandered off to play or is in trouble and is hiding to avoid punishment.

Please let this be nothing. The words in my head seem to drift into empty space. Even that seems wrong. I used to know those words were going somewhere. That someone was hearing them.

I read off the script instead of winging it. I know it’s slower, but it feels safer tonight. There’s something wrong with me, and the truth is, I’ve known it for a while. I’ve been afraid something like this would happen.

This is my nightmare, playing out.

I ask her if there’s anyone else I can speak to. Anyone who was with her when the child disappeared. There is only the trucker, and he knows nothing, other than that he’s found a crazed woman in a parking lot at three in the morning. In the background, traffic whizzes by. The trucker tells me that the people in the convenience store didn’t see anything either—just a woman going hysterical in the parking lot a couple minutes after she left the store.

I ask him to give the phone back to Trista, then please go check on the car and keep an eye on the baby, if there is one. Do we have two missing children here or one?

“Okay, Trista, I need you to take a breath, calm down, and talk to me. You’re not alone. We are going to do everything we can to bring this girl home safely.” My stomach turns over. I taste the 1 a.m. ham sandwich and the shot of energy drink. “Is she your sister or your daughter?”

“Mm-my girl . . . my little girl . . . ,” she sobs.

The alarm meter ratchets upward inside me. I’m pretty sure I’m talking to a teenage mother with two babies on her hands. “What is her name?”

“Em . . . Emily.”

“And how old is Emily?”

“F-f-four . . . f-five. She just turned f-five.” Trista seems more lucid now, her speech clearer. “We w-were gonna have her birthday par-party this weeken-n-nd. . . .”

I note that she used the word *were*. I taste the bile again. It’s a bad sign when a parent uses past tense in reference to a missing child.

She breaks down sobbing, and it’s a couple minutes before I can get her to listen to me. I feel the burden of time ticking by, even as I’m sending information through dispatch. I need a description of this girl.

“Trista . . . *Trista!*” I’m harsh now, like a teacher demanding a student’s attention. “What is Emily’s hair and eye color?”

“B-blonde . . . b-blue.”

“I need to know what Emily was wearing the last time you saw her. Exactly. Everything.”

Instead, she repeats location details. She’s at Cappie’s Quick Mart. She came out to buy cigarettes.

At three in the morning? I wonder and glance at the screen.

The caller’s voice is far away for a moment. I hear her screaming the girl’s name. It echoes against the traffic and a blaring horn. I cringe.

“Trista!” My voice fills the dispatch center, echoes down the hall. “Don’t put down the phone. Don’t hang up. Keep talking to me.”

Carol comes running from the break room. She’s heard me yelling.

I cap the mike, quickly whisper, “Missing juvenile, female, five years old.” My heart is pumping wildly. I point to the dispatch screen.

Then I open the receiver again. “Trista! *Trista!* What was Emily wearing? I need you to tell me what she was wearing.”

“She’s go-o-one! She’s go-o-one!”

“What was Emily wearing?”

“A . . . tee . . . a tee . . . a T-shirt,” Trista hiccups out finally. “One of W-Wade’s wor-work shirts. He . . . he . . . I-it was his . . . his . . . last . . . c-clean . . . M-maybe she thought sh-she was in troub . . . troubl-l-le . . .”

I note several things at once, send them through dispatch in random bits. There’s a male involved, possibly a domestic dispute, no known location on the male at this time.

“What color was the T-shirt?” If it was a man’s shirt, it was oversize for a five-year-old, probably worn as a nightgown.

“Re-red . . . or blue. I don . . . don’t know. He has . . . he has . . . I d-don’t . . . My *babyyyyy*. Where’s my *babyyyyy*?”

“I need you to stay focused, Trista.” So much time is passing. How much longer until officers reach her? I glance at the screen. They’re still several miles away. “What else was Emily wearing? Pants? Shoes? Coat?”

“No!” Trista sobs, frustrated with my questions now. “Only the shirt! Only the shirt.”

A chill passes through me. It’s cold at night in central Michigan in mid-October. I picture the little girl wandering along some roadside, shivering, barefoot, her blonde hair tangled around her face, her eyes filled with fear.

And then I hope that’s all it is. I hope she’s wandering somewhere. Alone. Far from the traffic that’s whizzing by in the background.

Beside me, Carol has picked up a headset to listen in on the call. She leans over my shoulder toward the screen as I try to work more information out of Trista, who has collapsed into unintelligible sobs again.

Carol looks my way, squints, shakes her head. Her eyes meet mine, gray eyebrows lowered and drawn together. “The Cappie’s Quick Mart out on Old Collier Road isn’t open late. There’s no highway traffic out there, either. She has to be at the new Super Cappie’s—the one they just opened near the bypass.”

I close my eyes, just for the flash of an instant, feeling sick, then hot, then dazed. Then I’m hit by the white-hot lightning of panic.

I’ve lived in this county all my life. I should’ve realized there wouldn’t be traffic noise by the Cappie’s on Old Collier Road. I should’ve realized she had to be somewhere else. . . .

The phone rings, and at first I'm still in the dispatch center, trying to answer the incoming call through my headset. But it won't work. It's just ringing and ringing and ringing.

It's about to roll over to voice mail when I jerk awake, lift my head off my own kitchen table, and scramble for my cell. The house is quiet, the full light of midmorning pressing through the window now.

A half-dozen thoughts strike me at once. The kids have slipped off, not bothering to wake me as they passed by on their way to the garage. Across the street, the real estate sign has caught the sun like a beacon. My car sits alone in the driveway, meaning that Robert has gone to the cabin in the north woods for the weekend instead of coming home after his business trip. Again.

The phone call is Carol from work.

I want to crawl to the nearest closet, curl into a ball, and cry. But instead, I answer the cell.

"They found something in the ditch a couple miles from the new Cappie's," Carol informs me flatly. "An auto supply store T-shirt. Red."

CHAPTER 2

I walk into the master bedroom, strip off the muddy clothes, and let them fall to the carpet, not even thinking about the fact that it's afternoon and the kids might come home from school anytime.

After a week of spending my off time tromping through the woods with volunteer search parties, poking in trash piles and moats of last year's dead leaves, I just want to fall into bed and sleep. I'm in family-conflict-avoidance mode, and I know it. Right now, the girl drama of a new school year and the wrangling over the For Sale sign across the street are like static, turned up impossibly loud. All I want to do is find little Emily, be the one who turns up the evidence that leads to her discovery. Alive.

I must, in some way, atone for my screwup. I have to make things right again.

My family doesn't understand. They don't get why I've spent endless hours joining the volunteers looking for Emily. Oh, they're aware of the search, of course. There are posters everywhere, constant coverage on TV. Pleas from Emily's mother and frantic grandparents. But my family doesn't know I was the one who took the call.

I'm not even sure why I haven't said anything. Maybe I just can't bear to speak it out loud, to have them see what a mess I am, how afraid I am that, while officers were racing toward Old Collier Road, Emily's abductor was slipping off into the night, somewhere near the new Cappie's Quick Mart near the bypass. Maybe I'm afraid that if I reveal the facts, admit to the guilt, the response will be a face buried in a cell phone. A disinterested *Well, you can't control everything, Elizabeth*. And then a quick redirecting of the conversation, to rehash the ongoing family drama about the land sale. Even the kids are involved in it now—taking up sides with my mother and Uncle Butch.

In Robert's case, the reply would more likely be a manufactured *Sorry you had a tough week. Listen, I'm going up to work on the cabin. I just need to get away for a while*.

I wonder if that's really where he is, and at the same time, I don't want to know. It's just one more thing cycling through my mind, the worries flashing by like the fins on a pinwheel.

Jessica skipped the SAT test she was supposed to take last weekend. Just skipped it. *You never told me you signed me up*, she argued. *Great. Now I'll probably have to miss a volleyball tournament to do a retake.*

Micah has a new girl chasing him. One who transferred here from another district because there were problems. At least that's the warning I got from a mother whose son was involved with the girl last summer.

Outside, as I look down the street, Uncle Butch and Mom are in a heated discussion in front of the little house she built for herself after Dad died and she sold the farmhouse to my brother and his wife.

Uncle Butch is in Mom's face, his arms flailing, his six-foot-four-inch bulk dwarfing her five-foot frame. But she's not backing down. My mother's hair may be auburn, but she's got the fire of a full-blown redhead.

Right now, she's lifting her hands palm-up in frustration. I know what she's saying. She has called my aunt Sandy in the Outer Banks of North Carolina repeatedly, and Aunt Sandy isn't backing down either. She's determined to sell her twenty acres of the farm in order to save the seaside store that has eaten up most of her cash reserves after the hurricane damage last year.

So far, Uncle Butch has threatened everything from a legal filibuster involving easements on the farmland to the equivalent of a family shunning. It won't do any good. Aunt Sandy is the baby of the family, and only slightly over five feet tall herself, but she is a force of nature. The rebel. She won't cave, no matter how much everyone espouses the logic of finally letting go of the beachfront retirement dream that has kept Aunt Sandy and Uncle George away from the family compound for the past eighteen years.

I haven't ever seen her little store by the sea, even though it's just a day's drive away. If I did anything to encourage this post-empty-nest life my aunt and uncle have carved out for themselves, I'd never hear the end of it, especially now that they're getting older. My mother can't fathom why *anyone* would want to live more than a stone's throw from their children and grandchildren.

But lately I understand it. Sometimes when I'm coming home after a long third shift on the boards, I want to run away to the beach myself.

I watch the fight across the street until it finishes. Uncle Butch stalks off to his vehicle and drives away, spewing gravel and burning rubber all the way up the street, a skill he undoubtedly perfected as a high schooler with Elvis hair, cruising in his '57 Chevy. The maneuver loses some of its effect when it's done in an old, potbellied Suburban and you're only going a half mile up the street.

The next thing I know, I'm laughing, and I wonder if I've really lost it this time. Maybe this is the final tipping off some invisible cliff.

You're just tired, I tell myself. *You need to catch a few hours' sleep, then go to work. Stay on the routine. Keep up the hope.* Dispatchers aren't supposed to get involved with the cases that come through the 911 phone lines, but the truth is, the calls stay with you. You go into the profession because you want to help people. You can't just turn that on and off.

A blonde curl peeks from the shadows of my purse—the photograph on a flyer seeking any news of Emily. They called off the search for her today. There's simply nowhere else to look.

I remind myself again to have hope. *If you give up, it's like saying that little girl isn't coming home.*

But the tears press anyway, and I pull the shades, slide into bed, and close my eyes. I'm just . . . so . . . tired. . . .

The doorbell rings downstairs as I finally start to drift. Who in the world? No one in the family would bother ringing the bell. They'd come in through the garage.

I ignore it, hoping it's just a package delivery, something Robert ordered online for the cabin. With so much vacation built up after seventeen years with the auto company, he has plenty of time to work on the place.

The doorbell rings again. Twice. Close together. Insistent.

I get up, put on a robe, and head downstairs. Before I reach the front door, I recognize the halo of auburn hair on the other side of the leaded glass. Mom. Why she's ringing the bell, I can't imagine.

I open the door, and she thrusts a white pet carrier my way. She has her cat, Honey, dangling under one arm and a sack of kitty chow under the other. "You'll have to keep Honey for me." As usual, it's an order, not a question. She jabs the pet carrier outward again. "Here. Take this."

I relieve her of the carrier and the cat chow as she breezes past me into the house. "Mom, what are you talking about?"

She strokes Honey's head so hard that the cat's eyes bug out with every pass. "I'm going to Sandy's and talking some sense into her. It's the only way. I am *not* having this family, or this farm, torn apart so my sister can sink the last of her money into that stupid shop of hers. Mother and Daddy didn't give us this land so we could sell it and run off to some hut on the beach."

"Mom, in the first place, it's a store, not a hut. In the second place, she's a grown woman. And in the third place, she's been there for almost twenty years now. She knows what she wants."

"She doesn't know anything. She's sixty-five years old, for heaven's sake. How much longer does she think she and George will be able to stay there anyway?" Mom paces down the entryway, Honey's rear end swinging against her hip. The cat's feet flail, searching for a toehold. I know the feeling.

"Mom, you can't *make* Aunt Sandy and Uncle George pull up stakes and come back. Maybe they never will. Maybe when they finally can't run the shell shop anymore, they'll just . . . retire there on the Outer Banks." It sounds nice. Retiring on an island.

Mom pulls a sheet of instructions from her pocket and leaves it on the dining table as she passes. Honey braces a claw on my mother's hip, tries to retract herself from the elbow hold. Mom hasn't even noticed so far.

"I'll tell you what'll happen. She'll sell that property and throw the money into that shop, and then when another storm comes along, or she or George experience a health crisis and they can't live in such a remote place anymore, they won't have anywhere to come home to. And we'll be stuck with strangers building houses *right* in the *middle* of all of our places. Butch doesn't have the money to buy the land from her, and neither do I."

Honey has finally gone into full-out escape mode. My mother releases her, and she jumps to the floor and skitters away, skidding on the tile as she disappears around the corner.

Mom barely gives the cat a second glance. She has bigger fish to fry. "I'm going there to talk some sense into her, face-to-face. That's all there is to it."

That's the second time she's said it. And this time, it genuinely worries me. "Mom, you've never once been out to Aunt Sandy's place in all these years, and now, suddenly, you're going? And then what? You'll kidnap Aunt Sandy and Uncle George and force them to come back to Michigan?"

Her green eyes flare, then narrow beneath windblown shocks of hair. She's not used to being talked to like this. No one talks back to the principal. It's hard for her to get used to civilian life. Even harder, since, after nearly thirty years of dedicated service, she was caught in the squeeze play of an unpleasant consolidation between two schools.

Retirement isn't suiting my mother. That school was her heart and soul. "George isn't even there with her right now. He's in Kalamazoo, taking care of his mother. He has *been* there off and on for months. The poor man is commuting back and forth between Michigan and Hatteras Island, trying to see to his mother's care and help Sandy keep that shop afloat. It's ridiculous. Their family is here. Their children and grandchildren are here. Someone has to force Sandy to see reason."

"Mother, you cannot fly to North Carolina on your own."

"I'm not flying. I'm driving."

"You definitely can't drive to North Carolina." I'm guessing that trip would take twelve to fourteen hours. Just a couple months ago, Mom ran her car into a ditch during a three-hour drive to my great-aunt's house. I think she fell asleep at the wheel, but she won't admit it.

"Oh yes, I can. There's some worry about a storm on the East Coast mucking up the airports. I don't want to fly and end up trapped out there."

"So your solution is to *drive*?" Like Uncle Butch burning rubber in his old Suburban, this would be funny if it weren't so serious.

"Yes, that's my solution. And if you're so worried about it, you can come with me. We'll only be gone a few days."

Her gaze catches mine, and suddenly I realize this is why she's really here. This is what she's had in mind all along.

CHAPTER 3

He's there in the woods. I hear him moving in the shadows. A sense of warning slides under my sweatshirt—cold, visceral, trailing along my skin like the edge of a blade. Not deep enough to cut, just touching in a way that makes me shiver.

I pull up the stick I've been using to probe leaves, then whirl around, catch a breath, but I can't see anyone.

Is he there? Is it just my imagination? Where have all the other searchers gone? We are supposed to work in pairs. Always in pairs. There's a danger that he might come back, seeking to snatch the evidence left behind and relocate it. If there is any evidence . . .

"Who's there?" I whisper.

"Elizabeth . . ." He knows my name. His voice sends another shiver through me.

What if he knows where I live? Where are Jessica and Micah? Could he come to my house, take them away like he took little Emily? Has he been to my house already? Stood over the beds of my children while they were sleeping?

"Who are you?" My voice echoes through the woods, bouncing off shadows and trees, rising into the canopy of birch and pine, startling birds into flight. "You give her back, do you hear me? You give Emily back!" Suddenly I am bold. I expect him to do as I have commanded.

I scan the forest, checking for the blonde girl from the photo on the flyer. I can almost see her, running through the trees. I think I do, but then she's gone.

"Elizabeth!" He calls my name again, louder than before, insistent. His voice seems to come from the sky, from everywhere. "Elizabeth!"

He grabs me then, seizes my arm, shakes me. The back of my head strikes something solid yet soft. His shoulder, I think. He has me now.

How will the news reach my family? How will they find out? Who will help Jessica pick out her dress for the prom? Who will make sure that

Micah doesn't get left out of all the festivities, since he's decided to graduate this year?

I picture them rattling around the house, alone, while Robert spends his time in the north woods. Will he come home and pick up the slack after I'm gone?

I fight, jerk an elbow back, flail my arms, try to grab something—his hair, his nose, his eyes. I go for the most vulnerable targets, the things I've learned in self-defense classes offered by the department.

"Elizabeth, for heaven's sake! Wake up!" The voice rings high, echoes. It's a woman's now. My mother's.

My head bobbles side to side, bumps into something hard this time, and I wake just as the car is wobbling from the shoulder back onto an old two-lane road.

Around the ribbon of blacktop, pine, maple, and sweet gum trees stretch skyward like the pickets of a privacy fence, concealing all but glimpses of what lies beyond—a house, a barn, a cotton field, white-crested and ready for harvest, and the sky darkening toward the first evening hues.

Beside me, Mom is wide-eyed, both hands back on the wheel. She sends a concerned look my way, but mostly she's irritated. "What in the world is wrong with you? You're lucky we didn't end up in a wreck."

I stretch the stiffness from my neck and sit up, surprised that I've let myself fall so deeply asleep. I'd intended to stay awake, to watch for any signs of Mom dozing at the wheel or zoning out and doing something dangerous. If she shouldn't be making car trips anymore, I need to know. But even that seems strange—my questioning my mother's competence in anything. She's always been the one in charge. Of the school, of the family. Of the world, really.

I don't want to take over the world, or even the running of the family compound. Or the running of *her*. It's all I can do right now to hold my own house together and keep from committing mayhem in the daily struggle of parent versus teen.

There's a town ahead, and I spot a Dairy Queen billboard. "Let's stop for an ice cream." I'm surprised when another sign informs me that we have driven through a whole state since I fell asleep. "We're in Virginia? How long was I out?"

"Three hours at least, maybe four." Mom rolls *the look* my way, frowning. "I've been trying to tell you that you don't get enough sleep. I

had to go up to the school and sign Micah's permission form the other day. You stretch yourself too thin. It's no wonder you forget things."

"They would've waited for it." I really don't need the bad-mother guilt trip. Does this woman have any idea how many times I forged her signature because she was tied up with football game crowd control, school board meetings, the courses for her doctoral degree, the task of working out class schedules for five hundred kids? It was just a good thing that my siblings and I went to a different school and that our administration never bothered checking the signatures.

In my eighteen years as a parent, I've attended fifty times more PTA meetings, sports practices, and school plays than my mother ever did for us. It's funny how family histories seem to differ, depending on whom you ask.

"The school administration needs things *when* it needs things. It's hard enough coordinating hundreds of students without tracking down every little thing for every individual kid," Mom lectures. So far, this trip across four states is like being stuck in a cave with a bear waking from hibernation. She's ramping up for the confrontation with Aunt Sandy and using me for sparring practice.

I've really had enough of it. "You know what, Mom? I rearranged everything on the spur of the moment to come on this trip with you. I took four days off work and stuck Carol with a weekend shift. I made arrangements for the kids. I called Robert home from the cabin. I really don't deserve this. And to tell you the truth, I don't need one more person complaining about me, okay?" The last words are out of my mouth before I realize that I have fully snapped and started digging a little too close to the pool of angst I've been trying to ignore. I've revealed more than I meant to.

A curious eye slants my way. "*Who's* complaining about you?"

"You just were. That's all I meant." Deflect. Distract. Sidetrack.

"You said you don't need anyone *else* complaining about you. Clearly there's a larger problem here."

Suddenly I wish I'd stayed asleep. "No. Nothing. It was just a figure of speech." We pass the Dairy Queen, and I watch it go by. I really need an ice cream cone right now. Chocolate. Anything chocolate. Maybe chocolate ice cream dipped in chocolate. I need comfort food, the kind of thing I would not normally allow myself to eat.

"Is it Robert?" For months now, she's been nibbling around the situation with Robert and me, trying to sniff out the reasons he's gone so much.

It's never occurred to her that if there is something going on, I don't want to know. At least not yet. Two kids graduating in one year and the end of family life as we know it is enough to handle. I refuse to let some big upheaval blow my kids out of the water during their senior year of high school. I wonder if this is the reason Micah has decided to hurry up and graduate. Maybe he's afraid that something bad is coming and thinks he'd better get out of the house while he can.

"Oh, look! There's a Piggly Wiggly!" Mom cheers, and I'm glad we've veered off course. Literally so—Mom turns in to the parking lot.

"Remember when we lived in Biloxi? You used to get all excited about going to the Piggly Wiggly."

"I don't remember." The family compound is the only life I've ever known. My father's stint in the military ended when I was three years old. "I was just little."

"I always thought that was the strangest name for a grocery store. . . ." Her face turns solemn as she leans forward to get a better view of the Piggly Wiggly sign. For a moment, there's a mist in her eyes. "You were such a cute little thing . . ." The sentence goes unfinished as if she knows that I've reached a point in life where a sense of yearning for the past strikes me too. There's something magical about that time when your babies are small, when you're the center of their world, the person they love the most.

"We always used to sing a little song, remember?" Mom offers. "'To market, to market, to buy a fat pig. To market, to market, jiggety-jig . . .,'" she sings. Having taught preschool for several years before she had children, my mother always had a song or a nursery rhyme to suit any occasion.

It plays in my mind, a long-lost track I didn't know was there. I join in on the second stanza. "'To market, to market, to buy a fat hog. To market, to market, jiggety-jog.'"

We laugh together at the end, and I have a flash of a memory. Heat boiling off asphalt around my white Mary Jane sandals, Mom and me sitting on a bench in front of a store, eating ice cream. There's a scent in the air, and I smell it again today. It's not a Michigan scent.

"I guess I do remember after all." An image wavers in my mind, heat-washed and misty—my mother as a young homemaker, before my little sister came along and then my brother. Before Mom decided the June Cleaver life wasn't for her, that she wanted a career.

But before all that, there was just a young mom and a first child and a quiet summer day with ice cream cones. There will always be those memories that tie us together, those invisible strings. The careless stitches of mother and daughter.

Suddenly I'm glad I've come along on this trip. The Piggly Wiggly seems healing in some way, though I can't explain it.

"Oh, let's go back and get an ice cream." The car wheels around in the parking lot, and we head back to the Dairy Queen. "Dinner can wait. We don't have a schedule to keep."

The last words trouble me a bit, because I know my mother. She never makes a trip without a schedule in place. She never arrives late or unannounced.

It hadn't even occurred to me that she might be making this trip without having ironed out the plans ahead of time, but those words, *We don't have a schedule to keep*, clue me in.

This is a stealth attack. Aunt Sandy doesn't know we're coming.

CHAPTER 4

Evening is setting in as we drive over the wide, four-lane bridge from the North Carolina mainland onto the Outer Banks. The highway is strangely quiet heading onto the islands, but it's busy going the other direction, crowded with vehicles stuffed full of possessions and trailers piled high with sofas, mattresses, ATVs, shelves, and store fixtures with tarps tied over the top. Even though the last miles after looping Norfolk are fairly rural, we've already passed numerous homes and businesses boarded up with hurricane shutters. I'm starting to feel the insanity of what we're doing, and living in Michigan, I know nothing about hurricane evacuations.

The crazy meter is ringing off the charts in my head. It does this often when my family is involved.

"Mom, grab my phone for me." I take one hand off the wheel and try to reach my purse on the passenger-side floorboard near her feet. "I want to check the weather."

"Not while you're driving."

"Give me my phone."

"For heaven's sake, Elizabeth. Have you looked around? What if you get distracted and drive us off into the drink?" She indicates the waters of Currituck Sound below us. They are perfectly placid this evening, slightly pink-tinged as the day works toward its end. It'll be dark before we can travel all the way down the Outer Banks to Hatteras Island.

"I just want to make sure you're not about to get us stuck in a hurricane." The horror stories I've seen on TV come to mind. I'm way out of my element here, and Mom only knows whatever she learned during those three years living in Biloxi. Which, presumably, is practically nothing.

Her arms cross, and her foot slides the purse far out of my reach. Our Piggly Wiggly peace evaporated about the time the Dairy Queen faded from sight in the rearview mirror, and we've been butting heads ever since.

She snorts. "I checked the weather before we left. What do you think I am, some kind of addle-brained idiot?" The claw of deeper issues scratches

up a morsel. Once again, we're feeling our way through this difficult dance of changing roles. And stepping on each other's toes. "We've got almost forty-eight hours before it is supposed to even be in the vicinity, and it's only supposed to pass by here, not make landfall. Those people are just taking precautions." She waves blithely toward the vehicles going the other way, heading for higher ground that's not surrounded by water.

"This is stupid," I mutter under my breath. Overhead, a formation of pelicans wings its way toward the mainland. The birds know. They are smarter than we are. The word *birdbrain* comes to mind.

I keep driving because we're here now. What other choice is there, really? We might as well see Aunt Sandy.

But in the morning, I am insisting. If I have to hog-tie my mother and throw her in the car, we are leaving. Preferably with Aunt Sandy safely in the backseat. I've heard the stories of Hurricane Irene hitting the Outer Banks. Of Aunt Sandy's shop flooding, the roof of her house being blown partially off, and the bridge to Hatteras Island washing out, cutting the island off from all highway traffic for weeks.

Aunt Sandy shared the details with us when she was home last Christmas. She made the hurricane sound like one ginormous adventure, filled with heroic acts of neighborliness and personal sacrifice. She always makes her life sound idyllic, partly to counteract all the family disapproval, no doubt. The relatives consistently provide a united front against this runaway island existence of hers.

It's a form of bullying, I guess, but it's what we do. We keep our own close to home. Period.

I give up on the phone. I'll check as soon as we get to Aunt Sandy's place, and if there's anything dire, we'll just get back in the car and drive the other way. After the long nap this afternoon, I feel pretty good. I could drive for several hours tonight if I had to.

But as we pass through the intersection that allows us a choice of turning north toward Duck and Corolla or south toward Kill Devil Hills, Nags Head, Rodanthe, Avon, and eventually the tip of Hatteras Island, where Aunt Sandy lives, I hope we really do have a day or two to spare. The windows are down, and the scents of salt breeze and sand slip into me. I need this.

Maybe now the nightmares about Emily will stop. I haven't turned the whole situation over and over in my mind for a couple hours or tried to

mentally rewrite the way things happened. Here, with the live oaks bending over the road, the Spanish moss dangling in lacy chains, and the palm trees swaying, Emily seems like a story on the evening news. Something terrible but far away.

I ignore homeowners shuttering windows and crews covering storefronts with plywood as we pass. It's hard to believe anything could be wrong in a place like this.

We drive by the giant sand dunes of Kill Devil Hills, and I can't help slowing down. I've read about this place in books.

Mom leans toward the window. "Oh, how beautiful! Maybe tomorrow on our way off the islands, we can stop and visit the Wright Brothers Memorial, see where Wilbur and Orville took their famous first flight."

I don't know whether to agree or look at her like she's crazy. This trip isn't a vacation. At the same time, I'd like to pull over, throw my arms out, and run wildly up that giant dune, see what the view looks like from the top. I'll bet you can watch the water on both sides of the island from up there. What kind of freedom would that be?

I can taste it, almost, that burst of something unplanned and completely different. Something I wouldn't normally do. My heart quickens for the first time in a long time. Maybe that's what I need, I decide. Maybe that's the secret to surviving this change in life, this ending of all the things I've put my heart and soul into, of motherhood as it has been. Maybe I need to plan a vacation—go bungee jumping or zip-lining or skydiving. Something wild.

"Well, that's a faraway look if I've ever seen one." Mom's observation breaks into my thoughts, and I realize some time has passed. "What's that about?"

"Nothing." The whole thing is a can of worms I'm not ready to open yet. With my mother or anyone. It's like I've been stuffing emotions into a bottle for a couple years now, and if I open the cork, everything will rush out at once.

"Oh, there it is!" She's distracted by a glimpse of the ocean. The waves, white-tipped and frothy, brush against the shore with a different kind of power than I'm used to seeing in Lake Michigan. They seem determined to pick up this place and move it bit by bit.

A lit sign echoes my thoughts: *Life on a sandbar. It's beachy!*

We continue down the Outer Banks, pointing out beautiful multistory vacation homes, interesting shops, and glimpses of the water that quicken

my pulse each time. No wonder Aunt Sandy has run away to this place. It's incredible. I wish I'd come sooner, brought the kids all those years she invited us to visit.

The sun sinks lower as we drive, and the last blush is gone by the time we finally reach Hatteras Island. Overhead, a spray of stars seems close enough to reach for. My mother has relaxed in her seat, gazing at the sky. She tells me about a time she and my father went on a picnic to Lake Michigan. The day he asked her to marry him, and she said yes. They lay beneath the stars for hours, making plans, talking about their future. A young couple in love.

Mom has dipped her toe into the waters of the past now. As we drive through Buxton and Frisco, she tells me about her wedding. The day, the dress, the conflicts with her own mother that seem petty now. "Sandy was only fifteen then, and your grandma was convinced that she was too young to be a bridesmaid. I think that was the first time my mother and I ever went head-to-head about anything. But I was almost twenty, I'd been out on my own working, and I was paying for a lot of the wedding. I wanted my sister in it."

"Did you get your way?" The GPS on the dashboard shows us drawing ever closer to Sandy's house, and I almost regret it. I'm enjoying the conversation. It's amazing that the GPS knows its way to places like this, so far off the beaten path. We've been driving down the Outer Banks for roughly two hours. From near the top, almost all the way to the bottom, where the ferry landing leads down to Ocracoke, the last of the developed islands. I know these places because Aunt Sandy has told me stories about them. They already live in my mind.

"Yes, I did. My sister and I had slept in the same bed since she left the crib in my parents' room, and I couldn't imagine not sharing that day with her."

"That's really nice." I picture my mother and my aunt, a little over four years apart in age, curled up in the same bed, sharing innocent games of Let's Pretend. It makes the present situation seem that much sadder. Should geography and real estate signs outweigh the bonds formed by the shared milestones of childhood?

The pressure of that question grows as we continue down the island and finally wind through a small neighborhood toward my aunt's place. Around us now, the houses are a combination of historic clapboard homes built

closer to the ground and more modern ones constructed on stilts where historic homes have undoubtedly surrendered to the wind and the floods.

“Mom, maybe you shouldn’t do this. Maybe you should forget what Uncle Butch says and just let it go.”

The profile of her chin is stiff. “I won’t have this family torn apart.” I recognize the stubborn look. I’ve seen it many times in my daughter, who is her grandmother’s spitting image—in personality and mannerisms, if not in appearance.

What if this is the thing that tears the family apart? I wonder. We’re pulling into the driveway now, so there’s no time to ask. The house is a gray, cedar-shingled structure on stilts with a carport underneath. Hurricane shutters cover the windows, but over the front door, a cheery sign, just visible in the glow of the headlights, proclaims, *Sandy Feet Welcome Here*.

The house is dark. It’s obvious that no one is home.

“Maybe she has evacuated already,” I suggest, grasping at a hope that perhaps this ill-fated journey will end in a missed connection. Somewhere on the road I learned that Aunt Sandy has quit answering calls from my mother and Uncle Butch, hence this wild trip.

“She’s down at that shop of hers. You can bet on it.” A frustrated huff punctuates the words. “Let’s go.”

We drive back to Highway 12, then wind our way past more shuttered houses, through Hatteras Village, and a short distance toward the ferry landing, where my aunt’s shop comes into view as we round a corner. It’s just like the pictures on the postcards she sends us at Christmas. An antique clapboard house in the I-style that’s traditional in the Outer Banks, painted yellow and converted to a shop. The wide front porch looks like a perfect place to sit and watch the traffic headed to the Ocracoke ferry. In back, the water of Pamlico Sound twinkles beneath the full moon, and some sort of outdoor lamps cast a colored glow onto the grass. The lights are on in the shop, the upper dormers reflecting against a carved sign that labels the place.

Sandy’s Seashell Shop
An Ocean of Possibilities

It looks like the showdown of the O'Bannion sisters will happen after all.

Mom doesn't even wait for me to put the car in park. She flips the lock and is out the passenger door, climbing the steps before I can turn off the engine, but she stops on the second stair from the top.

Exiting the vehicle, I hear music. Mom has tipped an ear toward it too. She glances over her shoulder at me as if she needs backup. I don't want to be backup. I'm realizing how completely I hate this mess. And I wonder how much of this is happening because my mother wants it and how much is because Uncle Butch is a bully and my family is set in its ways?

The shop door is open, but no one is around when we walk in. Furniture and store fixtures have been stacked in the main room, with soft things like chairs and sofas raised onto metal shelves and wooden tables. Clearly someone has been preparing for the possibility of floodwater. But even in its present condition, the shop is adorable. There's a coffee bar along the left wall, an antique display case bearing a vintage cash register, an actual indoor sandbox in the middle of the store, and a bay window on the front wall with beautiful stained-glass suncatchers hanging inside.

Hummingbirds. Dozens of them.

The well-worn plank floors of the main room and the beadboard wainscoting are clearly original to the house. Above the wainscoting an array of shell art and signs offers beach-related bits of wisdom, ready for tourists to take home. A rack of hats and sarongs makes me want to stroll a few miles down the shore and see what the tide might wash up. The music seeping from outside adds to the mood. It's an island tune, heavy on the steel drums and wooden flutes.

"She must be out there." Mom turns toward the light spilling through the back doors that lead to what appears to be a deck. The accordion paper shades are lowered partway over the glass, so all we can see is the first foot or two of weathered wood. "She has her stained-glass workshop in the old garage building in back. She told me."

My moment of beach nirvana evaporates as we cross through the shop and open the French doors. The deck comes into view, and of all things, it looks like there's a party going on. At the patio tables, a dozen or so people are laughing and talking and feasting on piles of food dumped unceremoniously atop splayed-out newspapers.

Mom stops in the doorway, clearly surprised to have walked in on a gathering of some sort. She's not at all prepared for this. From where I'm standing, it looks like we've shown up at a convention of old hippies. The people on the deck are an eclectic collection of long hair, grungy T-shirts, sagging tattoos, and leathery skin. They range in age from perhaps forty to seventy or so.

Aunt Sandy spots us, and her eyes fly wide. She stops with a crab claw halfway to her mouth, a cracker still dangling in the other hand. She blinks, blinks again. I have a feeling she's hoping we'll disappear. But of course, we don't.

Here come the relatives, like it or not.

Finally she sets down the crab cracker, which I figure is a good sign, and stands up. Her round cheeks rise beneath her spiky blonde hair, and a measure of relief trickles through me. At least we're not going to have all-out war right here and now.

To the contrary, she waves us outside, like she's not a bit surprised to find us on her doorstep. "Well, don't just stand there!" she bubbles cheerfully. "Come on out here! Grab a plate! We're having a hurricane party!"

CHAPTER 5

I open my eyes, stare at the evenly spaced metal bars above my head, wonder where I am.

For once I've slept the whole night, rather than spending the hours dozing and waking, dozing and waking in a sweat. I haven't tromped the woods in my dream, stirring the leaf litter and hoping to find a little blonde girl running through the trees.

The realization should come with relief, but instead it comes with guilt. If I give up on looking for Emily, even in my dreams, isn't it the same as accepting the worst?

I don't accept it. I won't. Little girls shouldn't be stolen from their mothers in the middle of the night. They should be safe at home in their beds, tucked in after a storybook and good-night prayers.

I figure out two things as I look up at the bars. The first is that I'm in the extra bedroom at Aunt Sandy's house—the one with two sets of bunk beds, where her grandchildren stay when they come to visit. Mom has already vacated the bed across the room, but the quilt is turned back and rumpled still. She must have gotten up in a hurry. Probably to go argue with Aunt Sandy some more, before my aunt can escape for her morning walk along the shore. There's a path out the back of the house, and it eventually leads to the ocean side of the island.

Yesterday morning, Aunt Sandy slipped away before Mom could catch her. They've been locked in mortal combat for over twenty-four hours now. Today we have to leave, and sooner rather than later. We've pushed the timeline as far as we dare.

The second thing I realize—with startling clarity, as I listen to see if I can catch the rhythm of the waves far off in the distance: I am angry with God. So incredibly, bitterly, hotly angry. I'm boiling over with it.

Why? I want to scream. *Why? Why? Why?* Why is evil allowed to come in the night and snatch up an innocent little girl? The world shouldn't be this way. And if it is this way, maybe I don't want to live in it anymore. . . .

I know that is a selfish thought. I brush it away as soon as it comes.

I wonder if the advice Carol has been giving me at work is more spot-on than I've realized. She thinks I need to see somebody—a doctor or a shrink. *It's nothing to be ashamed of, she says. This job is stressful, Elizabeth. You deal with people's worst situations, year after year, and it adds up. On top of that, major life transitions are hard. They can knock you completely off-balance. And then sometimes it's all as simple as hormones and body chemistry. You should go get checked out. Life's too short to be walking around with one foot in the ditch.*

I sit up, catch a breath, remind myself that my problems are small. I know where my children are, for one thing. They're both safe. There's never been a time when I couldn't kiss them good night, at least over the phone. And even though these years of tearing away are difficult, there's a part of me that knows it's normal enough. Kids are supposed to grow up and cut the apron strings. I just never dreamed those sharp scissors would leave so many wounds. Who *am* I, now that I'm not Mom-in-charge anymore?

I put on sweats and tennis shoes, grab a jacket in case my mother and Aunt Sandy are outside, engaging in an early morning battle. Yesterday, the only peaceful moments were those when Aunt Sandy brought out her sea glass, shells, and freshwater pearls and showed my mother how she makes one-of-a-kind jewelry pieces. *Jewelry from the sea*, she calls it. She almost lured my mother into the idea of being a long-distance designer of artisan pieces before Mom realized that she was unwittingly being pulled into the Seashell Shop dream. After that, she pushed away the salt-frosted glass and said, "For heaven's sake, I don't have time for this kind of thing. I came here to talk about the property, Sandy."

Then the war was on again. It lasted all day and kept us from leaving last night.

Maybe they've gone down to the water together this morning, but I hope not. We need to get on the road, and from the sounds of the conversation after the moments of sea glass sisterhood, it will be just the two of us leaving. Mom and I. The taproot holding my aunt to this place reaches straight through the salty soil and all the way to the floor of the ocean. And with Uncle George gone, there's no way she's leaving their house and the store without someone watching after them. She has a generator, bottled water, batteries, nonperishable food, Uncle George's old

ham radio, and all the other hurricane necessities, including numerous cans of gasoline.

Besides, she doesn't expect the storm to be that bad. The last thing we heard on the television was that it was expected to pass by Cape Hatteras, not coming onshore until farther north. The greater fear seems to be that it will strike hard around New York City and up the Jersey coast.

I don't know if it was a show of bravado or not, but at the hurricane party the night before last, the old hippies were tipping their glasses to the storm, thumbing their noses at the weather bureau, and eating enough discount seafood to choke a whale. What else is there to do but feast when the power may be out for a while and the food will spoil anyway?

These people are either the heartiest souls I have ever met or the most foolhardy. I can't decide which, but they are very nice. While helping to pack shop goods yesterday—and listening to Mom and Aunt Sandy argue—I met several women Aunt Sandy refers to as the Sisterhood of the Seashell Shop. Teresa, Elsa, Callie, Crystal . . . I can't remember all the names, but most of them own shops up and down Hatteras Island.

They are as close to my aunt as sisters, and as I watched them, I noted something. This is lacking in my own life. Over the years, I've gotten so busy with work and my kids' activities that I've let friendships slide off the map. Other than Carol at work, there's literally no one to talk to who *gets it* . . . no one I'm close enough to that I'd admit the ragged truth, anyway.

I find my mother in the kitchen, trying to make heads or tails of some sort of professional coffeemaker that has undoubtedly been brought home from the Seashell Shop.

Mom looks like you might expect a former high school principal to look without her morning coffee.

And Aunt Sandy is nowhere to be found. That, of course, is the first thing Mom complains about, after letting me know what she thinks of the fancy coffeemaker.

I decipher the brewing machine because I am, after all, trained to save lives, and this is a life-or-death situation. We need coffee. Now. Or heads will roll.

We perch on barstools on either side of the small island as the pungent nectar of morning perks nearby. Some fresh strawberries are waiting in a bowl. I don't know if they are for us or not, but I help myself.

I wait for the brewing to finish and for Mom to take in the requisite amount of coffee before I bring up the obvious. “We need to get on the road this morning.”

Mom is drumming her fingernails on her cup. *Ching, ching, chang. Chang-chang. Ching-ching-ching.* That’s not a good sign. “She won’t listen. She’s being ridiculous. It’s insanity.” Mom squints toward the back window. I gather that *Mrs. Insanity* has indeed gotten up early and escaped for her walk. “And I’m not the only one who thinks so either. That woman who owns the ice cream stand down the road, that *Teresa person*, she agrees with me. Not only was she sending her own elderly mother to the mainland to stay with relatives, she agrees that Sandra Kay is in no shape to be riding out a storm here, and especially not by herself.” She’s calling my aunt by first and middle name this morning, adding a parental tone to the battle. She is Big Sister Sharon now, and big sister knows best.

“Well, she’s done it before. They’ve been here for years, Mom. Surely she knows what she’s getting into.” I’d noticed my mother canvassing the crowd at the hurricane party, soliciting opinions, support, or information—or all three. She pulled Teresa aside again yesterday, when Teresa stopped by the Shell Shop to check on us. We were out back, packing up supplies in the glassmaking shop. Aunt Sandy was sweating like crazy, despite the fact that the day was seasonably cool.

On the one hand, I realize that what my mother has been doing, she’s been doing with the best intentions. Mom is not a mean person. She’s worried about her sister. On the other hand, I hate it when she does this to me. And I’m not unaware that in these months since her retirement, she has been nosing around in my life.

“Mom, I think you’re just going to have to let this . . .”

Her glare could fry an egg at thirty paces. “They *all* agree with me, Elizabeth. *Every* one of them I talk to. But especially Teresa. She knows the most because she’s the one going to the doctor appointments with Sandy.”

An uncomfortable wrinkle in the universe travels my way. “What doctor appointments?”

My mother lifts the index finger that says, *I’m right, and you’d better listen.* “Oh, you don’t know the half of it. And neither does George because Sandy’s been keeping secrets from him since not too long after they went through the last hurricane. She doesn’t want him having to worry about it,

considering all the trouble he's having with his mother and her dementia and the nursing home back in Michigan."

"But what's going on with Aunt Sandy?"

"Diabetes that's out of control. She won't take her medicine. And near blackouts behind the wheel of her car. Eating things she's not supposed to. She refuses to monitor her diet. And if anyone tries to tell her what she should do, she makes excuses. She says there's been too much going on since the last hurricane, and she doesn't have time for the adjustment to the medicine. It makes her sick and takes away all her energy, so after just *one week* of trying it, she went off the stuff. She says she's been making it okay all these years—she'll be fine until things settle down and she has *time to be sick*. Can you believe that? Can you believe the ridiculous stubbornness?"

Oh yes, I can. I'm looking at the mirror image. Different hair. Same personality. These women run the world, or else.

I take a sip of coffee, savor the taste on my tongue, try to come up with a solution that doesn't include throwing a gunnysack over my aunt's head and tossing her into the trunk of the car.

"Well, maybe when we get back home, we can—" I don't even get *talk to Uncle George* out of my mouth.

"I'm staying."

The hammer drops, and I hear it ringing against my ear. My brain sloshes back and forth in my skull, and it's a minute before I can form a coherent thought.

"What do you mean, you're staying?"

"I'm not leaving. That's it. She can't be here by herself. And she won't let any of her friends stay over with her because they have houses of their own to look after. And she refuses to weather this thing at their houses because she wants to keep a watch on this place."

"Mom, you can't stay here."

"Oh yes, I can. And I am. What's my sister going to do? Throw me out in the ocean? Once you leave, she'll be stuck with me, whether she likes it or not. If she's that worried about my safety, well then, she'll have to get in her vehicle and drive to the mainland, now won't she?" My mother gives me a lemon-lipped smirk, pleased with herself. All those doctoral classes are paying off. She has outmaneuvered everyone. She thinks.

“I’m *not* going to drive off and leave you here with a hurricane coming.” No way. Nohow. Not happening.

“Oh, it’s not even supposed to be that bad. You saw the weather report last night. Just a little brush.”

“Yes, and I see the eighty-seven gas cans piled on the deck out there too. It’s a hurricane, Mother. You can’t tell from one minute to the next what these things will do. Even assuming that it doesn’t cause some kind of catastrophic damage around here, there could be travel problems on the East Coast for days, maybe weeks. Who knows?”

She focuses out the window, as in, *La la la, I can’t hear you*. “I’m capable of making my own decisions, Elizabeth. They may have put some young know-nothing in charge of the school that should’ve been mine, but I’m still a fully competent adult.”

This is a fine way to prove it. My cell phone rings in my pocket, and if it weren’t for the fact that the kids might need me and the investigation into Emily’s kidnapping is still ongoing, I wouldn’t pull the phone out to look at it. As it is, Mom gives me a disgusted look as I check.

It’s Carol.

Something cold and solid sinks slowly from my throat to the pit of my stomach. “I need to take this.” I can barely get the words out.

Mom lodges a complaint about young people and bad cell phone manners as I head outside to the second-story deck and pull the door closed behind me.

I answer, and Carol sounds emotional on the other end. I know before she says the words. It’s bad news.

“Elizabeth, they’ve found a body out by Palmer Lake. They haven’t got a positive ID yet, but I didn’t want you to hear it somewhere else if you were following the local news over the Internet. Jason says it’s her.” Carol’s son, Jason, is one of the officers on the case. He’s looked at that picture on the flyer a thousand times. If he says it’s her, it is.

“Is he sure?” I ask anyway. I can’t think of what else to say. I feel myself breaking inside. Shattering into a million pieces.

How can this be? How can this be happening?

“Yeah. But they haven’t done an ID yet,” she repeats as if that extends a ray of hope. As if it would be better for some other little girl’s lifeless body to be found in the woods. “You okay?”

I don't really need to answer. She knows me well enough to guess.
"No."

Once again, I cycle through those moments. Those moments after the call came in, the time wasted because my mind was lost in a fog of my own problems. Could it have made the difference? Would the outcome have changed if Carol had taken the call?

"They don't know any details yet," she warns. "Elizabeth, don't go jumping to any conclusions. That won't help anything, okay?"

I don't answer. I can't.

"Okay?" Carol repeats, louder this time.

"I have to go." Somehow I manage to thank her for letting me know. Then I'm walking across the deck. And then I'm running, down the stairs, across the lawn of wispy salt grass and weeds, down the path through the scrubby bayberry bushes, toward the dunes and over them onto the thin strip of sand that hasn't been overtaken by the storm-swelled tide.

I run and run, shoes sinking into the sand, the weight of it pulling and tugging, slowing me down, not letting me get away fast enough. The waves claw the shore, and tears blur my eyes. Far out to sea, the first hints of a change in the weather blacken into a formless darkness.

I pant and I scream, but other than quiet, shuttered houses, no one hears me. As far as I can see down the beach, there's not a sign of another living soul. Nothing to stop me from running, except myself. My own weakness.

Eventually I can't go any farther. I can't put any more distance between myself and that phone call. My lungs burn and my legs go numb, and all I can do is collapse into a dune and watch the waves violently strike land, and feel myself going out to sea with them, piece by piece.

CHAPTER 6

I'm chilled to the bone by the time Aunt Sandy finally finds me. Overhead, the sky has narrowed, the clouds closing in. The waves have taken out the beach, the water already brown and churning with a mix of sea foam and debris. There's only a few feet now between the shoreline and the dunes. Aunt Sandy is driving on it in the little ragtop Jeep she uses to run around the island.

The vehicle slides to a halt, and she hurries toward me in a stocky shuffle as I rise from the dunes. I have no idea how long I've been here, watching the storm slowly work its way toward us. That is the beauty of the ocean, even when it's angry. It steals all perception of time. Right now, I need to lose myself more than anything.

But as I catch my aunt's frantic look, I realize how selfish I've been, and guilt strikes me like a cold splash in the face. Undoubtedly they've been looking for me all this time. I've kept them from last-minute hurricane preparations. By default, I have probably sacrificed any possibility of talking them both into leaving. If Aunt Sandy is really having as many health problems as my mother indicated, she doesn't need to stay here.

"Where have you been?" She grabs me and rubs her hands up and down my arms. The sweatshirt is wet, stiff, and practically icy. The spray is so cold now.

I like the numbness it has created.

"I'm sorry." I think I've gotten myself together. I intend to say that I had a call this morning with bad news. Instead, I manage, "The call . . . the call . . ." and then the flood wall bursts. Sobs come rushing forth, and I cry, bent over her shoulder for who knows how long. Against me, she seems strong, her feet spread a distance in the sand, bracing to hold back each strike of wind. I huddle on her leeward side like a clump of sea oats, seeking to ride out the storm.

She does me the favor of not asking for more information, here and now. The surf is so loud, it isn't a place for talking. Finally she guides me to the Jeep, buckles me into the passenger seat like a child, continues up the

dunes until we find a place to cross through, then motors between beach houses and down the highway. In the distance, the cylindrical black-and-white stripes of the old Hatteras lighthouse stretch skyward, seeming to promise that it is possible for something well built to survive the storm.

I wonder if I have what it takes. I don't feel as solid as that lighthouse.

Instead of taking me home, Aunt Sandy steers toward the Seashell Shop. She lets us in and calls my mother's cell phone from the landline. The service is patchy right now, so the call ends abruptly.

"We need to get you out of here, and you need to take your mother with you," she says, suddenly all business. The storm comes first, and I'm glad of it. I don't want to talk about the news from work. I don't want to think about it. "There's probably still time for you to get off the Banks and over to the mainland, at least if the traffic cooperates. But you need to go *now*. Just let me check everything and get the shutters in place on the door. And then we'll hurry home."

She walks around the room, muttering to herself, reviewing a mental checklist that makes me realize how many times she must have been through this procedure before. "All the furniture up . . . glass cutters and saws at the house . . . inventory on the high shelves . . ."

How does somebody do this—face storm after storm as if it's to be expected? Why hasn't she just given up?

She stands in the center of the shop, her hands braced on her hips, her face partially hidden by a baseball cap she has grabbed and pulled over her short blonde hair. "You might want to get one off the rack," she says, motioning to the hat. "It's about to be a bad time for hair around here. And depending how far inland you two make it—which, like I said, is all about the traffic—it may be a while before there's a hot shower."

"I'm not going." The words come out in a rush as if I've just discovered them myself, but I've known for hours that I couldn't bear to return home. Not right now. Suddenly, riding out a hurricane seems like the lesser of two evils. I can't watch the discovery of Emily's small body as it's broadcast on TV. The confirmation that it's her. The pictures of her sobbing mother clutching her baby brother. The interviews with the grandparents, who have stood rock solid through this entire process, their faces stricken with grief. I can't bear to hear the behind-the-scenes details coming out bit by bit. I can't go back to work. I can't take another call. What if I screw up again, cost someone else the time that's needed to save a life?

“Oh *no . . .*,” Aunt Sandy begins, but when her survey of the store turns her my way, she catches my face, studies me a moment. I feel like she’s reading everything inside me. “All right,” she says then. “Okay . . . but let’s just hope this one passes on by without being anything like Irene was.”

I nod, and then she hands me the phone and adds, “You’d better call your family while you can. Tell them not to worry if they don’t hear much from us for a few days. You never know about communications after one of these things.” *For a few days* slides past me, plucking a disquieting note. “And take those suncatchers out of the bay window, would you? I forgot those were there. Wrap them in bubble wrap and tuck them in one of those boxes with the egg-crate slots. Put it up high somewhere. Two dozen suncatchers are worth some money, and if, heaven forbid, we get any damage out of this storm, we’re gonna need it.”

The ominous tone should scare me—I think she means it to—but instead it produces one last burst of determination. I find myself slipping into my mother’s role. Maybe Aunt Sandy will listen to me. She knows I’m not trying to take over her life. “I understand how much this place means to you. But listen, I was talking to Mom this morning, and she’s legitimately worried about your health.”

She turns away with a quick shake of her head. “Don’t start on me. Just help me do these last few things and get the doors shuttered, okay? I’ve heard everything your mother has to say. I’ve already promised her that I’ll get checked out and see what I can do about finding a medication that doesn’t put me flat on my back, *when there’s time*.” A backhand hatchets through the air in a maneuver so like my mother’s, it’s scary. No wonder they drive each other crazy.

I hope it’s not genetic, this ridiculous determination to ignore all the people around me and answer a concern with a *laissez-faire* flip of the hand. *If I ever catch myself doing that, I hope I smack myself upside the head in the process*. “Okay, okay . . . but how about if we just go inland and get a hotel for a few days? All of us. I’ll drive. I’ll help you shutter up before we leave. It really doesn’t seem like a good idea for you or Mom to be here during this storm, just in case it’s . . .”

A look comes my way, and it aborts the rest of the sentence. There’s no point. Mind made up. Those blue eyes say it all. “Elizabeth, storms are part of living on an island. Every decision you make in life has benefits and consequences. Sometimes you just have to go on faith, and even that comes

at a price. It means you have to give up the idea that you're the one in charge of the universe. This old house and I have been through all the storms before, and we're going to get through this one. Whatever I need, whether that's provisions or friends to help in the aftermath or the kindness of strangers, like the volunteers who helped after the last storm, God's going to bring it my way."

I don't have an answer for that. Aunt Sandy is the expert in this area. She's the Bible study teacher. But I think, *What if the provision this time is a sister who's telling you to get yourself to the doctor?*

I don't say it, though. She won't hear me anyway, and I'm so ragged right now, I don't have any more energy for arguing. Instead, I take the phone outside so I can call Robert and tell him I've decided to stay for a hurricane.

I catch him in the office, and I know he's busy or he wouldn't be working on a Sunday. Aunt Sandy's cordless-phone battery is low, so I should make it quick, but there's a part of me that yearns for some form of normalcy, for a touchstone. I want to run through the list of kid issues: Micah's calculus-teacher problem, Jessica's cheerleader tiffs, signing up for another SAT test.

I want to talk. Just talk about all the normal concerns. Pretend there are no such things as storms and sad ends to troubling missing-persons cases.

"What's up?" he asks. I've let the line hang too long.

"Well, there's been a little hitch in my plans. . . ." I start into the saga of my aunt's health concerns, my mother's insistence on staying, and the fact that I'm afraid to leave them here alone. I downplay the hurricane reports, basically intimating that there's no chance it will actually hit full force here. "Just a lot of rain and thunder, and maybe flooding in low-lying areas, but Sandy's house is up high and fortified, so it shouldn't be any problem."

Robert is distracted but sympathetic. "Sounds like the O'Bannion commotion continues," he says in a tone that indicates he doesn't want the details or have time for them right now. Generally he tries to sidestep the family wrangles. "I have to travel early next week. Four days. A test track out in Arizona."

"I'm sure we'll be home by then." I run some quick mental calculations. Next week is seven days away. With any luck, we'll be through the storm and have convinced my aunt to make a doctor's appointment by then.

“Be careful on the way back home.” This is Robert’s way of ending the conversation nicely, but also letting me know he has other things to attend to.

I feel issue-creep coming on, and before I can stop myself, I’m unloading a laundry list of questions. Really, I’m just not ready to let go of the lifeline yet. I want Robert to ask for a few more details about Aunt Sandy and the storm, help me make sure I’m doing the right thing by staying here. I want him to act like they miss me at home. “Did Jess get signed up for the SAT test again? You know, I was thinking that really both kids should go even though Micah’s last score was pretty good. Oh, and I think I forgot to tell you—Jess found a leak below her bathroom sink. I stuck a bowl under it, but we better get a plumber in before it springs loose and floods the second story . . .”

“Got it under control,” Robert bites out.

“I wasn’t trying to nag. I was just wondering. You know, I’m nine hundred miles from home, and I’m stuck in the middle of this stupid fight between my mom and my aunt. I’m not there to take care of things at home. I just want a couple minutes of your time to find out what’s going on there.” My voice trembles at the end, but I harden myself against it. There’s no room for a breakdown right now, but there’s a part of me that wants him to pick up on the emotion and ask what’s wrong. I want to tell him everything—the 911 call, Emily’s mother, the wasted minutes . . . everything.

That little girl on the news, I want to say. I took the call. I made assumptions. I botched it.

“If you’re going to leave me in charge, Elizabeth, then let me handle it,” he snaps, and I’m stung.

I stand there gritting my teeth, my lips tightening against the swell of emotion—anger, irritation, disappointment, sadness. Loneliness. When did we get to this point, always brushing by each other in a rush or taking our frustrations out on each other?

He hates his job. I hate what our lives have become. We’re both stretched so thin that neither one of us has a soft place to fall. I wonder again if he’s seeking solace somewhere else. He wouldn’t . . . would he? Robert is one of the most honest people I know, which is why some of the things going on at work drive him crazy. There’s a lot of cutting corners in the auto industry during these times of economic pressure.

“I’m sorry.” He sighs into the phone. “It’s just been a bad day here, and I wasn’t planning on being out of town next week. I’ll miss the homecoming game.”

“Homecoming,” I mutter. “I’d forgotten about homecoming. . . .”

“Are you okay?” This time he seems like he’s really asking. I realize I’ve been wiping my eyes and sniffing.

“Yes . . . yeah . . . fine.” He doesn’t need any extra pressure today. I know how he is when things aren’t going well at work. “I’d better sign off. I’m trying to help Aunt Sandy get the shop closed up before the storm. She’s hoping the water won’t come in this time.”

“Listen, keep in touch.” His note of concern gives me comfort. Then I tell him what Aunt Sandy said—communications could be spotty.

We finish the conversation, and I call into work, explain that I may be off a couple more days than I’d planned. Fortunately, no one else is on vacation right now, so it’s not a problem.

All the bases are covered by the time I go inside to help Aunt Sandy finish up. I do as I’ve been asked. It feels good to have something to occupy my hands, a manageable task. I can save these little glass hummingbirds. They are beautiful things, my aunt’s creations—hummingbirds and flower vines, captured in colored glass and leaded metal.

“There’s one extra.” I hold it up after I’ve filled the box of twenty-four. The straggler dangles from its green ribbon, suspended in flight.

Aunt Sandy smiles at me as she crosses the room. “Must be that one’s for you. We’ll take it home with us, and you can tuck it in your suitcase. Then when you hang him in your window, he’ll be a reminder of an ocean of possibilities.” She spreads her arms like she’s Vanna White offering up a prize package, then looks at the pile of goods in the center of the room and adds, “Although my ocean’s a little bit of a mess right now, sorry. I wish you could see this place on a regular day.”

“Me too.” I’m one half inch from saying, *I’ll come visit again, maybe bring the kids after graduation*, but I stop myself. We’re supposed to be persuading her to give this place up, after all.

So I follow her from the shop instead.

I help her work the hurricane shutter onto the front door and tap the sliding latches into the brackets with a small hammer. By the time it’s done, we’re both sweating and Aunt Sandy has called her husband an ugly name or two. Uncle George designed and built this special door covering after the

last hurricane flooded and decimated the shop. He calls it the floodgate. It is weather-stripped to death around the lower edges, in hopes of preventing water from seeping into the building if it comes up that high. The guys from the surf shop helped Aunt Sandy install the ones on the back door after the hurricane party. It never occurred to her that she and I might test the limits of our strength to put the front floodgate in place today.

When we're done, she pauses, braces both hands against the doorframe, and scares me half to death by dropping her head forward and wheezing huge breaths.

"Are you okay?" I touch her shoulder before I realize that she's not having a heart attack. She's praying.

I close my eyes and bow my head, and a couple things strike me in the darkness of my own mind. I realize how much my aunt loves this place. How much it means to her. Much more than twenty acres of farmland she never uses and probably doesn't intend to. I'm also struck by the fact that, in the hours since I learned about little Emily, it hasn't occurred to me to pray. There's been nothing in my mind but grief and crazy rage. My last prayers went unanswered, after all. Emily didn't run through the trees to a rescuer. She wasn't delivered safely home.

I try to force myself to offer up words for her family, to plead that, in her last moments, she wasn't terrified and alone and cold. But all I find myself doing is reliving what those last hours may have been like—a stranger speeding away with her in the car while I sent the first responders in the wrong direction.

"Let's go." Aunt Sandy is all business again. We return to the Jeep, and instead of going home, we make the rounds, as she calls it. We visit the other shopkeepers. We check on the homes of friends who have evacuated. We canvass neighborhoods and ensure that the elderly women from the Sunday school class have gone to relatives' homes or that they at least have a caretaker staying with them.

We work our way through traffic, on the shoulder about half the time, to Fairhope, a little fishing village around a marina, where the boats are now bound and double-bound to the docks. I wonder how they will fare in the storm.

Inside Bink's Market, the Fairhope locals are discussing the incoming storm. We listen as we nibble on crab-and-sausage balls and crab rangoons, which the owner, Bink, assures us are famous. Meanwhile, three men at a

table swap stories about the last hurricane and the one before that and the famous Ash Wednesday nor'easter that tore a hole through the island, bisecting it.

I wonder again where these people get their fortitude. The weather hasn't ruined their appetites. As customers rush in and out, buying the last of the water, the bread, and the canned food, the fishermen play cards at a table in the corner and enjoy some of Bink's shrimp po'boy sandwiches. We buy some to take home.

"George and I love the food at this place," my aunt remarks as Geneva Bink wraps up our sandwiches.

I check out the size of the homemade bun and think of Aunt Sandy's diabetes. Clearly she's in denial if it's as bad as Mom said.

Before leaving Fairhope, we pull into the driveway of a giant Victorian house. With its three-story turret, wide front porch, and wraparound veranda, it makes me think of the graceful, quiet life of days gone by. Dressed in faded paint and crumbling gingerbread trims, it looks like a bride who has fallen asleep beneath the live oaks and forgotten to wake up, her wedding gown weatherworn now.

"Pppfff!" A disgusted sound escapes Aunt Sandy as she looks at the house. "Well, at least she's had someone put up the hurricane shutters for her, but I'll bet she's here. She sure doesn't need to be. Ninety-one years old and still determined to ride out the hurricane. Ridiculous."

I survey the place as we walk up the steps and knock on the door. "Ninety-one and she lives here? Alone?"

The reply is a frown of genuine concern. "One of my longtime customers. I don't think she has any family. Haven't ever heard her mention anyone for as long as I've known her."

I try to imagine a ninety-one-year-old woman going through a hurricane, all by herself in this enormous house. "That's terrible." Having lived on the family compound as long as I can remember, I can't fathom not being surrounded by relatives, not having someone to take care of me if I needed it. It occurs to me that I've never been as grateful for that as I should've been.

"Well, Iola Anne Poole is a woman of the Banks, through and through." Aunt Sandy says it like that explains everything. "This place gets in your blood."

The little woman who opens the door looks like a native. Her skin is a deep olive color, wrinkled and leathery in the way of things that have lived long by the sea. But her silvery-blue eyes are bright. She's tiny, stooped over, and thin, yet she seems strangely capable as she assures my aunt that she has made all the proper preparations for the storm. "Oh, you know, this old house and I have been through quite a few."

"I understand that, Iola Anne." My aunt touches the little woman's shoulder tenderly. "But I just wanted to check and see if you won't consider coming and staying over with me, or if there is anything you need. I could run to the store for you or . . ."

"No, no, no. Now don't bother about me. I don't want to trouble anyone." A pat of my aunt's hand and a shrug seem to assure that this slip of a woman has everything under control, though the general condition of the house says otherwise.

She catches me checking out the porch, asks who I am, and quick introductions are made. I shake her hand, which is cold, the skin as thin as parchment over bone, yet her grip is surprisingly strong.

My fingers stay trapped between hers for a moment as she turns back to my aunt. "I'll be just fine." A scrappy black cat with a damaged ear slips past her feet and skitters out the door, skirting us warily. "You'd better hurry back, Mr. Muggins!" she calls after him, letting go of my hand. "You'll end up with Dorothy and Toto in Oz."

The three of us laugh, and Aunt Sandy promises to check on her after the storm. Iola Anne Poole assures her it's not necessary. "You know how it is. The storms come and it's water and wind as far as the eye can see for a bit. But winds calm and the waters drain. We find our feet again, and the ground under us sprouts a new crop of seed. That is always the way of it. I don't suppose this storm will be any different."

At my aunt's insistence, Iola promises to at least call after the storm and let us know everything is okay in the big white house. We offer to fold the shutters over the door for her, and after calling Mr. Muggins in from the overgrown flower bed, she allows us to do it. She waves from behind the leaded glass as the hinges groan and we close her into darkness before hurrying back to the driveway. We've almost pushed our luck too far, I can tell. The weather's coming in now.

The wind buffets the Jeep as we travel back down the island. By the time we reach home and drive the Jeep onto one of the flatbed trailers

Uncle George cleverly uses to keep the vehicles and various machinery above the reach of low-level floodwater, I can feel the storm arriving in earnest. So can my mother. She's a nervous wreck.

I don't blame her. I feel pretty much the same way myself.

CHAPTER 7

The storm has been raging for hours now. It's worse than was predicted. It's hitting Hatteras pretty hard as it lumbers by, the eye staying out at sea. We've pulled the mattresses and one of the sofas into Aunt Sandy's dining room to camp out away from the exterior walls. From time to time, I'm sure the roof will go any minute.

Outside, the hurricane shutters rattle, and the house sways in gust after gust of wind. The rain flows in ribbons, stronger as each band of the storm bears down, but even the ebb is incredibly intense. I've never heard rain like this. The sound on the roof of Aunt Sandy's little saltbox house is deafening.

The storm wants to push its way inside. It's like a demon. Determined. Relentless. Seeking out the faintest cracks to breach our fortress and find its way past the walls. During the ebbs, we hurry through the house, replacing the towels and bedsheets we've stuffed in the wet spots around the windows and door stoops. Weather stripping is no match for the fury of this beast.

I have to give my mother and Aunt Sandy credit. They are an efficient team. Two commanding generals who have temporarily joined forces to fight a greater enemy. There is no arguing about whether or not we should have stayed.

During an ebb, we hear a rhythmic *clang, clang, clang* below the house.

Aunt Sandy pinches the bridge of her nose, closing her eyes. I notice for the first time how flushed she looks. "Water's coming up. The boat's floating off its trailer down there."

The noise suddenly makes sense. There's a little aluminum johnboat outside. Before the rain started, we unhooked the straps binding it to the trailer and tied it to the piers of the house instead. Now I understand why.

She seems matter-of-fact about it, but I know this is not good. For the water to float that boat, it must be a couple feet high already. The weather radio has been belching out flood reports for a while, and our hiding place has become an island.

“No way out but through the storm now.” Aunt Sandy sits down beside me on the sofa and pats my knee. She meets my gaze purposefully, as if she knows there’s a deeper meaning that can be taken there and wants me to grasp it. “I’ll bet about now you’re wishing you had beaten it toward home while you still could.”

“Nope,” I lie.

I expect her to ask about why she found me having a breakdown on the dunes earlier, but she doesn’t. Instead, she curls an arm over me and pulls my head onto her shoulder.

“No way out but through the storm,” she whispers again. “We’re not alone.” She combs her fingers through my hair, and I close my eyes, relaxing against her. “We’re never alone.”

I know what she’s referring to. She’s a woman of great faith. I don’t confirm what she’s said or refute it. I just drift away with the boat downstairs ringing like a church bell, her words the last ones on my mind.

There’s peace for a little while, and then I’m in the woods again. I’m forcing my way through briars, ignoring the sting as they claw at my skin, slice through my clothing. I hear something in the distance. Music. People singing. A choir.

Pushing back vines, I move toward the sound, stumble through the trees until I see light ahead. There must be a clearing. The singing is so loud now, it eclipses everything.

And then I’m in the hollow, standing outside a funeral tent. There’s a tiny white casket. A gasp steals from me, and I throw my hand over my mouth. All the mourners turn my way accusingly.

Emily’s mother motions toward the grave, her eyes still fixed on me. And then I’m standing at the edge of the hole, looking down on the casket, and it isn’t Emily in there, but Jessica. My daughter, lying on white satin, only four or five years old, her face soft and chubby-cheeked and pale. Lifeless.

The mourners begin throwing in handfuls of dirt. A scream tears from me, and I try to shield Jessica from the spray, but they hold me back.

Men begin adding soil by the shovelful. I scream again, and then Aunt Sandy is shaking me awake.

I come to consciousness lying on the sofa, trying to fight my way out of a quilt.

It’s a moment before I realize that the storm sounds different.

“The eye went past, out at sea. The wind’s hooking around the other way now, which means it’s going to pull the water up on the sound side even more. The weather radio is full of overwash reports on both sides of the island,” Aunt Sandy explains. She looks like she’s been dozing herself. On one of the mattresses, my mother is sitting up, watching me. I realize I’ve awakened everybody.

Aunt Sandy turns up the battery-powered lantern, then taps my legs so that I swing around and let her sit.

“Sweetheart,” she says when she looks at my face, “what’s the matter?”

My eyes sting and brim with tears, and suddenly I’m like this old house. I can’t keep the storm out any longer. It forces its way through the cracks.

Mom gets up and comes to sit beside us on the sofa, and I pour out the whole story. Emily, the fact that I was the one who took the 911 call, how I botched it. How I feel like I must be coming apart at the seams lately. There is something so wrong with me. I don’t even know who I am anymore.

As the storm increases in intensity again, I fold over myself, lower my head into my hands, and Mom and Aunt Sandy close ranks on either side of me.

“Elizabeth, you can’t take this on yourself,” Mom insists. “In the first place, it isn’t your fault that woman took her little girl out in the middle of the night and left her alone in a car. In the second place, you don’t even know what has happened yet, or *when* it happened. That woman might just as easily be lying about how long she was away from the car and how soon she called 911 when she couldn’t find her little girl. You don’t know if there’s one thing you could’ve done to change how this ended.” It’s exactly what you’d expect a mother to say, what I would say if anyone were trying to lay this on Jessica or Micah. Defend first, ask questions later.

Aunt Sandy rubs my back. “Honey, I can’t tell you why this has happened. It’s a terrible thing. One of those happenings you can question and discuss until your mind goes numb. But I do know that you’re still here, and if you’re still here, no matter how much it hurts, there’s a reason for that. You may not feel it right now. And it’s okay to grieve. But it’s not okay to quit living. You’ve still got kids to raise and the family to take care of and work to do. I know it seems like your babies get to a point in life where they don’t need you anymore, but they do. There are just a few hard years here where everything’s changing, where the kids are testing their wings, and then it gets better. I promise.”

“It does,” my mother assures softly. “You just wait, Elizabeth. In a few years, that girl who’s driving you crazy right now will be a woman you are incredibly proud of. She’ll be your best friend, and when you look at her, you won’t be able to believe that you raised someone who has so much going for her.”

They lock themselves around me in a three-way hug, and we rock back and forth, joined together, a sisterhood against the storm.

CHAPTER 8

The sun is out and the water has begun to drain away by the time Aunt Sandy backs the Jeep down from the flatbed trailer that has kept it above the brackish soup of overwash, runoff, and debris. On the piers under the house, the flood has left a line almost three feet high, which we know is not a good sign for the shop. This house is on higher ground.

We've spent just under forty-eight hours waiting for the storm to pass and the floodwaters to drain. With the power out in Aunt Sandy's neighborhood, we've been listening to weather-radio stories and getting word-of-mouth reports on the conditions farther north via the Hurricane Watch Net on Uncle George's scanner and ham radio. There's flooding and damage all the way up the Banks. Where the storm came ashore along the Jersey coast, the damage is catastrophic. Homes and businesses have been lost. And lives.

In Aunt Sandy's house, other than the leakage we mopped and sopped around the windows, everything remains high and dry. The generator is running on the deck, providing enough power to keep the essentials going, but crews are expected to restore the electricity soon. Even the food in the refrigerator will survive, it seems. To preserve the gas in the cans outside, we maintained our campout lifestyle and left the refrigerator closed throughout the storm.

Now it's time to move from survival mode to assessment and recovery. I know this process. It reads like a script in a 911 reference manual. Life preservation first, then damage control.

Aunt Sandy directs my mother to stay behind with the house and enlists me to go along on the reconnaissance mission to the shop.

Mom seems amenable enough. Working our way around storm wreckage and piles of sand transported by the raging water is more of an adventure than she really wants. She doesn't seem to regret the fact that we stayed through the storm, even though North Carolina Highway 12, the one road in and out of Hatteras Island, has been lifted and buckled at Rodanthe and Mirlo Beach, and the bridge at Pea Island Inlet is out of commission.

Emergency ferry runs will be starting soon to reconnect Hatteras with the mainland, but it'll be a while before transportation on and off the island becomes routine again. For now, we are just here, like everyone else who rode out the storm.

"You watch her," Mom mutters under her breath, leaning close to me as Aunt Sandy and the Jeep splash across six inches of water in the flooded yard. "She doesn't need to be doing this. Whatever has happened in that shop has happened. There's not a thing she can do about it now."

"I will."

"Don't let her start hauling things out of the place and whatnot," Mom insists. "She almost took a tumble in the hallway this morning. I know she was dizzy. I saw her feeling her way along the wall."

I've seen things too, but I don't share them with my mother. I do plan to try to talk to Aunt Sandy today. Maybe she will listen to me. I'll probably sneak a call to Uncle George if I can, assuming the landline phone is working at the Seashell Shop. Cell service is out due to a damaged fiber cable up island. Aunt Sandy won't be happy with me for butting in, but her husband needs to know what he's coming home to.

"Don't worry," I say and kiss my mother on the cheek. There's a new feeling between the three of us after the night of the storm.

On the way down the island, skirting logs, displaced patio furniture, and leaning telephone poles that have been cordoned off by emergency workers, Aunt Sandy talks about the most routine things as I stare at beach houses sitting in water, storm-damaged cars encased in sand wash, bits of relocated pavement, pieces of decks, and shreds of houses.

Aunt Sandy wants me to know that an empty nest isn't the end of the world. It's normal, what I'm going through. Even the distance between Robert and me. "It's the leap from one phase of life into another," she assures me. "Like when you went from being a young couple to being parents. Remember how hard that was? Remember those moments when you realized that you'd never again just hop in the car and go somewhere? That your life would always be tied to this new responsibility now? But it was the beginning of something too. It was the beginning of this great big adventure of raising a family. And that becomes your center point for a lot of years. It's normal to feel lost when you suddenly realize that's going away now. It's normal to grieve something you've loved."

I nod, still taking in the distractions. I consider what these people have been through, and I feel ridiculous. We shouldn't even be talking about my problems right now.

The salt air blows into the Jeep and tries to steal my aunt's baseball cap. She grabs the bill and pulls it lower, the sun reflecting off rhinestones that spell out the words *Beach Time*. "The trick," she says, "is to find a new dream for the next part of your life. Then empty nest becomes a beginning, not an ending."

"I know." I try to shift her off the subject. "I just want to get through this year, through the graduations and everything, and then I'll think about it."

A stern look comes my way. "That's not soon enough. Do you think those kids want a mother boohooing at every one of their little milestones this year? They want you to celebrate with them, Elizabeth. They've got enough of their own worries. They don't need to be worrying about you. They need to know that you'll be okay when they're gone. That you and Robert are looking forward to new frontiers too."

I try to think of it this way. I try to think of Robert and me doing things together again, just the two of us. Maybe going up to the north woods and spending time in the cabin?

Then I wonder if he's even interested. I can't tell Aunt Sandy that, of course.

"Like when George and I came here." She takes a breath, and I can tell she has a story she wants to share. She tells me about their first trip to the Outer Banks—a vacation Uncle George won through a sales contest at his job. She admits that they argued all the way from Michigan that first day. She wished they hadn't even taken the trip. "But you know, the vacation gave us a new dream, a dream we could share together. We saw that old house by the highway in Hatteras Village, and I think we both knew. Putting a shop in there was our future. It seemed crazy, but it was what we needed. We never looked back, and we've never been sorry. This part of our life has been one of the best parts. The shop, the grandkids coming to visit, our house with the path to the shore. A whole new experience, instead of sitting around mourning what's gone. I'm just . . ."

Movement on the side of the road catches my eye, and I shut out the rest of her sentence. There's a woman running from a beach house, sloshing

through the water in the front yard with something in her arms. I lean down and look in the side mirror after we pass. Something's wrong. . . .

"Wait! Stop!" I reach across and clutch Aunt Sandy's arm, strain against my seat belt to get a view over my shoulder. "Turn around! Somebody's got a problem back there."

Aunt Sandy cuts the wheel, circling a sand-covered pile of flotsam at the edge of the road. Our view is blocked momentarily, and then we see the woman. She's in the ditch now, running. There's a baby in her arms. Limp. My heart lurches upward, my mind rushes, and for a moment I wonder if this is a dream—if I'm really back at Aunt Sandy's house, asleep.

But it's real. It must be.

We squeal into the ditch, and the Jeep rams into a sandbank as it slides to a stop, tossing me against the seat belt hard enough that I'm addled for a moment before I spring the buckle, jump out, and run to the woman.

She's carrying a toddler, a little girl. The baby's wispy blonde hair is plastered to her head, muddy and wet. For an instant, my thoughts stall. I wonder again if I'm dreaming of Emily, but this child is younger.

"She fell!" the woman screams, her face flushed and covered with dirt and tears. "She fell off the deck into the water. I only turned my back for a minute. Oh, dear God, save my baby. She's not breathing. She's not breathing! Help my baby!"

There's a split-second fear that I will freeze, but I don't. A calm slips over me. A clarity of thought. A step-by-step logic that comes from training. "How long?"

I take the girl and lay her on the storm-washed sand alongside the road, shaking her to see if I can stimulate a response, but there is none.

A four-wheel-drive truck pulls over and two men run our way, but I'm barely aware of them. The script is in my head, but not only the script. There's also the emergency training I've been through as part of the department.

Until you're in the situation, you always wonder if you could do this in real life. Now it feels like second nature. "Find a landline and have someone call 911!" I say. Then I check her airway, give a quick breath into her mouth, feel for the rise and fall of her chest, try again to rouse her as the men in the truck race to the fire department, not far away.

I start chest compressions, count to thirty, give two breaths. She doesn't respond.

Come on, come on, come on, I think.

Beside me, Aunt Sandy is on her knees, praying.

The baby's mother keens and wails, calling out, "Sarah, Sarah, Sarah. Wake up, baby. Wake up for Mommy. Wake up!"

I repeat the process. Still no response after the second cycle. This child isn't going to die right here beside the road. She's not. This little girl will live a full life. She'll build sand castles along the shore, celebrate birthdays, hunt for Easter eggs, and wear her favorite dress on the first day of school.

Please, God . . . please. This can't happen. . . .

I begin a third cycle, then a fourth. There's a siren in the distance. Help, I hope.

Finally . . . finally . . . there's a thready pulse. A hint of life. And then a tiny cough. It is the most beautiful sound.

"Praise God!" Aunt Sandy lifts her hands heavenward.

I roll Sarah onto her side, support her head as she gags up a combination of water and stomach contents. When it's finally over, she fights back as I try to scoop out her mouth, and then her wide blue eyes blink at us. She's confused at first, disoriented. Her lip trembles and she starts to cry. I gently sit her up and let her mom cradle her so tightly that there's not a whisper of space between them.

"Thank you," the mother breathes, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Thank you. Thank you so much."

I hear clapping, and all of a sudden I realize there are people around. A first responder runs in with a medical kit. At least a half-dozen bystanders are forming a circle around us. I don't even know where they've come from.

I'm shaking as I stand up, and I just want to get to the Jeep and sit down. Catch my breath. I can't believe this thing that has just happened. We watch until the first responders finish assessing the child and the crowd begins to disperse, then we leave with everyone else.

It all starts to seem unreal as we continue to the Seashell Shop. I sit looking at my hands, thinking, *Did I do that? Did it happen?*

"If you hadn't been here, that little girl would probably be dead right now," Aunt Sandy points out as we skirt a piece of toppled billboard near the Seashell Shop parking lot. The area around the store is a swamp, water still pooled over the parking spaces and probably a foot or two deep in the backyard, all the way up to the deck. The flood-line mark on the building

pronounces the verdict without our even needing to go inside. When the eye of the hurricane passed by and the wind reversed direction, the overwash here was bad enough to cover the porch and reach partway up the long bay windows in the front.

Neither of us speaks as we wade through six inches of water, then climb the steps to the front porch of the old yellow house. Above the front door, the cheery ambers, blues, and yellows of a sign seem out of place now. The gold letters read:

Sandy's Seashell Shop
An Ocean of Possibilities

“Well, I hope this thing worked.” She indicates Uncle George’s homemade floodgate on the door while fishing a hammer and screwdriver from the antique iron mailbox. “Looks like this storm may have made it in through the windows, though.” She glances toward the nearest one, which is clearly below the dirt line left by the water.

Even so, she seems upbeat. This is the thing I love about my aunt. She never gives up, even when the prognosis looks grim. Somehow I know that, no matter what we find inside, the water will not defeat her. And perhaps, after what we’ve experienced on our way to the shop, she realizes what I realize—that no matter what happens now, this day is already golden.

The fact remains, though, that the storm has been much worse than anyone anticipated. The hurricane hung over the island forever, dumping water. Yes, it’s only property damage, and property can be replaced, but I know that Aunt Sandy wouldn’t be selling the land in Michigan if she and Uncle George weren’t already tapped out from the last storm recovery.

I help her clear driftwood away from the front door. We pile it near the porch steps. The collection looks almost like art, if you don’t think about what it is and how it got there.

The scent of the air slipping from the building answers the looming question even before we loosen the last of the latches and move the shutter away from the door. It smells like our clothes washer when one of the kids throws in a load and forgets about it for a couple days. In a flash, I wonder if anyone is taking care of the laundry at home. How are they faring without

me? Am I really as unneeded as I sometimes feel these days? Probably not. I know that's the truth of it.

I think about what Aunt Sandy said to me in the Jeep, about making the leap to a new phase and it all being part of the plan. Parenthood is the only career in which the better you do your job, the sooner you're fired.

I'll have to share that with Carol when I'm back at work. The thought makes me smile for about half a second, before I catch a glimpse through the glass door into Sandy's Seashell Shop.

My aunt grabs a breath and lets it out through pursed lips. Her shoulders square before she turns the knob. "No point avoiding reality. It is what it is." As she pushes it open, the door catches on a soggy floor mat we forgot to pick up. It's the first thing she grabs when she's able to squeeze partway inside. The drips create a waterfall as she hands off the mat and tells me to throw it over the porch railing. "Gotta start somewhere. That's the only thing you can do with a mess. Start cleaning it up, a little at a time."

Inside, the shop not only smells like mildew already, but it is a mess. The water reached over two feet high in here, swamping the old plank floors and the antique wooden beadboard around the lower parts of the walls. The moisture has seeped upward into the drywall above the wainscoting, drawing uneven mountainscapes in dirty shades of brown and gray.

"We just got all that fixed." Tears sparkle in Aunt Sandy's eyes, and she blinks rapidly, trying to deny them. "One season. *One*. That's all we got out of the repairs we spent so much money on before a storm hit again. It doesn't seem fair, does it?"

"No, it doesn't."

She pulls another breath, then puckers up and kisses the air on its way out. "Then again, this day is already a blessing." As she echoes my earlier thought, a smile spreads from one side of her face to the other, dimpling her round cheeks and spilling the tears over. "You saved a life today."

"We saved a life today." Through all the gloom and the smell of newly forming mildew and the merchandise that has tumbled to the ground and been covered by the slime, an incredible light falls over me.

"Divine providence." Aunt Sandy gives the events a name and an author.

She picks up a muck-covered glass box that has inexplicably been left sitting in the middle of the floor. We stand there and smile at each other as

she fingers the lighthouse ornaments atop the box, and the moment could not be more perfect. It's odd when I think back on the events of the past week and a half—the unpredictable, uneven chain that began with the frantic call about little Emily's disappearance and eventually led us here today. The fruitless searches, the nightmares, the trip to the Outer Banks, the storm, the woman running toward the road today with her toddler limp in her arms . . .

The shadow of the highest evil intermingled with the light of the highest good. Maybe all lives are filled with this. Maybe it is always a choice between embracing the darkness of one or the saving grace of the other.

I ponder the strangeness of it all as I try to keep Aunt Sandy from straining herself physically, but of course she insists on doing it anyway. I have no choice but to hover around, trying to take over the harder jobs, like removing the hurricane shutters, opening windows, taking the floodgates off the back doors so we can mop up floors and carry wet, dirty debris onto the deck. Floodwater stands under the boards, creating a dock that is only a foot above the out-of-place sea that reaches all the way to the sound. There is water pooled in Aunt Sandy's workshop out back too, but she's not as worried about that. The most important things have been raised or relocated, and years ago the old carriage house was lifted onto a block foundation in an effort to keep the historic frame building safe.

We mop, we rinse things, we do our best. We speak with neighbors and shop owners who pass by. I leave Aunt Sandy talking every chance I get, so she'll rest. Two guys in kayaks travel by on the sound, or perhaps they are in the backyard. It's impossible to tell. They wave, seeming to be almost enjoying the storm's bizarre aftermath.

A reporter from the *Charlotte Observer* comes by, working on an article. "This one will get special coverage in the *Washington Post* as well," he tells us as he walks with Aunt Sandy onto the back deck to snap a picture of her among the debris that is now drying in the sun. "We're doing everything we can to make sure that, in light of all the damage in New York City and along the Jersey shore, people don't forget you've taken a hit here as well."

From inside the shop, where I'm trying to finish some of the emergency cleanup Aunt Sandy insisted *had* to be done before we could possibly leave the store, I hear bits of the ongoing interview, but mostly all I can think is *My mother is going to kill us when we get home*. I'm surprised Mom hasn't

abandoned the house and hitched a ride here by now. She expected us to be gone only long enough to check on the shop.

Outside, my aunt waxes nostalgic with the reporter, relating the challenges of living on a sandbar, and then she tells the story of buying the house and starting Sandy's Seashell Shop. "I guess you could call this my midlife-crisis store," she laughs. The sound jingles in the air like the tiny brass bells she attaches to the bottoms of some of her suncatchers so that when the window is open, they become wind chimes as well. "But I wouldn't have it any other way. It's some life, here on these Outer Banks. It really is."

Before he leaves, the reporter crosses through the store and snaps a photo of me down on my hands and knees, grubbing around behind the coffee bar. I'm horrified. I can just imagine how I look. "Don't print that."

His brows lower with a disappointed look. "Seriously?"

I sit back on my heels and wipe my forehead with the back of my hand. The weather is cool today. Technically the storm has been classified as a nor'easter, but I'm sweating like a pig in August. Those changing hormones Carol warned me about, perhaps. "No, it's okay."

He asks me for a bit of my storm story, and I share it. An outsider's point of view of surviving a brush with one of the most geographically far-reaching storms ever recorded in the area. *The perfect storm*, they're calling it.

He's putting the lens cap on his camera when I hear my aunt's voice outside. "No! No! No! No!" She sounds panic-stricken, and it stands me bolt upright.

The reporter follows me as I hit the back door in a dead run. I am on the deck before I catch sight of Aunt Sandy. She is waist-deep in the floodwaters of the backyard, almost all the way to the sound, reaching for what looks like a toy wagon floating by. The red kind that children play with. It's drifting along like a little boat.

The reporter's camera clicks as I hurry down the steps and splash into the water. *Mom's going to pull every hair from my head individually if she sees this* runs through my mind. Why in the world is Aunt Sandy wading out there to rescue a stupid toy wagon? There's junk everywhere. You can't tell what might be beneath the surface of this water, either. My aunt might trip over something and fall at any moment. She's not all that steady on her feet.

“Aunt Sandy!” The water resists as I plow through it like a water-aerobics student on steroids. “What are you *doing*?”

She catches the wagon, reaches for something inside it while I’m still ten feet away.

The wagon floats off as she turns around, and when she comes closer, I see that she’s holding something small, black-and-white, and trembling. A little Boston bulldog. It’s licking her face with ferocious gratitude as she tries to push its head away.

“Stop that! Hold still, you little scallywag. Cut it out.”

The reporter’s camera spins into high gear as Sandy draws within a few feet of me and holds up the prize for which she has risked the floodwaters. “Look at this little piece of shark bait. Saw him just floating by in that wagon. No telling how he managed that.” She wobbles on her feet, and for a moment I think that both she and the dog are headed into the drink. Then she regains her balance, laughing and reaching for me. “Looks like we each saved a life today.”

“Hey, cute dog!” the reporter cheers, and I have a feeling that the little Shell Shop castaway has just become part of the story.

CHAPTER 9

“I don’t know . . .” Mom looks up from her suitcase, a half-folded shirt dangling from her hands. I’m not sure why she’s folding it so carefully. It’s dirty. All of our clothes are dirty. Water and effort can’t be wasted doing the wash right now.

“Mom, it’s time.” The days have run together. Three? Four? It’s a blur of dragging soggy inventory out of the shop, picking up water and supplies from the Red Cross station in a parking lot, delivering them around the island, checking on Aunt Sandy’s elderly friends, helping with first aid where I can.

Mom casts a concerned eye toward the window. Outside, Aunt Sandy is headed down the driveway in the Jeep to go over to Fairhope and check on Iola Anne Poole one more time. The foundling bulldog is in hot pursuit, hopping like a rabbit, the little white spot under his nub tail flashing.

“I think she’s trying to outrun him.” I point toward the window, laughing as the Jeep squeals to a stop and my aunt exits with her hands on her hips. She comes at the dog, hunched over like a pro wrestler trying to intimidate an opponent.

She hates that dog. He scratches at her door every night, whines and cries, and doesn’t stop until she relents and lets him in. Then the dog snores. Bad. She has started calling him Chum, not as in *friend*, but as in *shark bait*. She’s careful to let us know that is not an official name. She’s looking everywhere to find his owners, or at least some willing foster parents until his owners can be found. The story of his rescue made the newspaper, yet no one has come to claim him.

Even Mom can’t resist the scene outside. The two of us giggle as we watch Aunt Sandy and the dog do their love-hate dance. Unless we physically restrain him, Chum pushes the screen door open and does this every time his new favorite friend tries to leave.

“I think I should stay here with her until George is back.” Mom’s smile fades and the concerned look returns as Aunt Sandy finally allows Chum

into the passenger seat. Together they rattle off down the driveway and turn the corner, out of sight behind a bedraggled bayberry hedge.

I cram the last of my dirty, wrinkled clothes into the duffel bag that was supposed to last me a couple days. “He’ll be home tomorrow, Mom. It’s only one night. And if you don’t come with me, you’ll have to try to get a flight back to Michigan. With all the mess from the storm, that could be a problem.” In reality, Uncle George has told me it will be better if we go home now. On top of taking care of everyone else on the island, Aunt Sandy feels the need to treat Mom and me like houseguests. We’ve tried to set her straight, but you don’t set that woman anywhere. She’s like the value of pi. She just is.

My job today is to get my mother to come with me and stop butting in. Uncle George feels that there’s less chance of Sandy digging in her heels if he can get home and speak to her about the health concerns calmly, one-on-one.

“Mom, there’s no telling what will happen with the ferries and shoaling and the possibility of more bad weather coming. We need to get out while we can.” I don’t mean to sound selfish, but I miss my family. Other than a few short conversations on the Seashell Shop phone, we’ve hardly talked. I feel like I’m losing track of things at home, even though Robert has it under control.

Mom looks out the window, tearing up.

“Mom . . .”

“I miss my sister.” Her voice quivers and breaks. “I can’t believe all these years I’ve been so stubborn. I can’t believe I haven’t come out here and spent time . . . just because . . . I was mad that she moved away.”

“You can come back again once things are normal. Now that you’re retired, you could take an off-season rental and . . . stay for months each year if you wanted.” Too late, I realize I have divulged the fact that I think the family needs to stop pressuring Aunt Sandy. This is her life, her second-half adventure.

“Something’s going to happen. I just know it.”

“If it’ll make you feel better, we’ll get one of her shop friends to come stay here tonight. Teresa, maybe.”

“I just—”

Both of us turn toward the window at the same time. The barking has caught our attention, a wild, high-pitched *yip, yip, yip, yip, yip!*

I push to my feet. “What’s he doing?”

Chum is headed up the driveway in a dead run, not bunny-bounding like he usually does but dashing flat and full-out.

I hurry from the bedroom and walk onto the front deck, then stand at the top of the steps and call Chum. He dashes to my feet, barking, but darts away when I reach for him. I walk all the way down and try again. He runs through the soggy yard, slinging water, comes my way, evades capture again, then bolts down the driveway, pausing at the end to see if I’m following. I go a few steps, call him again. For a minute, we’re like a scene out of *Lassie Come Home*.

Mom follows me into the yard, and we stand looking at the dog. “Something’s wrong.” She frowns, clearly concerned. “Sandy wouldn’t just let the dog out of the Jeep and leave him running in the street. She’d come back to check on him. She might be tired of him weaseling into her bed at night, but I know she cares about that little guy.”

Chum barks three times and bolts for the road as if he realizes that we’ve finally caught on.

“I’m going to grab the car keys. . . .” Mom turns to dash back into the house. Fortunately we’ve moved her vehicle from one of the trailers to the driveway in anticipation of leaving today.

“She can’t have gone far.” I take off running after the dog. Down the driveway and the street, my legs pumping, the wet, brackish air seeming too thick to breathe.

I’ve gone a few blocks when I see the Jeep, cockeyed in the ditch, the front end rammed against a tree. Strangely, the motor is still running, exhaust churning from the tailpipe and disappearing into the morning mist.

Mom and I arrive at almost the same moment. Aunt Sandy is slumped over the steering wheel, her arm hanging out the window in a stiff, unnatural position.

The door resists when I try to open it. I throw my weight against the handle, stumble backward when it finally gives.

My aunt’s skin is coated with beads of perspiration as I lay her back against the seat and turn off the engine. A drop of blood falls onto the cuff of my jacket, leaving a small, round stain. She hit her head during the crash.

Aunt Sandy’s teeth draw back in a tight grimace that seems more reactionary than intentional. She moans, the sound starting low in her throat

and slowly rising. She is breathing, but I'm afraid the thing we've all feared has come to pass.

This looks like a heart attack. A catastrophic one.

"Aunt Sandy. Aunt Sandy, can you hear me?"

"N-n-not deaf. . . ." It seems like she's trying to force a smile, but it evaporates into a groan so guttural I ache inside.

"Are you experiencing pain in your arm? In your chest?" Again, the scripts come into my mind, clear, calming. I've been through this one so many times with callers.

"I . . . d-don't . . . h-have time . . . fff . . . for . . . a h-heart . . . 'tack . . . ," she assures me. If this weren't so serious, I would either laugh or cry. My aunt is still here with us, but this is bad. Medevac to a hospital will take a while, especially with all that's going on in the storm-damaged areas right now.

Mom elbows her way in beside me and takes her sister's hand. Tears fall next to the blood. "Don't you do this. Don't you do this, do you hear me, Sandra Kay?"

I push Mom away. "Mom, go to the neighbor's house. The one where Sandy used the landline phone the other day. Call in an emergency—tell them we have a heart attack in progress. We need medevac by helicopter. Now. The victim is conscious and responsive at this point. Give them her age, weight, and the address."

"N-n-not . . . th . . . the . . . w-weight . . ." Aunt Sandy groans.

"Ssshhh . . . You can stop trying to make us feel better, okay?" I comb the hair from her face, look at the gash. "We're here. We're going to get you through this."

Mom pulls something from her pocket and presses it into my hand—a small foil packet of some sort. "Here, have her chew one of these. I'll be back as soon as I can."

I glance at the packet. It seems like a miracle in the moment. "Aspirin?"

"I always carry them in my pocket." Mom shifts the keys in her hand, preparing to run for the car. "It's a principal thing. All those teachers, dealing with stress and students. Never know when you'll need it."

"What . . . f-flavor . . . ?" Aunt Sandy coughs and spasms after attempting the joke.

"Shut up, Sandra Kay. Now." My mother lays her forehead against her sister's as I struggle to tear the foil wrapper. "You have to make it through

this, do you hear me? You are my sister, and I love you. We still have things to do together. You promised. We're going to walk on the beach and design sea glass jewelry, and you're teaching me to make those hummingbird suncatchers or *else*. It isn't time yet. It's not."

My aunt doesn't answer. I don't know if she's losing consciousness or merely obeying her big sister for once. A tear slips from beneath her lashes.

I stop my mother just as she is turning to run for the car. "You'd better help me move her out of the Jeep."

This is not the end of the sea glass sisterhood. Not if I have anything to say about it.

CHAPTER 10

The ferry landing is teeming with people. Red Cross trucks, National Guard caravans, and groups of aid workers in identifying vests or T-shirts exit the ferry in droves. Meanwhile, visitors who underanticipated the effects of the storm and residents who have decided to relocate to the mainland until things get better line up to shuffle their way onto the outgoing boat. Ferry attendants encourage everyone to be patient. The emergency transports are operating on a regular schedule, despite issues with shoaling and debris left behind by the storm. The commute across the water, two and a half hours under normal circumstances, will be slower than usual.

Arduous is what it will be. We have no idea of Aunt Sandy's condition. By now she has, hopefully, arrived at the hospital by helicopter and is in the hands of cardiac doctors and nurses. The Shell Shop friends have left their digging out in order to accompany us to the landing, as have members of Aunt Sandy's church and Bible study group. We've gathered in a circle, joined hands, and prayed.

We hug and say our good-byes, and the ferry worker who was kind enough to move Mom and me to the front of the line escorts us on. There's no room for the rest of the Sisterhood of the Shell Shop to go. This ferry is full, and the wait right now is several hours.

"Let us know as soon as you hear anything!" Teresa yells.

We promise that we will, and then the crowd of weary, tired people closes in around us. I suddenly realize how much we all look alike in this condition. How completely desperation can equalize people.

It'll probably be a couple hours before we're close enough to the mainland to pick up a working cell tower and find out more about the medevac flight and Aunt Sandy's condition. We're fortunate that everything fell into place for her to be taken off the island so quickly, but even with the fast response, there's danger of a bad outcome. We know that. With a thready pulse and rising and falling from consciousness, she needed a top-notch cardiac team, sooner rather than later.

A man gives up his spot near the cabin wall, and Mom sits down, but I can't. I stand at the deck railing, hang over it, trying to let the sea breeze take away the feeling that I might throw up. Not far away, the pelicans swirl over the debris-littered surf, enjoying the buffet of floating treats offered courtesy of the storm. They seem to promise that all will eventually return to normal. The storm churns up food. The birds feast. Something good comes of even the worst events.

Is it possible? I wonder.

I watch the water slide by, and I do that thing I've mostly left out of my life these past few years, in favor of covering all the other bases. I pray and pray and pray . . .

I lose track of time. Maybe I doze off, standing there. I'm not sure. The adrenaline seeps out of my body, bit by bit, and I'm boneless and weary.

A guy I've never seen before hands me a protein bar and a bottle of water. "Here," he says, smiling at me. He can't be over twenty years old. Not that much further along in life than my own kids. A laid-back beach bum type. "They were handing them out from a Walmart truck. I figured if I took it, I'd come across someone who needed it. That's how it rolls, right?"

I nod and thank him and take the gift.

I figured if I took it, I'd come across someone who needed it. The wisdom of that strikes me in a new way.

I think of those weekends of advanced emergency training given to me by the county over the years. Of the relatives and friends who watched my children so I could go. The Red Cross volunteer who taught the classes. My long-ago high school health teacher who tested all the students to see who could react in a disaster. That teacher encouraged me to pursue something in the medical field, maybe think about becoming a doctor. When Robert and I made an immature decision on prom night and ended up coping with pregnancy, marriage, and the financial implications, that teacher helped me get into the 911 dispatcher training program with the county. Big dreams became smaller dreams, and life went on.

Sinking down against the railing, I rest my head and think of Aunt Sandy's advice to me about starting off on a new adventure in the second half of life. It comes back now, that long-ago dream of becoming a doctor. The idea resurfaces, dull and moss-covered, like something that's been trapped underwater for years. I pull it out, wipe it off, look at it from several angles, and think . . . *maybe* . . .

Could it be time now? Is this the time to reinvent?

Is survival sometimes about death and rebirth? Egg to caterpillar to chrysalis to butterfly? Is this, this ending of our family as I know it, not the death season but the birth of the butterfly season?

If a woman who's never owned a shop or lived by the sea can become Sandy of Sandy's Seashell Shop, what can I do?

If . . . *when* Aunt Sandy makes it through this scare, I won't try to persuade her to give up the Seashell Shop and move home, where the family can monitor and supervise and babysit her. A butterfly should live as long as it can in its natural habitat. This place of sand and water, of seasons and storms and challenges, has become who she is.

The thoughts seep through me, percolate like water through coffee grounds, producing something new, thick with tantalizing aroma. What would Robert say if I suggested all this? What would the kids think? *You're not the only ones heading off to school. Mom's got plans. . . .*

I close my eyes and let the thought drift like a raft just floating wherever the current will take it. I doze and wake and feel the water swaying beneath me.

I'm surprised when I finally climb to my feet and we're within sight of land. I remember my phone and pull it out, but then I turn and catch a glimpse of Mom standing on her bench. She's already on her cell, waving at me, trying to give me the high sign.

I let out the breath I have been holding. The news must be good.

My phone chimes as the texts from the past few days rush in. There's Jessica in a cheerleading photo, smiling alongside the friend she'd been fighting with. *Miss you, Mom!* the message says underneath. Micah reports that he's pulled a B on his first calculus test. Robert must have made him send the text—Micah would never do that on his own. There's a note from Robert, offering the rundown of activities around home. *Knew you'd be wondering*, it says.

Another from Uncle Butch, several days old. He's worried about his sisters after the storm. He wants someone to send him more information. How dare the cell service not do his bidding. This is ridiculous. He just wants to know that everyone's all right, for heaven's sake.

Beneath that, Carol has sent an update, written during the graveyard shift as my mother, Aunt Sandy, and I huddled together through the heart of the storm. *TOD 6 hr b4 call-in. 10W mom and boyfriend. Wanted u 2 know.*

I close my eyes, take in a breath of salt and sand and driftwood drying in the sun. Tears squeeze out and trail along my skin, the breeze cooling the heat of sorrow. Little Emily was gone from this world six hours before her mother called 911. A bedtime battle, perhaps—that terrible hour of the evening when unstable homes erupt and unspeakable things happen. A plot by the mother and her boyfriend to stage a kidnapping to cover it up. Little girls should be safe in this world, in their own homes, but the fact is that sometimes they're not. By now that felony warrant for the mother and the live-in boyfriend has been executed. The baby still strapped in Trista's car that night is somewhere safe. Even though I ache with this news, there is that much to be thankful for.

Emily is safe now as well. I know it. She isn't cold or alone or hungry. She is not lost in the woods, running wildly as in my dreams. Seeking rescue.

She is home.

All around her, there is nothing but love.

A hand touches my shoulder, and I jump, then realize that Mom has pushed her way through the crowd to me. The lines have loosened around her eyes, and her brows have relaxed a little. "She made it there in good shape. They were able to clear the blockages with an emergency angioplasty and stents. They may do bypass surgery later, after she's had time to get better, but she's stable now and in recovery."

My mother stretches out her arms, and we fold together and cry and rock and breathe. I don't close my eyes but instead watch the sun specks through a watery rim of emotion. But for the floating debris, Pamlico Sound is beautiful today. A pod of dolphins plays in the distance. They seem jovial and untroubled, as if they're saying, *What storm? It's over. Let it go. Let's celebrate life.*

Mom finally releases me, then gives me a serious look. "I'm not going home after Sandy's surgery. I'm staying, and I don't know for how long. I already called and talked to George about it. Sandy needs someone to make her take care of herself the way she should, at least while she heals up." But there's something in her voice that tells me this relocation may be more than temporary.

I feel a sting of separation. As much as our rough edges may rub blisters on each other from time to time, my mother and I have never been more

than a few miles apart since the Piggly Wiggly years. Now she will be halfway across the country.

I bite back a sudden wave of insecurity and the bleak but selfish thought that she will miss all the kids' senior-year milestones.

"I think you should." I have to force myself to say it.

"But I'll be home for all the kids' things. As many as I can catch." She reads my mind the way mothers and daughters do. "I have frequent-flier miles."

"The school will miss having you for all those volunteer hours." I'm searching for something innocuous that won't stir up more emotion. I know this is the right thing for my mother, and I don't want to mess it up.

She flips a hand in the air, swatting a man behind her, then turning to apologize before answering me. "Phooey on that school system. They should have appreciated me while they had me."

Her answer leaves me dumbfounded. This is the first time I've heard her actually let it go, not rehash all the reasons it was wrong for the district superintendent to make staffing decisions based on age and gender rather than years of experience.

Another milestone. Maybe we are both stretching our wings. Maybe this is a butterfly season for both of us.

Perhaps this rebirth from one thing to another happens repeatedly in a lifetime. Maybe life is a series of little deaths and rebirths, of passages and rites of passage, of God teaching you to stop clinging to one thing so you can reach for another.

A death grip doesn't reach very well.

I think of that tiny woman in her big white house in Fairhope. Aunt Sandy's friend, Iola Anne Poole—ninety-one years old, yet still surviving on these shifting bars of sand.

What she said makes sense now, as I stand shoulder-to-shoulder with my mother and watch the dolphins play in the sunlit water. *The storms come and it's water and wind as far as the eye can see for a bit. But winds calm and the waters drain. We find our feet again, and the ground under us sprouts a new crop of seed. That is always the way of it.*

I don't suppose this storm will be any different.

About the Author

Lisa Wingate is a former journalist, speaker, and the author of twenty novels, including the national bestseller *Tending Roses*, now in its eighteenth printing. She is a seven-time ACFW Carol Award nominee, a Christy Award nominee, and a two-time Carol Award winner. Her novel *Blue Moon Bay* was a Booklist Top Ten of 2012 pick. Recently the group Americans for More Civility, a kindness watchdog organization, selected Lisa along with Bill Ford, Camille Cosby, and six others as recipients of the National Civies Award, which celebrates public figures who work to promote greater kindness and civility in American life. When not dreaming up stories, Lisa spends time on the road as a motivational speaker. Via Internet, she shares with readers as far away as India, where *Tending Roses* has been used to promote women's literacy, and as close to home as Tulsa, Oklahoma, where the county library system has used *Tending Roses* to help volunteers teach adults to read.

Lisa lives on a ranch in Texas, where she spoils the livestock, raises boys, and teaches Sunday school to high school seniors. She was inspired to become a writer by a first-grade teacher who said she expected to see Lisa's name in a magazine one day. Lisa also entertained childhood dreams of being an Olympic gymnast and winning the National Finals Rodeo but was stalled by the inability to do a backflip on the balance beam and parents who wouldn't finance a rodeo career. She was lucky enough to marry into a big family of cowboys and Southern storytellers who would inspire any lover of tall tales and interesting yet profound characters. She is a full-time writer and pens inspirational fiction for both the general and Christian markets. Of all the things she loves about her job, she loves connecting with people, both real and imaginary, the most. More information about Lisa's novels can be found at www.lisawingate.com.

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When trouble blows in, my mind always reaches for a single, perfect day in Rodanthe. The memory falls over me like a blanket, a worn quilt of sand and sky, the fibers washed soft with time. I wrap it around myself, picture the house along the shore, its bones bare to the wind and the sun, the wooden shingles clinging loosely, sliding to the ground now and then, like scales from some mythic sea creature washed ashore. Overhead, a hurricane shutter dangles by one nail, rocking back and forth in the breeze, protecting an intact window on the third story. Gulls swoop in and out, landing on the salt-sprayed rafters—scavengers come to pick at the carcass left behind by the storm.

Years later, after the place was repaired, a production company filmed a movie there. A love story.

But to me, the story of that house, of Rodanthe, will always be the story of a day with my grandfather. A safe day.

When I squint long into the sun off the water, I can see him yet. He is a shadow, stooped and crooked in his overalls and the old plaid shirt with the pearl snaps. The heels of his worn work boots hang in the air as he balances on the third-floor joists, assessing the damage. Calculating everything it will take to fix the house for its owners.

He's searching for something on his belt. In a minute, he'll call down to me and ask for whatever he can't find. *Tandi, bring me that blue tape measure, or Tandi Jo, I need the green level, out in the truck . . .* I'll fish objects from the toolbox and scamper upstairs, a little brown-haired girl anxious to please, hoping that while I'm up there, he'll tell me some bit of a story. Here in this place where he was raised, he is filled with them. He wants me to know these islands of the Outer Banks, and I yearn to know them. Every inch. Every story. Every piece of the family my mother has both depended on and waged war with.

Despite the wreckage left behind by the storm, this place is heaven. Here, my father talks, my mother sings, and everything is, for once, calm. Day after day, for weeks. Here, we are all together in a decaying sixties-vintage trailer court while my father works construction jobs that my

grandfather has sent his way. No one is slamming doors or walking out them. This place is magic—I know it.

We walked in Rodanthe after assessing the house on the shore that day, Pap-pap's hand rough-hewn against mine, his knobby driftwood fingers promising that everything broken can be fixed. We passed homes under repair, piles of soggy furniture and debris, the old Chicamacomico Life-Saving Station, where the Salvation Army was handing out hot lunches in the parking lot.

Outside a boarded-up shop in the village, a shirtless guitar player with long blond dreadlocks winked and smiled at me. At twelve years old, I fluttered my gaze away and blushed, then braved another glance, a peculiar new electricity shivering through my body. Strumming his guitar, he tapped one ragged tennis shoe against a surfboard, reciting words more than singing them.

*Ring the bells bold and strong
Let all the broken add their song
Inside the perfect shells is dim
It's through the cracks, the light comes in. . . .*

I'd forgotten those lines from the guitar player, until now.

The memory of them, of my grandfather's strong hand holding mine, circled me as I stood on Iola Anne Poole's porch. It was my first indication of a knowing, an undeniable sense that something inside the house had gone very wrong.

I pushed the door inward cautiously, admitting a slice of early sun and a whiff of breeze off Pamlico Sound. The entryway was old, tall, the walls white with heavy gold-leafed trim around rectangular panels. A fresh breeze skirted the shadows on mouse feet, too slight to displace the stale, musty smell of the house. The scent of a forgotten place. Instinct told me what I would find inside. You don't forget the feeling of stepping through a door and understanding in some unexplainable way that death has walked in before you.

I hesitated on the threshold, options running through my mind and then giving way to a racing kind of craziness. *Close the door. Call the police or . . . somebody. Let someone else take care of it.*

You shouldn't have touched the doorknob—now your fingerprints will be on it. What if the police think you did something to her? Innocent people are accused all the time, especially strangers in town. Strangers like you, who show up out of the blue and try to blend in . . .

What if people thought I was after the old woman's money, trying to steal her valuables or find a hidden stash of cash? What if someone really *had* broken in to rob the place? It happened, even in idyllic locations like Hatteras Island. Massive vacation homes sat empty, and local boys with bad habits were looking for easy income. What if a thief had broken into the house thinking it was unoccupied, then realized too late that it wasn't? Right now I could be contaminating the evidence.

Tandi Jo, sometimes I swear you haven't got half a brain. The voice in my head sounded like my aunt Marney's—harsh, irritated, thick with the Texas accent of my father's family, impatient with flights of fancy, especially mine.

"Mrs. Poole?" I leaned close to the opening, trying to get a better view without touching anything else. "Iola Anne Poole? Are you in there? This is Tandi Reese. From the little rental cottage out front. . . . Can you hear me?"

Again, silence.

A whirlwind spun along the porch, sweeping up last year's pine straw and dried live oak leaves. Loose strands of hair swirled over my eyes, and my thoughts tangled with it, my reflection melting against the waves of leaded glass—flyaway brown hair, nervous blue eyes, lips hanging slightly parted, uncertain.

What now? How in the world would I explain to people that it'd taken me days to notice there were no lights turning on and off in Iola Poole's big Victorian house, no window heat-and-air units running at night when the spring chill gathered? I was staying less than forty yards away. How could I not have noticed?

Maybe she was only sleeping—having a midday nap—and by going inside, I'd scare her half to death. From what I could tell, my new landlady kept to herself. Other than groceries being delivered and the UPS and FedEx trucks coming with packages, the only sign of Iola Poole were the lights and the window units going off and on as she moved through the rooms at different times of day. I'd only caught sight of her a time or two since the kids and I had rolled into town with no more gas and no place else to go. We'd reached the last strip of land before you'd drive off into the

Atlantic Ocean, which was just about as far as we could get from Dallas, Texas, and Trammel Clarke. I hadn't even realized, until we'd crossed the North Carolina border, where I was headed or why. I was looking for a hiding place.

By our fourth day on Hatteras, I knew we wouldn't get by with sleeping in the SUV at a campground much longer. People on an island notice things. When a real estate woman offered an off-season rental, cheap, I figured it was meant to be. We needed a good place more than anything.

Considering that we were into April now, and six weeks had passed since we'd moved into the cottage, and the rent was two weeks overdue, the last person I wanted to contact about Iola was the real estate agent who'd brought us here, Alice Faye Tucker.

Touching the door, I called into the entry hall again. "Iola Poole? Mrs. Poole? Are you in there?" Another gust of wind danced across the porch, scratching crape myrtle branches against gingerbread trim that seemed to be clinging by Confederate jasmine vines and dried paint rather than nails. The opening in the doorway widened on its own. Fear shimmied over my shoulders, tickling like the trace of a fingernail.

"I'm coming in, okay?" Maybe the feeling of death was nothing more than my imagination. Maybe the poor woman had fallen and trapped herself in some tight spot she couldn't get out of. I could help her up and bring her some water or food or whatever, and there wouldn't be any need to call 911. First responders would take a while, anyway. There was no police presence here. Fairhope wasn't much more than a fish market, a small marina, a village store, a few dozen houses, and a church. Tucked in the live oaks along Mosey Creek, it was the sort of place that seemed to make no apologies for itself, a scabby little burg where fishermen docked storm-weary boats and raised families in salt-weathered houses. First responders would have to come from someplace larger, maybe Buxton or Hatteras Village.

The best thing I could do for Iola Anne Poole, and for myself, was to go into the house, find out what had happened, and see if there was anything I could do to keep it quiet.

The door was ajar just enough for me to slip through. I slid past, not touching anything, and left it open behind me. If I had to run out of the place in a hurry, I didn't want any obstacles between me and the front porch.

Something shifted in the corner of my eye as I moved deeper into the entry hall. I jumped, then realized I was passing by an arrangement of fading photographs, my reflection melting ghostlike over the cloudy glass. In sepia tones, the images stared back at me—a soldier in uniform with the inscription *Avery 1917* engraved on a brass plate. A little girl with pipe curls on a white pony. A group of people posed under an oak tree, the women wearing big sun hats like the one Kate Winslet donned in *Titanic*. A wedding photo from the thirties or forties, the happy couple in the center, surrounded by several dozen adults and two rows of cross-legged children. Was Iola the bride in the picture? Had a big family lived in this house at one time? What had happened to them? As far as I could tell, Iola Poole didn't have any family now, at least none who visited.

“Hello . . . hello? Anyone up there?” I peered toward the graceful curve of the long stairway. Shadows melted rich and thick over the dark wood, giving the stairs a foreboding look that made me turn to the right instead and cross through a wide archway into a large, open room. It would have been sunny but for the heavy brocade curtains. The grand piano and a grouping of antique chairs and settees looked like they'd been plucked from a tourist brochure or a history book. Above the fireplace, an oil portrait of a young woman in a peach-colored satin gown hung in an ornate oval frame. She was sitting at the piano, posed in a position that looked uncomfortable. Perhaps this was the girl on the pony from the hallway photo, but I wasn't sure.

The shadows seemed to follow me as I hurried out of the room. The deeper I traveled into the house, the less the place resembled the open area by the stairway. The inner sections were cluttered with what seemed to be several lifetimes of belongings, most looking as if they'd been piled in the same place for years, as if someone had started spring-cleaning multiple times, then abruptly stopped. In the kitchen, dishes had been washed and stacked neatly in a draining rack, but the edges of the room were piled with stored food, much of it contained in big plastic bins. I stood in awe, taking in a multicolored waterfall of canned vegetables that tumbled haphazardly from an open pantry door.

Bristle tips of apprehension tickled my arms as I checked the rest of the lower floor. Maybe Iola wasn't here, after all. The downstairs bedroom with the window air unit was empty, the single bed fully made. Maybe she'd gone away somewhere days ago or been checked into a nursing home, and

right now I was actually breaking into a vacant house. Alice Faye Tucker had mentioned that Iola was ninety-one years old. She probably couldn't even climb the stairs to the second story.

I didn't want to go up there, but I moved toward the upper floor one reluctant step at a time, stopping on the landing to call her name once, twice, again. The old balusters and treads creaked and groaned, making enough noise to wake the dead, but no one stirred.

Upstairs, the hallway smelled of drying wallpaper, mold, old fabric, water damage, and the kind of stillness that said the rooms hadn't been lived in for years. The tables and lamps in the wood-paneled hallway were gray with dust, as was the furniture in five bedrooms, two bathrooms, a sewing room with a quilt frame in the middle, and a nursery with white furniture and an iron baby cradle. Odd-shaped water stains dotted the ceilings, the damage recent enough that the plaster had bowed and cracked but only begun to fall through. An assortment of buckets sat here and there on the nursery floor, the remnants of dirty water and plaster slowly drying to a paste inside. No doubt shingles had been ripped from the roof during last fall's hurricane. It was a shame to let a beautiful old house go to rot like this. My grandfather would have hated it. When he inspected old houses for the insurance company, he was always bent on saving them.

A thin watermark traced a line down the hallway ceiling to a small sitting area surrounded by bookshelves. The door on the opposite side, the last one at the end of the hall, was closed, a small stream of light reflecting off the wooden floor beneath it. Someone had passed through recently, clearing a trail in the silty layer of dust on the floor. . . .

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