A HOLLOW LIGHT

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ABSTRACT

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A Hollow Light is an excerpt from a novel-in-progress set on the Outer Banks of North Carolina. The critical introduction explores the various influences of place on both A Hollow Light and contemporary American fiction.

Approved:

_____________________________________________________________
Joan C. Connor
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For Dad
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Whenever someone asks me what my novel is about, I always begin by answering, “Well, it’s set on the Outer Banks of North Carolina.” Place is the first thing that comes to mind when I try to describe my writing; it is the way I define my characters and the key to plot and action. I think that I am following in a tradition of regionalist writers and contemporary authors, Southern and otherwise, when it comes to the importance of place in my work. My novel is set in the South, though the more “northified” South of the Outer Banks. During the Civil War, the North Carolinian Bankers sided with the Yankees. The brogue of the island is not specifically Southern; it was brought over from Elizabethan England and hangs on in the speech of the older residents of Hatteras, mixing in with a more regional Southern dialect. The Outer Banks are a curious mix of North and South, and maybe that’s part of the reason why I feel at home there. I was born and raised in Ohio and continue to live in Ohio to this day, but my family vacationed for at least two weeks every summer on Hatteras Island. Two weeks every summer. It doesn’t seem like a lot of time. But it was enough, enough to allow the history of the pirates, the lost settlers, the lighthouses, the shifting sand banks and first flights, to steep in me. Hatteras is the place where my family spent the most time together. My father’s ashes are scattered in its waters. Though I’ve never lived there, Hatteras is home. I wanted to write a novel in which my main character not only found solace in a certain place during her time of grief, but also found herself through her interactions and relationship in that place. For me, place is the inspiring thing, my leaping off point, in both landscape and detail. I think that my characters spring from
place and the details associated with it, and that those details inform the characters. I believe I am coming from a tradition of regionalism, and that this tradition continues to inform the contemporary American fiction of such authors as Lee Smith and E. Annie Proulx. In my work, place involves detail and image; it entails situating the readers in a precise position, giving them as much or as little information as they need to empathize with my characters. In showing what my characters notice about place, I believe that I show who my characters are.

I understand that the term “regionalist” can carry a negative connotation, but I don’t think that it should. In my mind the term refers to a sense of grounding in place and a focus on home and identity in fiction. Eudora Welty writes in her essay “Place in Fiction” about the inadequacies of the word, stating that regionalism is:

a careless term, as well as a condescending one, because what it does is fail to differentiate between the localized raw material of life and its outcome as art. “Regional” is an outsider’s term; it has no meaning for the insider who is doing the writing, because as far as he knows, he is simply writing about life. Jane Austen, Emily Bronte, Thomas Hardy, Cervantes, Turgenev, the authors of the books of the Old Testament, all confined themselves to regions, great or small—but are they regional? Then who from the start of time has not been so? (132)

I couldn’t agree more. I think that grounding fiction in the specifics of a particular place is precisely what allows universal themes to emerge. In his article, “Location, Location, Location: Depicting Character Through Place,” Richard Russo says that “there’s no
reason to fear the regional label” (72), citing Faulkner as a writer who does not stray from his home turf but nevertheless manages to address universal matters. If writers such as Faulkner and Bronte are regionalists, then I would be proud to be labeled a regionalist and to continue in a tradition that values place and character. Judith Fetterly and Marjorie Pryce write in the introduction to their anthology of American Women Regionalists, “Regionalist writers frequently connect their interest in character to an interest in development or discovery of identity, specifically in relation to home, region, and community” (xvi). My narrator, Charlotte, is discovering her own identity and her sense of home and place as she spends a year on the Outer Banks, away from her midwestern community and family. In the relation of specific, nuanced details that Charlotte notices about her new home, I hope to communicate her sensibilities, her personality, and how she finds her way back to herself. In talking about further characteristics of regionalists, Fetterly and Pryce write, “Through interactions with other women, and with their stories, […], female protagonists and narrators in regionalist fiction often develop further within the context of a particular community of women located in a specific place, and define identity as collective, connected, and collaborative” (xvi). It is one of these female friendships that bring Charlotte to Cape Hatteras in the first place, and during her time there she interacts with several other women who contribute to her sense of identity born of place.

I hope to capture the feeling of life on the Outer Banks in a way that is sensitive to the place and the people. While I’d love to be considered a regionalist, I never want to be viewed as a “local color” writer. Fetterly and Pryce write about his distinction:
In the regional text, the narrator does not distance herself from the inhabitant of the region, as is the case in “local color” fiction; indeed, she frequently appears to be an inhabitant herself. The regionalist narrator empowers the voice of her regional characters, viewing them as agents of their own lives, rather than undermining them with the ironic perspective characteristic of “local color” writing. And the narrator’s stance of careful listening fosters an empathetic connection between the reader of the work and the lives the work depicts. (xvii)

Though my narrator is not a native inhabitant of the Outer Banks, she has spent a good deal of time there and she views it as home. It is vital to me to treat the characters in my fiction as honestly as I can without turning them into caricatures or stereotypes, to create empathy and not emotional distance as in “local color” fiction. One of the techniques that I believe goes a long way against slipping into “local color” distance is showing the particular details of a place, both interior and exterior. Richard Russo writes, “We won’t be told that that cocktail shaker is pure silver; we’ll be told that it’s sweating in the lazy mid-morning sun. Rendering such passive details active makes us insiders, not tourists” (76). And it is insiders, characters who cherish their environment, who allow us to see the people of a certain place as individual humans and not stereotypes.

Often I find that the details of place provide the birthing ground for action and dialogue. When I need to figure out what happens next, I imagine what my characters are seeing, and this prompts an interaction with the environment and the other character in it. Richard Russo writes about the need to foreground his writing in detail and setting:
When I’m writing badly, I’m almost always in a kind of fast-forward, taking shorthand notes on what the characters are doing and saying. Later, when I realize the scene isn’t working, when I go back and try to “fill in the details,” what I find is that the details often invalidate what the characters have said and done. Better and more efficient to slow down and see clearly to begin with. If character can grow out of place, as I’ve suggested, it follows that place cannot be “grafted on” late in the process.

(76)

I also find that when I am writing badly I am either skimping on details or relying on a set of cliché images that I pulled out of some imaginary stockpile instead of truly seeing what the characters are seeing, instead of using something honest and unique. When I’m writing badly, I use the generic instead of the specific, and it stifles a sense of place instead of illuminating it. In Francine Prose’s article, “Learning from Chekhov,” she quotes him on the importance of the right details in creating setting:

In descriptions of Nature, one ought to seize upon the little particulars, grouping them in such a way that, in reading when you shut your eyes, you get the picture.

For instance you will get the full effect of a moonlit night if you write that on the milldam, a little glowing star point flashed from the neck of a broken bottle, and the round black shadow of a dog or a wolf emerged and ran, etc…. (qtd. in Prose 10)
I want to capture those tiny pointed details that render an entire setting to “get the full effect” of place. In E. Annie Proulx’s novel, *The Shipping News*, the aunt notices certain of these details when arriving back at their family home in Newfoundland:

Square rooms, lofty ceilings. Light dribbled like water through a hundred sparkling holes in the roof, caught on splinters. This bedroom. Where she knew the pattern of cracks on the ceiling better than any other fact in her life. Couldn’t bear to look. Downstairs again she touched a paint-slobbered chair, saw the foot knobs on the front legs worn to rinds. The floorboards slanted under her feet, wood bare as skin. A rock smoothed by the sea for doorstop. And three lucky stones strung on a wire to keep the house safe. (45)

In the combination of unique details that the aunt notices about her home, readers come to see not only the place, but also how the character sees the place and relates it in the narration. Would another character describe a chair as “paint-slobbered,” or think of wood as “bare as skin?” I don’t think so. In another instance of interior place yielding character, the narrator describes Wavey’s house as “full of colors, as though inside Wavey’s dry skin an appreciation for riot seethed. Purple chairs, knotted rugs of scarlet and blue, illustrated cupboards and stripes margining the doors” (Proulx 223). Through these few details, a picture of Wavey’s house and her personality emerge. In Quoyle’s description of Newfoundland, the language, though maintaining the third person narration of the novel, reveals his sense of place in what he notices:
Beyond the glass the sea lay pale as milk, pale the sky, scratched and scribbled with cloud welts. The empty bay, far shore creamed with fog. 

[...] 

A faint path angled toward the sea, and he thought it might come out onto the shore north of the new dock. Started down. After a hundred feet the trail went steep and wet, and he slid though wild angelica stalks and billows of dogberry. [...] 

Behind him a profound sigh, the sigh of someone beyond hope or exasperation. Quoyle turned. A hundred feet away a fin, a glistening back. The Minke whale rose, glided under the milky surface. He stared at the water. Again it appeared, sighed, slipped under. Rolling fog arms flew fifty feet above the sea. [...] 

Quoyle clawed up. Thought that if he got in there with axe and saw, set some pressure-treated steps in the steepest pitches, built a bridge over the wet spots, gravel and moss—it would be a beauty of a walk down to the sea. Some part of this place as his own. (Proulx 103-105)

What Quoyle discovers through this place is that it is his own; through Newfoundland he finds himself, comes into his own being. By giving the reader such precise details of the landscape, Proulx makes Newfoundland come to life. I also like the way such details fit into a minimalist aesthetic, how a single, pointed facet can set the whole scene. This makes everything important; details and descriptions are in there for a reason, and this makes me focus on language at the sentence level where everything has to be precise. In
Martha Lacy Hall writes about this sense of detail in relation to place:

What I am eager to tell about is the blue striped cushions on the porch furniture and the pecan pie coming out of the oven. […] Fears, pains, and chuckles. Haircuts. Corns removed from tender toes. The details and feelings associated with place, place as the setting for human experience and its complications, large and small. (65)

I want to write about these haircuts and corns, these large and small complications that can illuminate a life. In my fiction, I think the way of getting there is through the specific, through the blue striped cushions and little glowing star points. Welty writes about the importance of these details of place in fiction:

What is there, then, about place that is transferable to the pages of a novel? The best things—the explicit things: physical texture. […] Location is the ground conductor of all currents of emotion and belief and moral conviction that charge out from the story in its course. These charges need the warm hard earth underfoot, the light and lift of air, the stir and play of mood, the softening bath of atmosphere that give the likeness-to-life that life needs. (128)

In creating a fictional world, it is the details of place that impart a sense of believability that then allow anything else to happen. Place is the anchor.

Lee Smith is another writer who I feel captures the essence of place through her rendering of detail. In her novel, *The Last Girls*, Smith’s character Harriet describes the
interior place of her childhood home, again encapsulating the sense of place through detail:

The storefront room was narrow and high-ceilinged, like a shoe box; at the back, it opened into a smaller version of itself which was mostly used to store cloth and supplies. “Now don’t you even look at my junk room!” her mother would laugh, guiding someone through […]. A door at the back of the little room led into an alley […]. A black iron stairway, oddly located in the middle of the second room, led up to their living quarters, which Mama called “the apartment.” Actually it was a series of three rooms leading one into the other, right over the top of the shop. The girls’ room had twin beds and a three-sided bay window looking out on the street; then came the kitchen, tiny and jumbled yet strangely elegant with its round oak table and hanging Tiffany lamp; then Mama’s room with its own scent—cigarettes and talcum powder and musky perfume and something else, something mysterious. Mama’s room was exotic and beautiful with its big brass bed and rose silk coverlet and piles of soft pillows and clothes strewn all around, its crackly piles of newspapers and magazines. (27-28)

It is through the combination of detail that the reader gets a sense of the home Harriet grew up in, the textures of “soft pillows” and “crackly piles of newspapers” mixed with sights—the bay window, the Tiffany lamp, the twin beds—and smells of “cigarettes and talcum powder” as well as the way the narration imparts details that aren’t strictly
sensual—likening the room to a shoe box or naming the bedroom “jumbled yet strangely elegant.” To me this mixture of specific detail is what changes setting into a memorable sensory experience for the reader. In *Fair and Tender Ladies*, Lee Smith’s narrator Ivy Rowe opens the first letter of the epistolary novel by describing the journey her parents take up the mountain to Sugar Fork and then narrates her mother’s first view of her new home:

She saw Pilgrim Knob rise up directly behind the house, and Blue Star Mountain beyond. They call it that because of how blue it looks from down below, along Home Creek and Daves Branch, why you can see Blue Star Mountain clear from Majestic on a pretty day. […] She saw the shining waters of Sugar Fork go leaping off down the mountain into the laurel slick. And she saw that this is a good big double cabin here with a breezeway in between where it is fine to set and look out and do your piecework. And she saw the snowball bush in the yard and the rosybush here by the porch all covered with pink-pink flowers. It was June. And Momma looked up in the sky she said and she saw a hawk gliding circles around and around without ever flapping his wings, again that big blue sky. She said that hawk made three circles in the sky, and then Daddy turned to her real formal-like and cleared his throat and said Maude, it is what I have to give you. (Smith 13-4)

This description of Ivy’s mountain home is almost magical to me because of the way it connects Ivy with both place and family. The use of proper names of the mountains
makes me believe that the narrator know her way around in a way that can only happen when you have spent your life, or a significant part of your life, in a certain place. The mountain is what Ivy’s father offers her mother—he offers place in all its loveliness and pride and connection to family and home. When Ivy returns as an adult to her home on Sugar Fork and begins to ready the land for farming, Smith writes:

We cut the brush and pulled it up and piled it in big piles and burned it, and the pale blue smoke from the burning rose straight up to the blue-blue sky. The purple judas-trees were already blooming, and pink and white dogwood, and red and white sarvis even though all the trees were bare except for the greening elmtops. Cardinals were back already, calling Sugar sweet, sugar sweet. (189)

Through the detailed rendering of color combined with other sensory aspects such as the sound of the cardinals, Smith creates an impression of place. It is also the way Ivy as a narrator describes her surroundings, like the “blue-blue sky” or “greening elmtops” that connect place to her character by showing us what she notices, what touches her sensibilities, and how she goes about putting words to her place.

I try to capture these various sensory impressions when I write about place. Oftentimes when I am stuck I will look at pictures of the Outer Banks to take myself back to a certain place. I close my eyes and remember the sun warming my arms, the way the air is heavy with salt, like something you can touch, how many times in succession the seagulls cry. I’m trying to catch those different senses and how they combine into an impression of place when I write about “this bruised January day, sharp wind kicking up
whitecaps and ruffling the muted reeds until they bent their heads low” (11). But I’m also trying to find the right details that suggest not only life on the seashore, but life on the Cape Hatteras seashore. I want to figure out what makes it different from a story set in, say, Cape Cod or Pismo Beach. When the story begins, it is winter on Cape Hatteras, and I want to show the difference in the rhythm of daily life from the bright bustling of summer:

Winters on Cape Hatteras were more desolate and more compelling than I’d imagined. There was a quietness, a somber rhythm that made the summer seem like a carnival of color and life. Ice cream stands, putt-putt courses, bright T-shirts flying from shop windows, all these furled in on themselves in the winter. The Island, extended and curved like a ballerina’s arm, elegantly jutted people away in these windy, chilly months. (19)

In this case, I am not so much using specific sensory impressions to communicate a sense of place as much as I am trying to put my finger on a general sense of Hatteras in the winter. It still involves using the specifics—the putt-putt courses and bright T-shirts—but what I’m hoping to communicate is the subdued, somber atmosphere that Charlotte discovers during this season on the island, a mood that matches her own mindset, and how different that is from the bright, happy summers she has spent on the island. In this case, I think it is the interrelation of voice, character, and place working together to create atmosphere. It’s not so much the sensory details that work to establish place, but how Charlotte relates to and describes the rhythms of a Hatteras winter, that link her character
and voice with place. I also want to relay the details specific to the Hatteras villages so that my story couldn’t possibly be set on Cape Cod or Pismo Beach:

The ferry boat to Ocracoke ran from five a.m. until midnight every day, and every day the road through Hatteras village swelled a little more with traffic as summer approached. […] We crossed the bridge over the canal that marked the center of the village, passed the grocery store and post office and library and giant taxidermied marlin that hung by the fire station. (129)

In this case what I’m trying to do is pick out the details that make the village come to life for me. When I think of Hatteras village, I think of that enormous marlin, and it is significant to me that this is the image Charlotte uses to establish a sense of the village.

Eudora Welty writes, “Place in fiction is the named, identified, concrete, exact and exacting, and therefore credible, gathering spot of all that has been felt, is about to be experienced, in the novel’s progress” (122). It is this exacting credibility that I want to convey to my readers through the use of detail and place. I want them to feel the warm salt breeze brushing their arms and see the diamonds prickling the water of the Pamlico Sound in the evening as the sun goes down. I want them to feel the tiniest grain of sand and hear the caw of gulls over the rush of waves, to sense the warm safety of the lighthouse beam sweeping across the dark dark night. I want them to taste the salt.

Russo writes, “In the end, the only compelling reason to pay more attention to place, to exterior setting, is the belief, the faith, that place and its people are intertwined, that place is character, and that to know the rhythms, the textures, the feel of a place is to know
more deeply and truly its people” (Russo 72). I believe this. I believe that a place and its people are all bound up together, and that by getting the details right I can convey both.

Place for me is essential, and I want to use it to take my readers home.
Works Cited


Prologue

The first time I caught sight of Evie I was spinning around naked on a sand dune in the mid-July heat. I wanted to twirl myself into the Hatteras afternoon, let the sunlight and warmth soak through my skin until it was part of me. I was ten years old and Evie looked about the same, all dark hair and little-girl bones and specks of light.

“Why are you naked?” she asked.

I stopped spinning and stared, arms over my chest. “Because I’m going to have a bath after my brother gets done with the bucket.” I picked up a striped towel and wrapped it around myself. “Why are you in our campsite?”

“I was climbing,” she said. Her legs sparkled with a fine coating of sand. “Why are you taking a bath in a bucket?”

I kicked a cloud of sand into the air. “The showers are too cold. Don’t you freeze in them?”

Evie picked up a coquina shell and held it out to me. “I don’t have to. I live here.”

“In the campground?” The shell curved in Evie’s brown hand.

“Don’t be stupid,” she said. “We live in a house in Buxton.”

I told her my name and she told me hers and we picked up shells for a while.

“Does this one have a name?” I asked. A creamy white whorl nestled in my palm.

“That’s a Scotch Bonnet,” she said. “They eat sand dollars.” She sucked in her cheeks and made a slurping noise. “They suck out all the sand dollar juice.”
I threw it back into the sand. “Gross.” My shoulders shuddered. “I love sand dollars. I’ve never found one.”

“Why bother when you can buy them at The Pirate’s Cove?”

“It’s not the same,” I said. “If I found it, then it would really be mine.”

“You won’t find one here.” The breeze flipped up the pink ruffles on her swimsuit.

“I might,” I said. I knelt down and swished my fingers through the sugary sand, back and forth. “Do you know the sand dollar story?”

Evie sighed. She said that everyone knew the sand dollar story from Sunday school. The top was a poinsettia, the bottom a lily, five piercings where Christ was nailed to the cross, five doves of peace when you crack it open. I’d always thought they were angels and I told her so.

My brother James, blonde and skinny and five years old, trotted up the sand dune. “Your turn,” he said to me.

“James, that’s Evie,” I said, and hiked down the dune for my bath.

~ ~ ~

That evening after dinner James and I walked down the hill. We were swinging hands and James grasped a sno-cone. “Ask your mom if you can take a walk,” I called when I spotted Evie at a campsite in the bend of the road.
She jumped up from the picnic table and ran towards us. “I can,” she said. Her long hair swung jauntily in braids, and crickets whirred in the dusk. The lighthouse should have been sweeping its beams across the island but it was the summer that it was dismantled, ready to be moved inland, away from the eroding ocean. Evie took James’ sno-cone wrapper and I tensed, afraid she would litter. But instead she tossed it in a trash can, clanging the lid. James put one hand in mine and one in Evie’s.

“My dad’s moving the lighthouse,” Evie said. Her voice was almost defiant.

“Swing me,” James said. He stepped forward and lifted his feet, hanging like a monkey between me and Evie.

“Won’t it fall?” I asked.

Evie gave James an extra heave and he kicked a flip-flop off. “It could,” she said, swinging James back. “Nobody’s ever done this before; we’re the first.”

I released James’ hand and ran my fingers over the sea oats lining the road. “I don’t like it,” I said. “I think it should stay where it belongs.”

“Lots of people think it should stay where it belongs,” Evie said. She picked a sea oat and I gasped.

“It’s illegal to pick sea oats,” James said, crossing his arms over his Star Wars T-shirt.

“It’s okay,” Evie said. “This one was dead anyway, see?” She showed us the frayed stalk.
“You must love living here,” I said. We crossed over to the bath house and sat on the wooden steps. A tiny green frog leapt around the water fountain and James gave chase.

“It’s okay,” Evie said. But something about her eyes, the casual shrug of her left shoulder, made me think that she really did love it.

For the next two weeks Evie and I were inseparable. Our families intertwined because of us. When Evie’s dad came to visit after work he’d stay for dinner on the grill, flipping steaks and keeping the gulls away from the hot dogs, swapping fishing stories with my dad. Evie’s Aunt May told us tales about pirates and shipwrecks, and my mom draped jackets around our shoulders when the wind chilled around the campfire. Evie’s mother had taken up with one of the contractors from Buffalo who was here to move the lighthouse. This was why Evie and her brother Nate were staying with their Aunt May for the summer, who liked to squat in empty campsites, moving in her RV with the big tan and brown striped awning until the park rangers threatened to have it towed. Evie seemed to take solace in this family of mine, my serene mother and boisterous dad, my freckled little brother who followed us around, my cousin Troia who Evie said looked like pictures she had seen of mermaids combing their long, golden hair. That was the summer Troia met Michael, and he joined our circle, too. It was the first and only year Aunt Gwen, Troia’s mother, had accompanied us on vacation. She spent most of her time complaining about the humidity, cold showers, and general lack of civilization, the only note of discord in our bunch. We spent our days on the shore, digging holes,
playing Frisbee, poking at jellyfish with our sand shovels. One day, my dad taught me to body board.

“Don’t let go of me,” I yelled. The wave rose in a crescendo above my head and I clung to the orange body board, trying to propel myself backward. It was a big wave, or at least it seemed that way when I was small, and I didn’t want to ride it, but my dad pushed me into the curl anyway. And then I was rushed forward, lifted up, splashed down, and spit out in the shallow water, looking down at the little bubbly holes the coquinas and mole crabs made. I pushed the hair out of my eyes and ran back through the breakers, dragging the board behind me. “That was an elevator,” I said.

Dad took the board’s leash off my wrist and strapped it to his own.

“You go up and then down really fast,” I said. I snorted as a wave splashed up into my nose.

“Snort,” my dad said, pulling his nose up into a snout at me. He caught a wave before I could tackle him. I body surfed into shore behind him. James and my mother were spread out on the sand building a mermaid, and Dad and I sat down beside them. It was what James and I called a plop-whopper day—waves that could do a number on you if you turned your back, but good for body-boarding. I slapped at a biting fly that hovered around my ankle.

“We need seashells for her bathing suit.” James motioned at the mermaid-in-progress.

“Oh, my God,” Dad said, covering James’ eyes with his hand. “Don’t look, son. She’s nekkid.”
James took Dad’s hand away. “There’s sand on my face,” he said, brushing it away. He turned and poked his finger into the mermaid’s stomach, making a belly-button.

I started scalloping the mermaid’s tail, wondering when Troia would get back with Evie.

“It’s about a million degrees hot out here,” Mom said, wiping her forehead with the back of her arm. “I’m going in for a dip.” The metallic gold thread in her bathing suit sparkled as she walked down to the water.

“Dad?” James asked. “Are augers bivalves?” He offered up a small pointy shell spiraled with brown stripes.

“Do you see two valves on it?”

I took the auger and stuck it in the mermaid’s mouth like a fang. “I don’t see any valves,” I said.

Dad picked it up. “Augers are univalve,” he said, tracing it with his finger.

“One-part shells. They’re carnivorous gastropods. First showed up in the late Cambrian period. Remember when that was?”

“No,” James said.

“About 500 million years ago,” Dad said, sculpting a small fish in the sand. It swam merrily beside the mermaid. “Way before people. We can go get some bivalves tomorrow if you want.”
“Let’s get them now,” I said. Bivalve scavenging meant rigging up an inner tube with a cooler in the middle, putting on rubber water shoes, and clamming in the Sound.

“After Evie gets back.”

Mom walked up from the water, shaking her head and spattering water over Dad’s back. He grabbed her and pulled her into the sand. “Cal,” she said, laughing and slapping at Dad’s hand. I stuck out my lower lip and blew my bangs out of my face, a technique I had been practicing all summer, and shook my head. They were so embarrassing.

“There’s Evie,” Mom said, pointing up to where the boardwalk opened onto the beach. She blew a kiss at Evie and waved.

Evie walked down to our umbrella, carrying a small plastic bag. She brandished it in the air. Evie had been shopping for stationary in Avon. We were planning to find a pen-pal in Ireland because Aunt May had told us stories about Irish pirate queens.

“I got it,” she yelled. “We can write it tonight at my house,” Evie said. “But I wanted to show you now.”

“Where’s Troia?” Mom asked.

“She stayed at the camper to read,” Evie said. “I think her mom was mad.” Mom shook her head and said she had better go see if there was anything she could do. She headed off toward the sand dunes, twisting up her hair as she went.

Evie and I sat in striped beach chairs under the umbrella and looked at the stationary. The paper was pink with veins of fiber running through it. It bent backward in the breeze and I tried to smooth it out, put it back in the bag.
“Shit,” Evie said. “It’s getting ruined.” I looked up to see my dad raise an eyebrow at Evie’s swearing.

“Hey, Big E,” Dad said to her. “Come help us build this mermaid.” He walked up to us and put his sandy arm over Evie’s shoulder, giving her a hug as they walked down the sand.

“Only if you tell us the Story of Absolutely Everything,” Evie said, kneeling beside James.

I put the stationary in the beach bag and joined them, sculpting curlicues for the mermaid’s hair. I listened to my dad recount the Story of Absolutely Everything—he told about the universe before there was a universe, infinite density, cosmic inflation, quarks and leptons, matter and anti-matter. I loved the part about dark energy and pictured a mysterious bearded warlock benevolently calling forth the stars and galaxies. Dad always ended the story the same way, with the formation of the earth, fiery and awful and pounded with comets, then the cool and the water and the slow oozing forth of life. “So when you think about it,” he said, “everything in the universe was there in that first bang. All the building blocks of life. And those same forces—gravity and density and everything—are in you and me right now, and what’s in you and me right now is also stretched way out to the very edges of the universe. Pretty cool, if you ask me.”

“So much better than Genesis,” Evie said.

My dad sat back on his heels. “Now, that doesn’t mean Genesis isn’t true, or that they can’t both be right.”
“My dad says the same thing,” Evie said. “But my mom says, ‘Don’t encourage her. She needs to read her Bible.’” She patted sand into waves around the mermaid.

James jumped up. “We should build a trench,” he said. He bent over and started digging with his hands like a small blonde dog. “That way when the tide comes in it won’t ruin her.”

Evie put her hands on her hips. “When that tide comes, it’s going to cut a swath of destruction across this mermaid.” She loved to say things like that.

“It’ll be okay, James,” I said. “We can build a new one tomorrow.” I smoothed my hand across her fin, the sand cool and moist under my fingers.

“All the particles will still be there,” Dad said. “Now how about we get some seaweed for her hair?”

~ ~ ~

One night, Troia had a premonition. She was in a New Age phase and tended to have premonitions on everything from spaghetti for dinner to the Olympic diving results. The adults had gone to bed, leaving Nate and Troia and Michael to watch over the bonfire on the beach. We had been making sand angels, flinging ourselves to the ground and waving our arms and legs back and forth. Troia’s face under the moon was pale, dreamy-eyed. “The lighthouse is going to fall,” she said. “We have to stop it.” I remember the silence that followed, a moment when even the ocean held its breath, and
then the crash of action as Nate put out the fire and Michael piled us into his 4-Runner. I sat in the back with James and Troia and we tried to formulate a plan.

“Call your dad,” I said to Evie.

“Why?”

“He’s a lighthouse mover,” I said.

Nate turned around and looked at me, his shoulders jostling back and forth as the truck plowed through the sand. “Who told you that?”

“I thought you were just tourists,” Evie said. She played with the air-conditioning vent, flipping the slats up then down. “I was making it up.”

“You lied,” James said.

Evie banged Nate on the arm. He was staring out the window with squinted eyes.

“Let’s call him anyway,” she said. “Dad’ll know what to do.”

“There’s nothing to do,” said Nate. “What do we say, ‘This girl from Michigan had an apparition that the lighthouse was going to fall?’”

“Premonition,” Troia said. We pulled up to the campground phone booth and everyone looked at Nate. He threw his arms in the air and slammed out of the truck, stood silhouetted in the headlights as he dialed the phone and slapped away mosquitoes.

“You should get Aunt May,” James said. He was squished on Troia’s lap, knees pulled up to his mouth. Michael nodded, reached his arm to the back seat, and tousled James’ hair. I dodged out of the truck, my bare feet pounding the blacktop.

“Charlotte, wait for me.” Evie’s voice trailed behind me but I kept running.
When I reached Aunt May’s RV she was sitting up in bed smoking and doing a crossword puzzle by lantern light. “Seen the devil, child?” she asked, stubbing out her cigarette while I leaned over to breathe and Evie slammed in the door behind me.

“My cousin said the lighthouse is going to fall,” I said. I bit my lower lip then let it go. “Sometimes Troia just knows things.”

Aunt May shrugged a purple chenille bathrobe over her pajamas and scooted out of bed. She held Evie’s chin in one hand and mine in another, her eyes darting between our faces. “So how are we going to stop this?” she asked.

“Nate’s calling people,” Evie said.

We walked down and met them at the phone.

“Let’s go,” Troia said. “We have to get there.” She sat in the front seat. Michael drove, and Nate sat between them, leaning forward. Evie and I climbed into the way-back of the 4-Runner and James followed. I pushed him into the regular back seat with Aunt May.

“Called your dad then?” Aunt May asked Nate.

“Yeah, and Mom.”

Evie leaned forward. “What’d you do that for?” she said. “Mom doesn’t know anything.”

“Her Buffalo man does.” Nate sat back and crossed his arms.

“He doesn’t,” Evie said. She threw herself against the back seat. “He doesn’t know anything.”
I sat beside her as the sea oats waved in the moonlight and the road pulled away from the car.

The lighthouse relocation site looked like a ghost town. Machinery sat abandoned and the track for moving the lighthouse snaked across the ground. Even though we parked near the new location, deeper in the trees, I could still hear the ocean pound.

“See, it’s fine,” Nate said, gesturing up at the lighthouse perched on the track, black and white and spiraling to the sky. Michael parked the truck and the headlights swept over a plain brown sedan. A man sat at the wheel and Evie’s mom hunkered in the passenger seat, her lips a thin line, and then the lights went out and Michael shut off the truck.

Aunt May opened the door and we all filed outside. The night was thick and damp and enclosed with trees. Nate and Michael went over to talk to the Buffalo man and an engine rumbled up the road, headlights sweeping over us. Evie’s dad’s rusted red Ford truck pulled to a stop and his long legs swung out.

Evie rustled behind me. “Why are they just talking?” she asked. “Why don’t they do something?”

Voices rose in the darkness, caught on the wind. They weren’t discussing the lighthouse. They were arguing about who called whom first, and why.

“We have to do something,” I said.

“Look here,” Aunt May said. “We got to let them sort out their business.” She patted Evie on the shoulder. “Meantime, let’s do our own thing.” She nodded her head at Troia, who took James’ hand as we crossed the road, away from the yelling. Aunt May
stopped at a picnic table surrounded by pine trees. Their scent prickled my nose. “Thing
is,” she said, climbing on top of the table. “Everything’s got its own energy. These trees.
That lighthouse. Us people.” She mulled her mouth around a chaw of tobacco and spat.
James dodged it. “So what we need to do here is send out some good energy to that
lighthouse.”

“We’ll help keep it strong,” Troia said. She hopped onto the table and twirled
around in a circle beside May. James followed her, his hair white in the moonlight. I
looked at Evie. She leapt up too, thrust out her hand to me. I held on even after I
climbed up and the others followed suit, making a circle.

“What do we do now?” I asked.

“We chant,” Troia said. She threw back her head, hair silvering down to her
waist, then looked down again. “Anyone know any chants?”

“Cats and dogs, pigs and hogs,” Aunt May intoned. “Sturdy up them lighthouse
logs.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Evie said.

“Cats and dogs, pigs and hogs,” James yelled. We started circling on the table,
the pine trees spinning overhead. We turned a little faster until Aunt May pulled us down
and we sat in a circle. Blood pounded in my face and Evie’s hair tickled my arm.

The Ford truck rumbled down the road and Nate and Michael crossed over to us.
The Buffalo man’s sedan took off behind Evie’s dad.

“They checked it,” Michael said.

“And it’s okay?” Troia hopped down and put her hand on his arm.
Nate leaned back and rested on the table. “The pile of bricks is fine,” he said, kicking at the sand. A sliver of white peeped out where Nate had struck and I rushed toward it. The moon had come to the ground, a round white sand dollar. I picked it up, dusted it off.

“Look.” I placed the sand dollar carefully in the center of the table and we circled around. Me, Evie, James, Troia, Nate, and Michael. Aunt May headed back across the street to the truck, tapping out a cigarette as she walked.

“You have to break it,” Evie said. It was perfect and pure and it was mine. I wanted to hold it in my palm, wear it as a talisman around my neck, sleep with it under my pillow. “You have to let the angels out,” Evie said. “To protect the lighthouse.” I looked at Troia. She nodded.

I traced the leaves of the poinsettia, smooth and coarse at the same time. “I can’t do it myself,” I said.

Evie picked up the sand dollar and held it out to me, an offering. “We have to let the angels out,” she whispered.

I ran my fingers under the sand dollar, placed my thumb on top beside Evie’s, rubbed it back and forth one last time.

“Ready?” she asked. She looked like a native princess with her dark braids in the moonlight.

I took a deep breath, all salt and pine. “Ready.”

The sand dollar broke crisply, and five white angels scattered into the sand.
Part One

January
Chapter One

My hands were bleeding when I saw Nate again, when he burst from the Pamlico Sound in his wetsuit and pushed up beside me on the dock. I reached out to grab the nylon sack of clams he tossed up. Tiny red rivulets ran down my wrists and dripped on the pier. The crimson looked out of place on this bruised January day, sharp wind kicking up whitecaps and ruffling the muted reeds until they bent their heads low.

Nate grabbed my right hand, cold beads dripping off his hair and landing on my arm. “Stigmata?” he asked, wiping the blood away.

I would have been amused if I had that capacity anymore. I would have laughed and said that, yes, God did indeed work in mysterious ways and made me idiotic enough to cut myself not once, but twice in the kitchen, and made my skin thin enough to bleed through my Band-Aids just to affirm his love for humanity. But I was only able to remember how to be lighthearted. The water lapped against the dock and I closed my eyes.

“Charlotte?” Nate asked. “Are you okay?” He pulled my hand closer to his chest. I opened my eyes and turned away. Back at the Inn a light flicked on, illuminating a second story window. I managed a nod, a half smile.

“Fine,” I said, but the tears came anyway, filling my eyes unexpectedly. I couldn’t control them, couldn’t control anything anymore, and I pulled my hand away. “I have to get back.” The wind lashed my cheeks as I ran down the boardwalk, heading toward the light.
The Pamlico Inn was the only thing saving me. The Inn and the water. My head was in a strange place, disparate from that of my brother, James, or my mother. It was difficult to be with them. Now that our family was only three. I did my breaking apart in the two years that my father was sick. I didn’t know how we lived through those years. I didn’t know how he could be dead. Fathers were always supposed to be there, steady and strong and reassuring. Beaming advice, love, laughter. Beacons. He had been gone for six months now. Gone.

Nine years ago, the Park Service moved the Cape Hatteras lighthouse. I was afraid that it would crumble and fall, afraid that the one thing that had been there all my life would suddenly be gone. They were moving it to a better place, away from the eroding ocean. I imagined the black and white spirals, all 208 feet of them, swaying, rocking, left, right, catching momentum, crashing to the sand. Piles of black and white bricks. Dust. Everywhere dust, rising and billowing and choking me with grit. Days later I would still be spitting out rogue grains when I brushed my teeth.

But the lighthouse didn’t fall. It just changed. Moved. To a different place. Different isn’t always better. Sometimes different is too much. Different can make you run away, and this is where I ran, this is where I landed three days ago, this great gray seashell of an Inn tumbled onto the shore. Three stories, ramps along the outside; a walkway connecting the new addition to the original; lace curtains; rooms named after North Carolina wildflowers. My best friend Evie Austin’s parents owned it. Nate was
Evie’s brother. He had been gone on a trip to the mainland until today. The Inn received few guests in January so the Austins were letting me stay in a room tucked behind the office, The Primrose Room. In exchange for it, I was learning to be a Jill-of-all-trades, doing what needed to be done: answering phones, taking reservations, cleaning, restocking the snacks in the guest quarters, running errands, baking. Baking. Me. I didn’t bake. I microwaved. But somehow I found that the elemental kneading of dough, the rhythmic mixing, whisking, scraping, soothed me. When I was in the grand industrial kitchen surrounded by spices and pots and pans, I could breathe. I could make a mess, I could cut my hands, and somehow it all came round right. I didn’t eat. I tasted, pecked, skimmed a finger around the lemon meringue bowl and licked it off. But that’s all. That’s all.

I hid in the Primrose Room and let myself cry. I felt so stupid crying in front of other people. It’d been six months now. Six months and eighteen days. I wiped my face with my hands when there was a knock on my door.

“Charlotte,” Evie said. “I’m coming in.” She pushed the door open and stood with a hand on her hip, her eyes shadowed. Then she rushed forward, touched my face and pulled back. I saw a mixture of blood and tears on her fingers. “You’re bleeding,” Evie said. She pulled a tissue from the side table and wiped my cheeks, my palms. Her dark hair fell forward, shiny and straight and long.

“Tin foil,” I said, turning to rifle through my suitcase for more Band-Aids. “I manage to cut myself while ripping out tin foil.”
“When are you going to unpack?” Evie asked, pulling a pair of pink socks out of my bag and tossing them on the bed.

I shrugged. Didn’t bother telling her that nothing was permanent. That I’d watched my father die, packed my bags, and left for college. Because he wanted me to go. Because everyone said it would take my mind off it. Him. September, October, November, I did everything but think about it. Him. I unpacked my luggage, decorated my dorm. And then, on Christmas Eve, Evie called to tell me that she was pregnant. A note of apology was in her voice. She even said she didn’t want to burden me with this so soon after my father’s death. I took a leave of absence from school. The form I filled out asked the reason for my departure. Life and death, I wrote. And I left the solid Midwest and came down here to be with my friend. But sometimes I thought I had selfish motives, that I couldn’t help Evie. That really I just wanted to stare at the water and make everything go away.

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Clam chowder was simmering on the stove, and the smell made my mouth water. My eyes water. Evie sat on the edge of the bed, tossing the pink socks up and down in one hand. “Did I ever tell you about the time my parents tried to make me wear a pink dress,” she asked.

I shook my head no, tried to smile, but really I just wanted to be alone and cry.
Evie went on. “It was some awful Easter dress or something,” she said. “I think I was seven. I was in my sherpa phase. No way was that dress going on my body.”

“Your sherpa phase?” I blew my nose and sat down beside Evie.

“I was obsessed with climbing Mount Everest,” Evie said. “You know, like a sherpa.” She got up and placed the socks in a dresser drawer. “I still think sherpas are kind of sexy,” she said.

“What’s not to love?” I asked.

A phone rang in the office across the hall. “I should get that,” I said.

“I’ll do it,” said Evie. She walked to the door and paused with her hand on the frame. “I’ll see you at dinner,” she said.

I went to the bathroom and washed my face, came back to my bedroom and sat looking out the window. Pampas grass shook and swayed in the wind around the curved gravel driveway. Winters on Cape Hatteras were more desolate and more compelling than I’d imagined. There was a quietness, a somber rhythm that made the summer seem like a carnival of color and life. Ice cream stands, putt-putt courses, bright T-shirts flying from shop windows, all these furled in on themselves in the winter. The Island, extended and curved like a ballerina’s arm, elegantly jutted people away in these windy, chilly months. I loved it both ways, winter and summer. My parents had only seen the summer months. Had planned to see winter when they retired. My dad would never see a Hatteras winter. So many things he’d never see. So many things missed. I got up and wandered around the Inn before I started crying again. I stopped at a tall sliding glass door and watched an egret swoop down and land in the marsh grass. The sun was
peeking above the rim of a gray cloud—maybe we’d get a Sound sunset. Nate thought that his parents should have built the Inn on the ocean side of the island, but I loved the stillness of the shallow bowl of water that was the Pamlico Sound.

Outside the wooden door to the kitchen I paused to run my fingers over the carved sign that said *Galley*. I could hear Evie and Nate bickering back and forth, and then Evie said something about dying and I didn’t want to hear them talk about me or my dad so I went in. Nate was tall. He blushed a little bit then bent down to the sink. Cute and lanky with his wetsuit peeled half off. Before I could say anything, Evie grabbed a handful of silverware in one hand and me by the other and we spun out the door. We loped over to the dining room and started setting out plates and cups and napkins.

“He’s happy about it,” Evie said out of the blue. Her fingers flitted down forks with the speed of a hummingbird.

“What?”

“Stephen,” she said. “He’s happy about the baby.”

“I didn’t know you told him.” I passed Evie saucers. A gust of wind shook the house, rattling the window-lined dining room. “Did you tell your parents, too?”

Evie walked around the table. “Not them yet. Nate knows. I told Stephen last night. He yelled some but then he seemed happy enough.” She jostled the table with her leg, reached forward to steady a pitcher.

I stopped straightening the linen. Looked at her. “He yelled at you?”

“You know, whatever. ‘How could you,’ blah blah blah.” Evie fluttered her hands in the air and looked at the ceiling. A ray of sun shot through the window and
danced across the table. “But the point is, it’s okay, and he’s coming to dinner tonight. That was him on the phone.”

Goody. I walked over to the other side of the table and sat in a chair overlooking the dock. I was no fan of Stephen Oden. Once, in the fall, he took Evie on the ferry to Ocracoke, got drunk, and left without her. It was his way of ending their relationship. She called me from the terminal as the last boat was pulling out, wondering what she’d done wrong. I turned and Evie was staring at me with round, dark eyes. “Okay,” I tried to sound cheery. “Hey, I’ll give him a chance.” I smiled and my face felt like it was cracking.

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Not many people showed up for dinner, and Stephen was late. Evie hadn’t told her parents that he was coming. Once he was inside the Inn, she explained, Stephen had the safety of guest status. Her family was bound by politeness. The only Inn guests tonight were a pair of blonde marine biologists called Jane and Henry Bennett and a bespectacled, bearded linguist there to listen to the island dialect. They scattered around the long rectangular table with the Austins and me and pulled cloth napkins onto their laps.

“This chowder sure is making me feel quamish,” Evie said to her mother, throwing around the island word for queasy. Mrs. Austin furrowed her brow at Evie’s forced vernacular. She was short, like Evie, and looked like she ought to be at the kid’s
table, if they had one. They didn’t, because Evie’s mom was the Innkeeper, and she said that everybody would be welcome on the same level at the Inn, especially children. Somehow I didn’t think she’d extend that policy to one of Evie’s. Evie’s dad’s title was the Innkeeper’s husband. He was tall and tan and made the guests feel at home with his jokes and homemade muffins.

The linguist pressed his index fingers together and rested his chin on top of them. “Did you know, Evie, that the word quamish is found in Shakespeare?” he asked.

“She knows,” Mrs. Austin said. “She’s just showing off on account of you being here.”

Mr. Austin crumbled crackers into his chowder. “If you want to hear the brogue in full swing you ought to head down to Ocracoke and sit in on a poker night,” he said. “It gets to be a regular pissing contest to see who can sound the most Elizabethan.”

Evie kicked me under the table. “Hey, Meehonkey,” she said. “Pass me the salt.”

I smiled. Meehonkey was an old island word for hide and go seek, and when I first heard it I couldn’t stop laughing. I said it so much it became a nickname. Nate reached for the lighthouse-shaped salt shaker too and our hands met, then skirted away. “Are your hands okay, Charlotte?” Nate asked. He passed the salt to Evie.

I looked down. “I’m fine. Just thin-skinned.”

Jane the biologist smiled at me. Her teeth looked too big for her face. She had a concave chest, thin and hollowed-out. “I’m always nicking myself on something or
“Everyone thinks she tried to off herself,” Henry said. He glanced at Jane and I thought that they looked more like siblings than husband and wife. “Really it was a run-in with a coral reef.”

“Yoo-hoo!” A voice echoed around the windows of the dining room and Evie and Nate’s Aunt May poked her bedraggled head around the corner. “Lookit who I found,” she said, ushering Stephen into the room like he was a lost puppy. People called Aunt May eccentric, or unconventional, or original. She drove a beat-up old pickup down the beach every day. Her other vehicle of choice was a school bus she’d painted green and emblazoned with her name. Part of her lower jaw had been cut out because she had chewed so much tobacco she got cancer. She liked to walk around naked in her house, and sometimes she forgot to put clothes on before she answered the door. Today she wore green corduroy overalls—they matched the bus—and a red plaid shirt. She was an original, all right.

“Hey, Aunt May,” Evie said and leapt up, hustling over to Stephen before he could say anything. She gave Aunt May and Stephen hugs and pulled them to the table, where Mrs. Austin hastily set them places and spooned chowder into big blue bowls. Mr. Austin creaked his tall frame out of the chair and got up to kiss Aunt May on the cheek and shake Stephen’s hand.

“How are you, sir,” Stephen said. He had a sharp chin and a wiry frame and was growing a mustache.
“Older, fatter, and slower,” Mr. Austin said, thwacking Stephen on the back and steering him to a seat.

“Catch anything lately?” Stephen asked Mr. Austin. He sat between Evie and Nate and his sandy hair glowed in the evening sun.

They started talking about fishing and the weather. I lifted my spoon, put it down. Evie blinked rapidly and the color leached from her face, purple shadows smudging the area beneath her eyes.

I cleared my throat and asked, “Evie, could you help me in the kitchen?”

She stood up and swayed. I steadied her shoulder and walked her to the door before her knees buckled and her full weight was on my hands. “Nate,” I said.

Evie’s eyes rolled back in her head and everyone rushed forward. Nate tapped her cheek as Mr. Austin eased Evie down to the floor. The room buzzed with voices and I rested Evie’s head in my lap. Aunt May barged her way into our circle, pushing Mrs. Austin aside.

“Get back, you damn fools,” she said. “Jacob, go get me some of that yaupon root you use for tea.”

“For fainting?” he asked. “I never heard it used for that.”

Nate glared up at Stephen, who had sat back down and was tapping his finger on the table and pressing his lips together. Mrs. Austin stood up and patted Stephen’s hand. “I’m sure she’ll be fine,” she said. She scanned the room with her sharp eyes. “Please, everyone, sit back down. More coffee?” The marine biologists declined.
“I could make her the yaupon tea,” the linguist said. “If you think it would help.”

He looked at Aunt May.

“Always helps what ails me,” May said.

“Please, no,” Mrs. Austin said. “Sit on down and relax. Evie will be fine.”

Evie groaned and opened her eyes. She pushed herself up on her elbows and scowled. “Will you all please get away from me?” she asked. “I’m fine. I must’ve just tripped.”

Mr. Austin stooped down and rubbed Evie’s back. “No, you fainted, honey,” he said. “Let’s get you to bed.”

“No, Dad, really, I’m fine,” Evie said and stood up slowly, inching her way back to the dining room table, eyes dark in her pale face. She grinned at the guests, who had dutifully sat back down. “Thought I’d give you a little more entertainment than that sunset’s providing.” She motioned with her head to the windows. The sky was smearing with fat dark clouds. I went back to the table and sat down, too.

Mrs. Austin made quick work of offering dessert and French roast coffee laced with Chicory, passing cream and sugar. “Now, I want to make sure you all have what you need,” she said. “Down here doing work at this time of year.” She clucked her tongue and nodded as they ate cheesecakes and little puffy cookies that I had baked that morning.

“Folks, I think I’m going to call it a night,” the linguist said. “You feel better, now, Evie.” The pair of marine biologists said their goodnights and followed. The room
was quiet. Evie looked at the floor and Stephen tugged at his hair. Mrs. Austin pushed out her chair and gathered up soup bowls. They clanked together like thunderclaps.

Mr. Austin stood up, too. “Easy there, Deb,” he said, taking a stack of bowls from her. “New dishes aren’t in the budget.”

I stood and moved toward Mrs. Austin. “Let me do that,” I said.

Mrs. Austin slammed a handful of spoons onto the table and turned to Mr. Austin. “After that stunt your daughter pulled, you want to talk about dishes?”

“She got sick, Debbie.” Mr. Austin set the soup bowls down on the sideboard and looked from Mrs. Austin to Evie.

“She got something,” Mrs. Austin said, walking to the door. She stopped with her hand on the doorjamb and looked over her shoulder at Evie. “Didn’t you?” she asked, taking a step forward. “I hear you getting sick every morning. And now this? I may be simple, but I’m not stupid. Why don’t you tell your father what’s really going on, Evelyn?”

If there was one thing Evie hated, it was being called Evelyn. She turned toward Stephen then back to Mrs. Austin and raised her hands into the air, stiff and spread apart like starfish. “All right, you want to know what’s going on? I’m pregnant, that’s what’s going on.” She slammed her right hand down. “I was a bad girl. Is that what you want to hear? Do you want me to apologize?” Her left hand curled into a fist. “Do you?” Tears sprang into her eyes, and Evie was not one to cry. She stood up and touched Stephen’s shoulder. “Let’s get out of here.”
“Now, hold on here,” Mr. Austin said. His jaw was slack and his voice calm.

Night was closing in early, tingeing the dining room bluish-gray.

“Sir, I can explain,” Stephen said.

I thought Mr. Austin’s eyebrows were going to fly off his forehead. “That’s an explanation I don’t think I need to hear,” he said, his finger pointed at Stephen.

Stephen Oden’s face started squirming. “It takes two, you know.” He got up and walked over to Evie. “How do I even know it’s mine?” He said it quietly, under his breath. I didn’t think anyone else heard, but Nate stood up, too. He grabbed Stephen by the collar, looked at him hard, didn’t say a word.

Evie pried them apart. She was really crying now. “Just get out,” she said to Stephen. “Go home.” She ran out the door. Nate stared at Stephen until he left, too.

Aunt May got up and flipped on a lamp. “I always did say them Oden men was dicks,” she said. “Just didn’t reckon on them knowing how to use ‘em.”

I looked at my plate, a half-moon of liquid marking where my chowder bowl had been. Nate stared at the floor, eyebrows drawn together. Mrs. Austin stood up and yanked curtains across the windows, shutting out the darkening night.

“Not the end of the world,” Aunt May said. She picked up a dinner roll and a butter knife.

“Shouldn’t you go see to Evie?” Mr. Austin asked his wife.

She pulled the last curtain shut, looked at him, and walked out of the room.

~ ~ ~
Hi Charly,

I hope you’re getting all settled in there and everyone is doing well. Give my best to Jacob and Debbie and, of course, Evie. What a rough time this must be for her. James brought home a D on his algebra test, then apologized for allowing his grief response to show in such a typical manner. I told him his Dad would say that he needed to study. I don’t know what to do with him.

Can you show me how to change the e-mail to take off your Dad’s name? I can’t stand to look at it. Hope everything is well, honey, and that you’re getting a little beach time, even in the winter. The Weather Channel says it’s supposed to be in the seventies there this weekend.

Love,

Mom
Chapter Two

I could hear the waves when I woke up, pounding away on the other side of the island. I’d always been able to tell when there was a storm brewing and I could feel it that day before I opened my eyes.

“Charlotte.”

I sat straight up at the sound of my name and saw Evie curled up in a yellow chair in the corner.

“Sorry,” Evie said. “I didn’t want to scare you.” Her eyes were swollen and she rested her chin on her knees.

“It’s okay,” I said. I rubbed my eyes and reached for my robe. “Do you hear those waves?”

“Nor’easter blowing in,” Evie said. She sighed, opened her mouth to speak, closed it again. When she looked up at me her eyes were hollow and dark. “Charlotte, what am I going to do?” she asked.

I pulled her over to the bed, wrapped her in my blanket still warm from sleep, brushed the hair off her face. “It’ll be okay, Evie,” I said. “I don’t know how, but it’ll be okay.”

Evie flopped back onto the bed with a groan and threw her arm across her face. Sometimes I didn’t understand life. Most of the time I didn’t understand life. From the time I was little I had wanted a family of my own, wanted babies. And Evie didn’t.

I nudged her with my foot. “Hey Eves,” I said. “I’m sorry about last night. I know you weren’t ready to tell them.”
She shrugged. “Ready is overrated,” she said.

“Think everything is okay with the baby?” I asked. “Fainting is kind of normal, right?”

“It’s not a baby,” Evie said. “Technically. Technically it’s just a mass of cells. A growth.” She grimaced and glanced down at her stomach. “It’s a bunch of cells, half of which were put there by Stephen Oden.”

I walked over to the window and peeked out the lace curtain. The scrub trees were shaking their bare branches in a frenzied dance. I leaned my forehead against the cool glass. “It will be a baby,” I said.

Evie threw a pillow at me. “Seriously,” she said. “Would you want a partial Stephen Oden tumor growing inside of you?”

I sat on the edge of the bed. Some cells were not just cells. Some cells were death.

~ ~ ~

It was September seventeenth, James’ birthday, when my father told me he had cancer. He wouldn’t talk at first—this is neither the time nor the place—but I kept asking. The biopsy results were back and the only thing worse than knowing bad news was not knowing anything at all. Cancer. An astrological sign. A water sign, Cancer, the crab. In the stars. Cancers were supposed to be nurturing, protective, tenacious, and sensitive. If you were born with your moon in Cancer, as I was, you felt most comforted
when you were caring for somebody else. If you had cancer in your lymph nodes, you had a twenty percent chance of living for five more years. We were all sitting around our polished cherry dining room table. My brother had already blown out his eleven candles.

“Can you re-light them?” he asked. “I want to change my wish.”

I started to cry, we all started to cry, and, miles away on the Outer Banks, pellets of rain were spatting the beach. The dunes and sea grasses blew sideways and the next morning Hurricane Isabel gashed across the island, separating the village of Hatteras from its neighbors to the north with a watery swath. The destruction was awesome. My family and I glued ourselves to The Weather Channel and gaped at the new inlet, the Sea Gull motel spewed sideways into the center of Highway Twelve, the beachfront houses crumbled into the sea like brittle skeletons.

The force of the waves and the wind was just too strong for the island to stand. At its widest point, Hatteras is only three miles across. During our summers on Hatteras, my dad, the geologist, showed us fossils of sea creatures found in the Sound, a record of how far the island had already eroded westward. In the early days when Native Americans lived there, Hatteras was lush with trees and vegetation that kept it anchored against the sea.

Nothing was stable anymore. Maybe it never was.
“Charlotte?” Evie said, nudging me with her knee. She got up and walked over to my closet. “It’s going to be cold today,” she said. “Did you bring any sweaters?”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Do you remember Hurricane Isabel? What we decided then?”

“We decided that Aunt May should not be allowed to stay on island during a hurricane,” Evie said.

“Not that.” I tugged on her hand. “We decided that nothing should ever come between us, that we should never be torn in two.”

“I know,” Evie said. “I remember.” She rifled through my suitcase and pulled out a cream cable knit sweater.

“Please have the baby.” I could feel my ears reddening. “Just do. I’ll help you take care of it. We can move in together, just please, Evie.”

Evie stared at me. “If I have the baby I’ll have to marry Stephen,” she said. She tapped the door of the closet and kicked at my shoes, grazing the side of the cardboard box. “Charlotte, did you bring clothes you haven’t shown me yet?” She tossed herself to the floor and flipped open the lid.

“No.” The word popped out of my mouth like an ice cube. I shook my head.

“Don’t open that, please.”

“Why?” Evie asked. “Do you have racy lingerie in there?” She raised the other flap. And I was stuck to the floor. I couldn’t move, couldn’t speak. Evie squinted into the box. “What is that?” she asked, poking at it with her forefinger.
“That’s my father.” The words sounded clearly articulated in my head, sounded proud and brave and strong. I didn’t think they came out that way.

Evie stepped over to me. Her mouth rounded into a small o. “Your father’s ashes?”

I nodded. “He wanted to be scattered here. The family’s coming in July. For the scattering. We’re going to get one of those big houses on the end of the island, you know, down by the ferry, and hire a captain to take us out. We don’t know if everyone is going out or just me and Mom and James so I have to look into that, look into boats, you know, and how many people can fit on one and how much it costs and if they can even do something like that. I mean, it’s not like a religious service or anything but it is kind of weird. You know?” My throat tightened again.

Evie nodded. “We’ll ask Nate, okay? He knows about boats.” She touched my arm, rubbed up and down. “Let’s go to breakfast. Nate’ll be down there.”

Nate was in the dining room balancing a platter of blueberry muffins in his hand. Evie grabbed one and sat down. “Nate,” she said. “Tell us about boats.” She picked the blueberries out of her muffin and popped them into her mouth one at a time. The wind lashed around the corner of the Inn.

“Boats,” Nate said. “What do you want to know?”

“How about the Miss Hatteras?” Evie said. “How many people can fit on her?”

“You planning a blow-out party or something?” Nate’s eyelashes were thick and brown as he blinked at me.

Evie kicked him. “It’s for Charlotte’s dad’s scattering.”
Nate placed a muffin on a bone china plate with gold piping. He set it down softly in front of me. “The Miss Hatteras holds at least a hundred people. It’s either that or a dinghy. Limit there’s six.” He passed me butter and juice. “But I have my license. I could take you out.”

I ran my finger around the edge of the plate. The muffin crimped with French pastry topping. “Mr. Austin must’ve gotten up extra early to do that,” I said.

“He’s always up early,” Nate said.

“It’s just I usually help him,” I said, pushing my muffin at Evie. I went into the kitchen. The aroma in there was amber and gold. “Hi Mrs. Austin,” I said. “Can I help?” Mr. Austin did breakfast and Mrs. Austin usually took care of afternoon refreshments.

“I’m making carrot cake for today.” She passed me a silver potato peeler. “And call me Debbie.”

I set myself up in front of the stainless steel sink and palmed a carrot, slicked the skin off it, whisked and skimmed and scored across my thumb. I sucked my teeth and threw the carrot into the sink. Two thin lines of red stung down my wrist. I could feel it. It nettled my skin open and I brought the grater down on my thumb for the second time just to feel that rasp of pain.

The Galley door swished open and Nate walked in bearing an empty platter. “Blueberries went over well,” he said to his mother. Nate’s voice was as thick and dark as tar. He turned to me. “Charlotte, you okay?”

My blood smelled tinny, smelled like the silver grater. “I’m just helping peel.”
Nate pressed a white washcloth onto my hand. His fingers were long and brown and calloused. “Not having much luck in this kitchen,” he said. Then to Mrs. Austin.

“Mom, got any Band-Aids?”

“In the cupboard,” she said, barely turning her head.

I let Nate wash my hand and bandage me up.

“You need some breakfast,” he said.

“She knows to help herself to anything we have,” Debbie said.

“I was just trying to help,” said Nate. “Something you might want to think of.”

Debbie thwacked her spatula down on the counter. Little bits of batter splattered the oak cabinet. I looked out the window. Across the walkway the old part of the Inn stood like a dowager, righteous and strong against the wind that tugged at her grey shingles. I wanted to be outside in that wind, wanted it to grasp my hair and pull until my roots tingled. I pushed past Nate and ran down the steps toward the water. I stopped at the pier, huddled with my arms around my knees so that I could feel my thumb throb when I clutched my hands together. Slowly, I pressed into the flayed flesh. Pain coursed like waves and the wind rocked and despite the clouds, despite the gray, I could see clearly for the first time in months.

Evie sat beside me. I hadn’t heard her come down. “Nate said you cut yourself,” she said.

“I was peeling carrots.”

The sputter and huff of a boat churned out in the Sound. “That looks like The Celtic,” Evie said. The Celtic was Aunt May’s fishing trawler, put together from a kit
and souped up with a fast engine. She loved taking it across the inlet into the ocean, sidling up to fancy yachts, and challenging them to drag races. She never lost.

Evie had her hand over her eyes, scanning the horizon even though the day was overcast. Habit, I guessed. She brought it down to her stomach and flinched. “Dad must’ve gotten some bum blueberries,” she said. Another twitch. “Ouch.”

Aunt May was cutting the engine but even so she roared up to the pier in a foam of fishtailing water. She stopped the boat and tossed a coil of rope to the dock. Evie hopped up to tie it off but doubled over before she could execute her famous slipknot.

“What’s wrong?” I knelt down so that I could see her face, brushed her hair away.

“You girls chat later,” May yelled. “This boat can’t wait.”

“I don’t think Evie can wait,” I said, but I straightened up and tied off the rope.

“I’m okay.” Evie moved over and held out a hand to May, who brushed it away and leapt onto the dock, her knees creaking as much as the boards.

“Got the morning sickness?” May asked, her eyes honing on Evie.

“I don’t think so,” Evie said. She winced again and sat down.

Aunt May thumped Evie’s shoulder. She looked like the Gorton’s fisherman’s sister in her yellow rain hat and overcoat. “Kid,” she said. “What are we going to do about this?”

I sat down beside Evie and draped my arm over her shoulders.

“I don’t know, Aunt May,” Evie said.

“You love him?” Aunt May crossed her arms.
“I might. I could.” Evie and Stephen had only started dating when they both went away to college and were homesick.

Aunt May settled into one of the chairs on the dock and popped a chaw of Doublemint into her puckered jaw. “I ain’t lived all these years to not know a few things,” she said.

“Enlighten me,” Evie said. She hunched her chin over her knees.

May cleared her throat, mottled the Doublemint around her cheek, spat into the Sound. “You ain’t in love with that boy. And you don’t got it in you to not have that baby.”

“I agree.” My words hushed out, caught on the cold wind.

Evie lifted her chin. “Ya’ll don’t know. Neither of you know what this is like. You saw how Mama looked at me last night. I don’t even want to think about Daddy. If I have this baby and don’t marry Stephen—” she paused. “They’re old-fashioned.”

Evie’s hair blew across her face. “I’m already the black sheep.”

“She’s right.” May looked at me. Her accent slanted the word into roight.

“Golly gee whiz, thanks, Aunt May,” Evie said.

May continued, “Island folk are old-fashioned, but they got horse sense.” She gave a quick nod of her yellow-capped head. “You’d be surprised what your daddy can forgive.”

Evie turned her head, I thought to look over at May, but her whole body followed, crumpling into a ball. I saw Nate running down the boardwalk and May hoisted herself off the chair to meet him. “Get this girl to the doctor,” she said.
Evie moaned. “No,” she said. “Don’t you have something, May?”

“No yaupon root’s going to help now.”

“There’s the clinic in Hatteras,” I said. I felt eerily calm. Still.

“They know me there,” Evie said through her teeth.

Nate bent down to his sister. “I’ll go find a car. Mom took the truck up to Nag’s Head and the Trooper’s misbehaving.”

“Just take the boat,” May said, jerking the rope off the piling and handing it to Nate. “I’ll head up and tell Jacob.” May was moving down the pier and didn’t hear Evie’s shushed, “no.”

~ ~ ~

The Celtic lifted and bounced across the water. Evie, down below, would alternately yell up. “I’m fine,” and then, “Ouch, goddammit.” Nate had me posted on the starboard side looking out for sandbars, pelicans, buoys, and the Coast Guard. The waves were rushing in whitecaps, choppy two foot riots in the normally placid Sound. A ray of sun warbled through the clouds and disappeared. Nate steered the boat with ease. He knew these waters well.

“Buoy,” I yelled, pointing to the right.

Nate nodded. “Hang on,” he said. “Looks like we’re going to get some air.” He cut the wheel to the left and The Celtic ramped off an oncoming wave, splashed down into the trough, rose again.
“Not funny.” Evie’s voice rose from the cabin.

“I’m doing the best I can,” Nate said. “Speed or smooth, you choose.”

“Just get her there,” I said. My knuckles were poking out of my hands in white knobs as I clutched the rail. Another wave rose and droplets showered the aft.

“That rain or backsplash?” Nate asked.

“Just splashing, I think.” I held my palm out to the sky. “I can’t tell.” A tiny edge of red poked around the edge of my bandaged thumb and I pulled my hand back.

“Figure we’ve got seven or eight hours before this storm blows in full force,” Nate said. “Last three of those won’t be fit to be on the water.” He shook his hair out of his eyes like a wet Labradoodle.

“Maybe your parents could come get us if we get stuck,” I said.

“I heard that.” Evie’s dark head poked out of the hatch.

“Get back down there,” Nate yelled. He jerked The Celtic to the right and we skipped like a smooth flat stone. “Pelican,” he said, but I didn’t see anything.

I went down and sat with Evie until I felt the boat rev down and make several turns. The motor ground to a halt.

“This is as good as it gets,” Nate said, extending his hand down to help us climb out. He had docked directly behind the small hospital that was newly built in South Nags Head and moored The Celtic to a pier—I didn’t who’s. At the bow, Nate jumped out and lifted Evie onto the pier. A short trek through marshy scrub grass led to the back door of the hospital. I jumped off the pier, soaking my sneakers and sloshing over to Evie.
“Can you make it?” I asked her. Evie’s hand still grasped her side, a jumble of silver rings bright against her brown jacket. Before she could answer, Nate picked her up and trudged toward the hospital. I followed, feeling like a kid squishing through mud and sand and tracking dirt all over the antiseptically white floors. Feeling nothing really at all.

~ ~ ~

I was glad my father did not die in a hospital. I was sorry he did not get to die at the ocean, as he wanted. I wished that he did not have to die at all. Hospitals, even when they were different, were all the same. Their scent crept into my skin and turned my stomach against itself. That was why I declined the cup of coffee Nate offered, and the vending machine wares. I poked at my thumb until it bled freely again and the pain pricked along my veins and I excused myself to the restroom. I needed a break. Nate’s relentless pacing and pushing cardboard food items at me had to stop.

I turned on the hot water, waited for the steam to envelop my face, breathed in the warmth. Only the sterile ammonia smell was there, and it amplified, and I shut off the tap and walked back to the waiting room. “Any news?”

Nate shook his head. He sat on a pea-green plastic chair, long legs splayed out, elbows on his knees, head in his hands. My thumb pulsed. I reached out. Put my fingers in his tousled hair. He looked up at me, the planes of his face angled and sharp.

“Will you pray with me?” he asked.
I sat down. Pray. It was an astonishing request, an intimate one, one I could not honor because I had forgotten how. But I nodded, bowed my head and counted the number of linoleum squares beneath my chair. Fifteen if I took in the ones that were on the outskirts of my vision. Hoped that Nate was not an out loud pray-er. Hoped he wouldn’t suggest having a preacher or prophet lay hands on Evie and her unborn child, if there was still an unborn child. Nate’s shoulders moved up and down and I thought he was crying, but he was only stretching, shaking himself out.

Nate put his hand on my knee. “Thanks for that.”

“Don’t thank me,” I said. “Really.” I hoped he thought I was being modest.

“But I think she’ll be okay,” I said, shifting his hand off my knee.

Nate looked up at the ceiling. I wondered how many tiles were above my chair and if they corresponded with the ones below it. “Everything happens for a reason,” Nate said. Five words that were despicable to me. And then the follow-up. “It’s in God’s hands.”

I pushed my thumb into the metal leg of the chair. Pressed harder to relieve the idea that some fictitious higher power had a benevolent and all-knowing reason for tearing my family apart. That was no god. That was no higher power. That was nothing I could bow my head before.

A white-coated doctor stepped into the waiting room, doors swinging behind her. She peered over rimless glasses at a plastic chart. “Austin?” she asked, surveying the room. Nate stood up and walked over to her. “Are you family?” she asked.
“Yes,” I answered quickly for both of us. Doctors never talked unless you were family.

“Have a seat,” she said, motioning with the clipboard to the pea-green chairs. She tucked a strand of honey brown hair behind her ear. “We’ve examined Evie and she’s going to be fine. She’s had what’s called a subchorionic hematoma, which is a blood clot that forms behind the placenta. She had some bleeding but the ultrasound shows that both she and the baby are healthy.”

I smiled. The baby was still there. Evie was healthy. I pictured her blood pooling and rounding out and pushing her baby’s placenta away and bit my lip.

“What caused this?” Nate asked. He hooked his thumbs around the belt loop on his jeans and creased his forehead in a frown.

“Sometimes these things just happen,” she said. “Have Evie take it easy for a few days—no heavy lifting or intercourse. It was a fairly substantial clot, so bring her back for an ultrasound in a month.” The doctor showed us to the receptionist. Nate made an appointment and I tagged behind the doctor, asking if I could see Evie.

She looked fragile and white when I pulled back the curtain, sitting on the bed with her brown patched jacket on and a hospital gown covering her legs. “That’s a nice look you’re going for there,” I said.

Evie lifted the corner of the gown with two fingers. “I always did say that puke pink was my color.”

I brought her jeans over and set them beside her. “I hear it’s the new black.”

“Charlotte, I don’t have any underwear,” Evie said. “I bled through them.”
In the pseudo-room next to Evie I could hear a man protesting that he did not need a catheter, that he could take a piss himself. The nurse answered back that he’d had twenty minutes to take a piss and if he didn’t do it soon she was going to do it for him. I jerked my head toward the curtain. “Maybe you could borrow his. Doesn’t sound like he’s going to need them.”

Evie laughed, a low and melodic ripple of sound. I went in the hall, explained the situation to a nurse, and returned with the prize.

“You have to be joking,” Evie said, holding the adult diaper out in front of her like it might already be full. She shook her head while she put it on, asked for my help with her jeans. “Do you think this is a sign?” Evie asked, pausing with one leg in and one out.

“The diaper?”

“This whole episode,” Evie said.

I hiked the denim up her left leg. The center of her pants were dark with stain. “I think it’s a sign you’ve got a pretty tough baby,” I said.

Evie stood up, buttoned her jeans around the puffy elastic and plastic. “Maybe it’s a sign the baby doesn’t want to stay there,” she said. We slid on her shoes in silence; she took my elbow and we shuffled out to meet Nate.

“We’ve got to move,” Nate said.

“I’m fine, thanks for asking,” Evie said.

Nate stopped walking. “Sorry,” he said. “But we’ve got to get Aunt May’s boat back before the storm hits.”
“Maybe we should wait,” I said. “Evie probably doesn’t feel very good and it’s cold and stormy. We could find somewhere to stay.”

“No,” Evie said. “I want to go home.”

Evening was lowering on the Pamlico when we stepped outside. Gray sky collided with gray water: a uniform blankness punctuated by small rushing peaks of whitecaps.

“Let’s do this,” Nate said, lifting Evie to the boat, jumping on The Celtic and lowering his hand for me.

“I can stay topside,” Evie said.

Nate cast off and started the boat. The Celtic hummed to life with a throaty growl. “Go down below. Charlotte and I can handle things.”

I grabbed Nate’s shoulder when we hit the first wave. The wind cut through my sweater, cold as a slap.

“Should’ve shown your hand to the doc while we were there,” Nate said.

“No, it’s nothing.” The boat tipped and tilted through the water. A patch of concentrated whitecaps caught my eye. “Over there,” I pointed.

“Could be a sandbar,” Nate said. “Not where it usually is but they shift all the time.” He corrected the steering, lightly and gingerly. I moved closer to the railing. The rain started for real this time, fat icy drops blowing sideways, creeping in at my neck, my wrists, anywhere that was exposed.

“Is this safe?” I yelled across to Nate.

“Sure,” he called back. “Hell, the hull is steel—bulletproof.”
“Was Aunt May expecting attackers?” I moved closer to hear his answer, held on to some rigging.

“The Outer Banks are known for their pirates,” Nate said. We hit a wave and I bobbled into him. He held out an arm to steady me. “I’ll tell you the stories sometime.”

Evie rose out of the hatch, her face pale and glistening. She flung two camouflage rain slickers up and I caught them, gave one to Nate.

“You okay?” I asked her.

Evie scrunched up her nose. “Nauseated, but fine. I’m headed back down.”

“Good thing she doesn’t get seasick,” I said to Nate. Without thinking I reached up to pull his slicker more fully over his shoulder and Nate caught my hand, his fingers pressing into the cut on my thumb. I gasped and he let go.

The wind and rain filled the silence and the waves rose. Something, pain or fear or excitement, fizzed in my veins, and I moved closer to Nate, straightened his slicker on purpose, let my fingers linger on his neck for a moment so brief it was nearly nonexistent. “So we’re kind of wet,” I said.

Nate shifted his weight from foot to foot, adjusted the wheel a touch. “Kind of.” His gaze searched my eyes and a bubbling feeling coursed up a notch and I skimmed his cheekbone with my pinky finger, landing at his lips. Nate leaned forward, bent his head down, caught my bottom lip between his, moved up. I opened my mouth to him. He tasted like smoke and salt and my head buzzed and we hit a wave. The Celtic slammed into the water like a sledgehammer and my forehead banged into Nate’s teeth. He swore and over-corrected the boat, lurching us sideways against the current. I grabbed some
rigging, slid toward the rail on the slippery deck and Nate reached out, pulled me back to my feet and straightened The Celtic.

“What the fuck?” Evie’s voice rang out over the storm.

“Pelican,” I murmured. Nate laughed. My feet slipped again and he caught me. I held on to him until we reached the Inn. Mr. Austin must have been watching for us, because he ran down and helped us to dock. The Celtic knocked about in the wind but settled into the pier, and Mr. Austin climbed aboard.

“Evie?” he asked. His voice was heavy and flat.

“She’ll be fine,” Nate said. He wound rope into a coil. “Could you get her inside?”

Evie looked out the hatch at her father and went with him wordlessly. The rain pelted their bent figures as they scurried up the boardwalk, Evie tucked under Mr. Austin’s arm. A shock of wind gusted frigid air into my fingers, my toes. Nate put his arms around my waist and the sudden heat twisted my stomach into a shiver. I shook away. He was too close. I didn’t know why, but right then, he was too close.

“I’m going in,” I said. I leapt off The Celtic, walked through the rain and wind and cold, unsure where I was going, not certain where I had been. Nate followed. I tugged on the door of the Inn’s kitchen but the wind held it closed. Nate reached his arm around me and pulled the door open and we fell into the kitchen.

I skirted the poncho over my head and let it drop on the floor, turned to go out the door, to go anywhere, but I stopped and caught Nate’s eyes. He looked confused. I kissed him again, then pushed into the hallway and realized I’d entered the new part of
the Inn and would have to cross outside to get to my room. The wind was so strong I could almost let myself fall against it. Could almost trust myself to let it hold me up.

~ ~ ~

I stopped inside the old part of the Inn when I heard voices. Mrs. Austin—Debbie—falsely bright, checking someone in. The guest, a long shadow cast by the chandelier in the dim evening. I heard laughter, deep and resonant, and I shivered in my wet clothes. I squeezed my thumb and walked in the door.

“Michael.” He was tall and golden-haired, lean and muscled, chiseled and young and strong. He was my cousin Troia’s boyfriend, and I hadn’t seen him in years.

Michael looked at me, blinked, looked harder. “Charlotte?”

“What are you doing here?” We spoke the words together and laughed. Michael stepped across the room and gave me a hug.

“Sorry about the attire,” I said, motioning to my soaked sweater and jeans.

Michael smiled. “Hey, no problem,” he said. “I heard that wet is the new black.”

It took me a second to realize that the laughter I heard was my own, which was enough to make me stop. “What are you doing here?” I asked.

“I’m researching currents and global warming for a grad class.”

“And here I thought you’d come all this way to see me,” Nate said, appearing around the corner. He and Michael performed a ritualistic handshake slap before clapping each other on the back.
“Good to see you, man,” Michael said. He turned back to me. “So I came down on break to visit Nate and check out the currents at my old stomping ground.”

“I’m surprised you made it in through this storm,” Debbie said. I’d forgotten she was in the room. “But it’s good to see you, Michael.” She turned to Nate. “Where’s your sister?”

“How should I know?”

Debbie walked out of the room toward the family quarters. The storm lashed around the windows of the office, clawing and howling.

“That is some Nor’easter,” Michael said.

Nate lifted a shoulder. “Should’ve been out there on a boat,” he said. He walked to the bathroom off the office and returned with two towels, handing me one. I sat down, dizzy. Realized that I hadn’t eaten all day. Michael sat in the chair beside me.

“Oh, okay?” he asked. “You look pale.”

The room was muted despite the glowing lamps and chandelier and the wind was still blowing on my skin. Michael shrugged out of his coat, shook it off, and placed it around my shoulders. I curled in. “I need to go get some food,” I said. But I was starting to warm. I leaned back.

“I’ll get you something,” Nate said. “Orange juice, too?” He left for the kitchen.

Michael patted the arm of the loveseat. “Remember the orange sno-cones you used to get in the summer here? Thought your brother’s teeth might be permanently orange. He used to love to run up and stick his tongue out at me, show me what kind of
sno-cone he’d just had. Probably because he knew I’d haul him over my shoulder and toss him in the water.”

“Thirteen,” I said softly.

Michael leaned his head in toward me. “James is thirteen now?”

I nodded. “A man. He thinks.”

“Because of your dad.”

I nodded again. My head was heavy.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Me too.”

“I missed the service. By the time Troia told me, it was too late,” Michael said.

“Too late.” It came out as a whisper, and Michael moved over to the loveseat and put his arms around me. I rested my full head on his chest, curled in deeper. It felt good not to need to speak, not to need to explain myself, not to need to figure things out so I could pretend to be happy for someone else’s sake.

The door banged open and shut, rain blowing in. “Here, drink some of this,” Nate said, handing me a glass of juice. The citrus burned and I coughed, but drank some more and the room grew brighter and the sounds less dim. Nate gave me a piece of toast and I ate it. I sat up, took off Michael’s coat.

“Do you want some tea or anything?” Nate asked.

“Beef jerky and a Budweiser,” Michael said. “Let’s do this Charlotte style.”

Again I was laughing before I knew it. “What has my cousin been saying about me?”
“Yeah man, how is Helen-of-Troia?” Nate asked, slapping Michael on the knee. When Michael and Nate first met they were teenagers, surfing and working and fighting over my cousin. In the end Michael won, and he and Troia dated through college.

“She’s good,” Michael said. “Got her Master’s, teaching third grade and volunteering at a hospital.”

“Sounds like her,” Nate said. He leaned back in a chair. “You didn’t know Charlotte was here?”

Michael rubbed my shoulder. “Troia’s been busy, grade cards and all. Me too with classes and research. By summer we should be able to move in together.”

“Summer,” I said. “We’re having a service for my dad this summer if you’d like to come. Troia will be there.”

“I’d like that,” Michael said. “He was a good man, your dad.”

“The best.” I put my toast down and pushed the plate away.

Michael stretched and stood up. “Hey, I’m going to head up to my room. Long drive today.” He gathered his bags. I handed him his coat. “I’ll see you guys tomorrow.”

I tried to look at Nate, but I couldn’t. I studied the floor. Brushed toast crumbs off my pants.

Nate cleared his throat. “So,” he said. “Be good to have Michael around for a while.”

“Yeah.” I nodded. Ran my finger up and down the seam of my jeans.
“Some storm,” Nate said. “We’ll have to go see what’s blown up on the beach tomorrow.”

“Sounds good,” I said. “Maybe Evie will feel like going out by then.”

“You want any more to eat?”

I shook my head. “No, thanks.”

“You were looking a little faint there for a while,” Nate said.

I sighed. “Yeah, it was just too much. For one day, you know?”

Nate moved my plate and glass around on the coffee table. Stacked them up and wiped a tiny spot of orange juice with the napkin. “I didn’t mean to freak you out,” he said. “Back on the boat. To move too fast.”


“We don’t have to talk about it,” Nate said.

“Good.” I said it a little too quickly, with a little too much force. I dropped my hand to my lap. “Maybe later.”

Nate got up, set the plate and glass on the desk. “I’ll get those in the morning. You should go to bed.”

“I will,” I said. I stood up, found my legs, managed a smile. “Night, Nate.” He gave a small half-wave as I walked out into the hall. When I was out of sight I stopped and leaned my back against the wall. Let my head fall back and stared up for a moment. I turned away from my room and walked toward Evie’s, knocked on her door.

“I gave at the office,” she said.
“Hey,” I said, sitting beside her on the bed.

“Hey yourself, storm chaser.”

“Doing okay?”

Evie sat up, stacked the pillows behind her back and scooted over so I could climb in beside her. “I’ve had better days,” she said. “You?”

“Same.” We sat together and Evie leaned her head on my shoulder and I leaned against her head.

“You’re damp,” she said.

“Sorry.” I moved away from her but she pulled me back down. “Did you know Michael’s here?”

“Michael, Troia’s boyfriend, Michael?”

“Yeah.” I snuggled further into the covers. Yawned.

Evie pulled the sheet over our shoulders. “He’s been down here a lot. Something with the Labrador Current and the Gulf Stream.”

“Remember that summer we met him? That was the same time we met,” I said. My words felt warm and hazy.

“He cut his foot surfing at night,” Evie said.

“And almost drowned James,” I finished.

“Charlotte?” Evie said.

“Mmhmm.”

“Let’s go to sleep.” Evie switched off the lamp and the soft darkness washed over me.
Chapter Three

There’s an old story here on the Outer Banks about a witch named Cora. When she was burned at the stake she vanished into smoke. The letters of her name seared into the tree she was tied to. When I looked at the thin red line under my bandage I felt like that tree. Marked. A husk. I woke early after the storm, rolled out of bed without waking Evie, and slipped outside where a grey dawn shimmered. The deck railing splintered under my elbows as I leaned against it, watching the lapping water and waving sea grasses and breathing them in.

“You’re up early, little one.” It was Mr. Austin. He was fond of telling me that my name meant “little and womanly.”

I nodded and we stared at the Sound. He clapped his hands down on the railing. “Coffee?” he asked.

“No, thanks,” I said. “I’m just going to shower then I’ll be down to help with breakfast.”

“Good deal,” he said, squeezing my shoulder with his solid hand. “Potato pancakes and something this morning,” he said.

“And something?” I scuffled my foot along the slats of the deck.

“Leaving that bit up to you,” he said. “Figure it’s time you stepped up to menu planner.” His form shrouded in the mist and he disappeared toward the kitchen.
Evie perched on the counter as I surveyed the Frigidaire for omelet ingredients. She moved a little more slowly than usual but said she was feeling better. I found spinach, bell peppers, crumbles of cheddar cheese and set them on the counter.

“Maybe you should let me chop,” Evie said, sliding off the counter and opening a drawer for the knife.

I tossed her a pepper. “I’ve been thinking about when we met,” I said. I reached up for the green glass bowl I used to whip eggs. “The summer of the lighthouse move.”

Evie whacked a pepper and seeds flew. “Summer of the Buffalo man, you mean?” she asked. “I thought for sure they’d get divorced.”

“What did happen to make them stay together?” I asked. I fired up the oven and lined muffin tins with ruffled pastel papers.

Evie had moved on to spinach, which she chopped with great gusto, wiggling her green fingers at my face until I swatted her. “I don’t know,” she said. “Religion. Pressure. Family.” She shook her hair back out of her eyes. “This is a traditional place. We’re old-school all the way.”

Mr. Austin ambled in and kissed Evie on the cheek, and then me. “How are my favorite girls this morning?” he asked, appraising our breakfast efforts.

“Good,” Evie said. She bent down to wipe up the pepper seeds and rose in slow motion, carefully straightening her stomach. She tossed the dishrag in the sink.

“Talked to Stephen yet?” Mr. Austin asked. He cracked eggs into a mixing bowl and added cream.
“Dad, it’s the crack of dawn. I haven’t exactly had a chance.” Evie passed me a bowl of vegetables and washed her hands.

“I figured spinach omelets with the potato pancakes,” I said. “If that’s okay.”

“Sounds fine,” said Mr. Austin. “I got things under control here,” he said, whisking the eggs into a froth. “Why don’t you girls go rest or play or do whatever it is you girls do.” He waved us out of the kitchen and we crossed outside to a hammock swing. The first pink rays of the sun smudged the sky in the east and we pushed back and forth with our toes.

“Morning!” Michael’s voice reverberated around the corner and he jogged over to our swing. “Who’s up for seeing what that Nor’easter blew in on the beach?”

“Sure,” I said. The beach after a storm was always a surprise.

Nate came outside, yawning and stretching his arms over his head. His hair looked rumpled from sleep. “What’s up, kids?”

Michael told him about the beach and Evie scooted inside to get us thermoses of coffee. We grabbed coats and crunched down the gravel driveway to Michael’s 4-Runner, a green version of his old red one.

“Sorry about the mess,” Michael said, picking up McDonald’s wrappers and Coke cans and throwing them to the back. Nate got in the front seat and Evie and I took the back.

“This feels like the old days,” I said. “I like it.”

“I don’t get that whole nostalgia thing,” Nate said, drumming his fingers on the console. I felt deflated, like someone had pricked the magic out of me. Outside my
window the town of Buxton rolled by. Little restaurants and churches and a fire station with a yellow truck outside. The Pamlico glimpsed through in places, wide and calm. Crab shacks perched on the water and every house had a pier. The trees grew closer together as we neared Frisco and the old Trent woods. I cracked my window to smell the pine.

“We had a lot of fun back in the day,” Michael said, catching my eyes in the rearview mirror. “Looks like I might be spending a lot more time here if I get the internship I applied for.”

“The Park Service one?” Evie asked. She bounced her knee up and down.

“Yeah, I’d be part of the Geoscientists-in-the-parks program,” Michael said. He turned left onto the campground road and we passed the Billy Mitchell airport, a tiny patch of concrete and parked planes covered with tarps. “I’d get to do research on the currents and erosion.”

“How long’s it last?” Nate scratched the stubble along his jaw.

“Six months.” Michael stopped the car near the beach access road. “Want to walk up or drive?” he asked.

I turned to Evie. “Can you walk that far?”

She waved her hand at me. “I’m fine. I could walk for miles.” She cracked the door and pushed it open. The ocean pounded. “Probably good for the kid,” she said.

“Kid?” Michael’s brow furrowed as we started walking.

Evie wrinkled her nose at him. “Nate didn’t tell you?”

Nate lifted a shoulder. “Too early in the morning for family secrets,” he said.
Evie nodded. “I’m kind of pregnant,” she said.

“Just kind of?” Michael asked.

Evie held her finger and thumb to together then parted them minutely. “Very kind of.”

The ocean crashed and the sun danced on Michael’s hair as he contemplated this. “Okay,” he said finally.

“You’re not going to question me? Ask me whose it is? What I’m going to do?” Evie grabbed Michael’s arm and swooned sideways, looking up at him. “Why, oh, why, can’t you be part of my family?”

Michael laughed and put his arm around Evie’s shoulders, hugging her to him as we trudged through the thick sand. “I pretty much am, right?” he asked.

“Oh, Michael, you’re the brother I never had.” Nate shook Michael’s other arm.

I picked up a broken sea oat and tickled Evie. “Remember James yelling at you about picking these?”

“I was pretty impressed,” Evie said. “That’s how I knew you weren’t just dumb tourists.”

The road ascended and we plowed our way up, the surf louder with each step. I looked down for holes and when I raised my eyes at the top of the road I gasped and grabbed Nate’s arm. The ocean had eaten the beach and tumbled in a roaring green frenzy to the dune line.

I stopped and stared at the tumult and droplets of water misted my face.
“Wow.” I don’t know who said it; maybe we all did. The gentle slope of sand where we’d built castles and bonfires was gone, covered by an ocean gnawing at the sand dunes.

Michael shook his head. “I have got to document this,” he said. Excitement prickled in his voice and he turned. “Camera’s in the car,” he said, sprinting off down the road.

I felt pressure on my hand and realized that Nate was squeezing it.

“ Haven’t seen it this bad in a long time,” he said. “Not since the triple strike in ’99.”

Right after the lighthouse was moved in the summer of 1999, Hurricanes Dennis, Floyd, and Irene slammed into the Outer Banks. They chunked away the beach where the lighthouse had stood. Evie and Nate’s parents reunit ed that autumn for a season of repair.

“Nor’easters are sneaky,” Evie said. She advanced toward the water and threw a shell out into the waves. It vanished in white froth.

I pulled on Nate and we stood beside her. I didn’t hear Michael approach until he tapped me on the shoulder, his camera in hand. He showed me the digital images of the waves but turned the camera off at a picture of Nate and me holding hands, the steaming ocean surrounding us, Evie off to one side.

My grasp on Nate’s hand slackened and he released it, crossing his arms over his chest. The sun was bright and I moved away from the water to sit in the damp sand.
“You’re going to need my diaper from yesterday if you keep it parked there,” Evie said, casting a shadow over me. I pulled her down beside me and we stared at the waves. “I need to go talk to Stephen,” she said. “Tell him about yesterday.”

“Want me to go with you?” I asked.

Evie rubbed her head and squinted into the sun. “No,” she said. “I’ve got to do this myself.”

Nate and Michael moved down the sand to shoot different angles.

“Evie, I’m sorry if I pushed you before. About having the baby,” I said.

Her gaze was locked on the water but she nodded. “I don’t know what to do,” she said.

“You’ll figure it out.” I wrapped her in a hug and she felt bony and fragile against my shoulder.

“I just need to get this over with,” she said. The breeze kicked up and Evie shivered. She collared her hands around her mouth and called Nate’s name. “I’ll have Nate drop me off and come back with the truck,” she said.

Nate trotted forward and Evie stood stiffly. Michael passed Nate his cars keys, and Evie and Nate headed down the road, dark heads disappearing over the horizon. Michael eased himself into the sand beside me and we looked at more pictures. He put the camera back in its case and kicked off his shoes. “You cold?” he asked.

I stretched my arms forward. “The sun’s keeping me warm enough,” I said. “But the sand is kind of wet.” We spoke louder than usual over the crash of the surf.
Michael furrowed his fingers around in the sand, picking up a smooth purple shell. “What’s the story with you and Nate?” he asked.

The sun felt suddenly hotter on my face. “Nothing,” I said. “There is no story.” I picked up the purple shell and smoothed it like I was making a wish. “Did he say there was?”

“Nah,” he said. Michael leaned back on one elbow then sat back up. “Sand is cold,” he said.

The sunlight shimmered a rainbow mist over the sea spray and I shivered. “I kissed him yesterday,” I said. “I shouldn’t have, but I did. And now I don’t know what to think.” My shoulders felt heavy and I leaned forward over my knees. “I’m not thinking too clearly these days.” I flipped at the edge of my bandaged thumb and sand stuck to it. It didn’t hurt anymore.

Michael rubbed my back in slow reassuring circles. “You’ve got a lot on your mind lately,” he said. “Is there a reason you shouldn’t have kissed him?”

“It’s just that I shouldn’t even be down here,” I said. My hair blew over my mouth and I wiped it away, sand sticking to my lips. “I should be home with my mom and James. Or back in school like my dad wanted.”

“Hey, there’s nothing wrong with taking a break,” Michael said. “When my mom was sick I took a year off school.”

“But you were there with her,” I said, straightening my spine. “You didn’t run away.” A wave crashed closer to the dunes than the rest and foam washed up inches from our feet. We leapt up and staggered back, and my foot caught in the sand and I
tripped backwards. Michael tried to catch me but we both fell down in a heap and a reed poked me in the back. I yelped and rolled to my knees, damp sand all over my navy jacket and jeans.

“See what happens when you start beating yourself up?” Michael said, holding my elbow and brushing himself off.

I shook the sand off his camera case, handed it to him. We stood up and moved closer to the road, sat down on the crest of the hill. “I’m afraid nothing’s out there,” I said to him. “So afraid. That after death there’s nothing.” I pushed my hair behind my ears and took a breath. “I don’t think I can go on like this. Not believing.”

Michael placed his palm on the top of my head, squeezed and ran his hand down to my neck. “Troia knows more about that stuff than me,” he said. “But if you want to talk about it, I’m here.”

“Especially if you get the job,” I said.

“Yep.” He opened the camera case and looked at the images again. “Those currents are crazy today, Charlotte. Wild. All over the place.” He shut the lens, stood up, and pointed at the waves to the north. “See that,” he said. “Up there around the point you could usually see the Gulf Stream. It’s like a giant river inside the ocean.” He held his hands out to his sides. “It comes sweeping up from the equator, bringing all kinds of life with it. Just teeming with life.”

“But then it meets the Labrador from the north,” I said, colliding my hands together. “Pow. Graveyard of the Atlantic.”
“Exactly.” He walked closer to the water and I followed. “Here and Newfoundland are the only places in the world where those two currents meet like that. Add the shoals off the cape and you’ve got a recipe for shipwrecks and crazy weather.”

The wind blew Michael’s hair back from his face.

I wanted to run into the water and let the currents wash me anywhere they wanted, north, south, up, down. I took off my shoes and ran toward the surf. “Let’s get our feet wet,” I yelled to Michael, bending down and rolling up my pant legs.

“You’re a glutton for punishment, my friend,” he said, but pushed his jeans up too. “Race you.”

We dashed down to the shore line and the spuming water iced over our feet, our ankles. I shrieked and ran backwards, jumped over a wave and chased it forward. Seaweed tickled my toes and I splashed a handful of the frigid water in Michael’s direction.

“You’re going down, McConnell.” Michael chased me and I dodged him. A wave slapped foam up to my thigh and I sprinted back to the dryness of the sand dunes. I leaned over with my hands on my knees, breathing hard. My thumb stung from the salt like it was newly cut. I shook it out, and Michael asked if I was okay. I kicked some wet sand over his feet, spattering him with water.

“I’m good,” I said. “But you’re going to have to rinse off your feet now.”

“Oh, really?” Michael balanced a heap of sand on his right foot and hovered it at me, but I pushed him off balance and the sand flew to the side as he stepped down. I turned to run and just missed crashing into Nate.
“You two been swimming?” he asked, his gaze skating over my wet jeans.

“Sure,” I said. “The water’s fine.” The ocean rumbled and thrashed under the bright sky. Three seagulls flapped by, looking confused that the beach was gone.

“Yeah, you should take a dip,” Michael said. “Like bathwater.”

“Right, like bathwater on crack,” Nate said. I walked over to my shoes, sat down and unrolled my pants.

“Did Evie get to Stephen’s?” I asked Nate.

He nodded. “She’s there now.” The clear morning sun burnished a bit and the day seemed cooler.

“Let’s head back to the Inn,” I said. “I want to be there when Evie gets back.”

“I want to upload these photos.” Michael brandished his camera and stuffed his feet back in his shoes. We strode across the sand towards the road. I turned back to the ocean before the rise of sand dune obscured it from view. In its wildness, in its crashing green-gray glory, it was an entity unto itself, and I felt small, insignificant, perched on the edge of the world and yet still, somehow, a part of it all.

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Charlotta Divine—

Just a quick note while I’m on my lunch break. It’s Salisbury steak day. Which made me think of you.

Love and squishes,
Troia

PS—I forgot to tell you that Michael is coming down there. Have much more to discuss on that subject.

~ ~ ~

I sat on the pier in the afternoon sun, the stillness of the Pamlico seeping into my bones, soft and calm after the jumble of ocean that morning. It was warm enough to take off my jacket, and the breeze brushed my arms. I dipped a hand into the water on impulse, and the cut on my thumb sizzled. I swirled my hand around, focusing on nothing but the rush of water and pain. It was just a matter of time before Evie would come bounding back from Stephen’s, before dinner preparations began and new guests arrived, the tide flowed in and back out. My thumb started to numb. I looked at my hand floating in the water like some sort of bizarre fish, as if it weren’t my hand at all. Fingers, long and tapered. Oval nails that squared off at the tips. The hand that looked like my father’s hand. Their likeness increased, the sicker my father got. He used to palm igneous rocks in front of a classroom, lift slabs of malachite and granite as if they were made of chalk, haul bits of the earth out of their resting places to teach about where they had been. As the cancer crept into his bones, his hands lost strength. The clay coffee mug James made in art class shook when my dad lifted it to his mouth. He still had hair then, but when it started to fall out from the radiation he asked me to shave his head. We sat outside in the spring sun and I pretended that I was a famous hairstylist
flown in from Paris for the occasion. I clipped his hair short, buzzed it with a razor. The fine strands tickled across my fingers and when I was done he ran his hands over the smooth baldness, the bones of his fingers lacing over his skull.

I heard my name and pulled my hand out of the water, turning to see Evie traipsing through the sea grass at the edge of the Sound. She lifted her arm and waved and I ran down to meet her.

“Didn’t Stephen drive you home?” I asked. The ground was soggy under my feet and squished as we walked back to the pier.

Evie lifted a shoulder. “I wanted to walk.” She exhaled in a huff. “He wants me to have the baby,” she said.

“He does?” An egret lifted into flight, white wings pushing into the sky. We reached the dock and knelt down to take off our muddy shoes. The boards of the pier were cold on my bare feet but we walked to the end anyway and sat on the edge.

“He says he’ll take care of me,” Evie said. She gazed out over the water and twirled a strand of hair around her index finger. “Maybe we’ll have clams again for dinner.”

I bit my lip. I wasn’t going to get anything else out of her. “Do you want to have the baby?”

Evie threw a twist of hair over her shoulder and turned to me. “I want to go see Aunt May,” she said. “Apologize for puking all over The Celtic.”

“When did you do that?”
“About the time you were lip locked with my brother.” Evie drummed her fingers on the pier.

“Oh God,” I said. “Evie, I’m sorry.” The wind cooled across my burning cheeks.

“That I puked or that you made out with Nate?”

“Yes,” I said. “No. Both.” I clenched and unclenched my toes against the cold boards of the dock. “You were sick and I didn’t know. You saw me kiss him?”

“I saw some tongue action at one point,” Evie said.

I groaned and brought my hands to my forehead, pushed them back through my hair. “I don’t know what I was thinking,” I said.

“Don’t sweat it,” Evie said. “You’d make a cute couple.”

I looked at her. “We just kissed. That’s all.”

Evie pulled her knees up to her chest. “Nate doesn’t kiss unless he means it.”

She chipped at a scab on her ankle. “Let’s go see Aunt May. Come on, I’ll drive.”

Aunt May lived down the island in the tiny fishing village of Hatteras. It was the place she loved best and she would not leave her stilted shack even when a storm threatened. Evie pulled the car around a gravel driveway that snaked through wind-stunted trees. Everything leaned to the left, including Aunt May’s house. It bobbled on top of its stilts like an unsteady pelican, thrusting its gawky head as high as it could, slanting forward over a narrow but deep canal where The Celtic was anchored. Aunt May’s house was surrounded by large vacation homes, three-story beach mansions that lined the canal like haughty flamingos dressed in pastels. When this part of the island began to develop, Aunt May refused to sell her land and remained happily ensconced in
her own quarter acre of tangled island growth. We climbed out of the car and I stopped
to inspect the orderly row of seven plaques, each bearing a picture of a black and tan
Yorkshire Terrier and the name Walter.

“Has May gotten the next Walter installment yet?” I asked Evie. Whenever one
of Aunt May’s dogs died, she replaced it with another and gave it the same name. She
claimed she couldn’t keep any other name straight and would just end up calling it Walter
anyway.

Evie stepped around the Yorkshire Memorial Gardens and made her way to Aunt
May’s rickety steps. “I think she’s Walter-less at the moment,” Evie said. She turned
and motioned for me to follow her. “Walter version seven lasted a good long time. She’s
still recovering from his loss.”

We clacked up the steps and Evie pounded on the door. It was painted red and
gleamed against the weathered boards of the house. Evie pounded again and turned the
knob, poking her head through the door. “Aunt May?” she called in to the house. Strains
of a Mozart concerto drifted out and we walked inside. Aunt May stood in front of a tall
easel wearing an apron, humming and sweeping blue paint on a canvas in wide strokes,
keeping time with the music. As we got closer I realized that she was wearing only an
apron. She looked up and smiled her caved-in grin. “Hello girls,” she said, splattering
paint on the carpet as she turned to us.

“Aunt May,” Evie said. “Clothing?”

Aunt May put down her paintbrush and shook her head. “You know I can’t paint
like that.” Her accent rhymed can’t with paint. “Sit,” Aunt May said, pointing at the
green chenille sofa. I sat and picked at the raised balls of fabric while Aunt May pulled on a bathrobe.

“Tea?” Aunt May steered Evie toward the sofa, then went into the kitchen, running water into a black teakettle and lighting the gas stove. She came back into the living room, sat down and put a gnarled hand on Evie’s knee. “How you feeling?”

Evie shrugged. “Fine. But I threw up on your boat.”

“Don’t you worry about that,” Aunt May said. “I already got things fixed up.” She hoisted herself up and clattered mugs down from the kitchen cabinets, putting them on a tray made of bamboo.

“I wish you could help me fix up the rest of my life,” Evie said. She leaned back against the sofa, sat up and pulled a quilt off the back and wrapped it around herself.

“This looks like Nate’s baby quilt,” she said. It was blue with squares of smiling yellow ducks. I touched its soft frayed satin edge.

“It is,” Aunt May said from the kitchen. “He found it the other day and wanted me to fix up the bald patches. He loved that thing raw.” Aunt May carried the bamboo tray to the living room and placed it on a coffee table made of gas cans and mirrors. I picked up a mug that had a logo of the Frisco Rod and Gun. Two fishing poles crossed like clashing swords.

Evie lifted the mug of tea to her lips, drank, and made a face. “What is that?”

“Ginger,” Aunt May said. “Settles your stomach.” The Mozart concerto wound to a close and Aunt May started to stand to change the music.
“I’ll get it,” I said. The symphony emanated from an antique record cabinet that hid a state of the art CD player. I selected some Beethoven and stopped at a framed picture of a man in uniform on the wall. “Was his name Walter?” I asked. The mystery of the Walters had long haunted me.

“Of course not,” said Aunt May. “Walter’s a dog’s name.” She settled back into the sofa, smoothing her bathrobe around her knee. “His name was Harvey. Harvey Finkle. Mainlander. Been dead for years now.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. I sat back down. Aunt May’s house smelled vaguely damp and the paint fumes were making my head hurt.

“He was the great love of your life, right?” Evie asked Aunt May.

“Something like that,” Aunt May said. She patted Evie’s knee again. “Now look here. I’ll tell you this like I told your mama a long time ago. All men are pricks. You got your good pricks and you got your bad pricks, but all men are pricks. You need to know that, and you need to know your family is going to be right here for you whatever you decide to do. You just need to know that.” Aunt May hugged Evie to her.

I picked up the tea tray and carried it into the kitchen, rinsed out the teakettle. The water and Beethoven’s fifth symphony drowned out Evie and Aunt May’s voices, their discussion, drowned out everything. A surge of homesickness rose in my stomach and for a moment I wanted to go back to my landlocked family. The sun began to lower over the canal, pink brushing the sky. When I went back in the living room Evie was still nestled under Aunt May’s chin like a child.
When Evie and I returned to the Inn, Nate was standing on the pier, his frame dark against the violet sky. I told Evie I was taking a walk and made my way down to the water. The wind gusted and Nate’s flannel shirt billowed out behind him. I crept up behind him, stood on my toes, and brushed my lips across the nape of his neck. He started and turned his head, his dark hair tickling my nose, and I slipped my hands underneath his flannel, pressed my breasts to his back. He smelled like wood smoke and pine, salt and sweat. Nate turned and I pushed my hands up the front of his blue thermal undershirt, the nubbins grazing across my knuckles. He touched my face, skimmed a long finger over my cheek, and I raised on my toes again to match my mouth to his, to run my hands around his back, to knead his shoulders, to pull him down to me. I just wanted to kiss him.

~ ~ ~

Charls,

Mom said I should write to you.

James

~ ~ ~
At dinner that night I stole glances at Nate as he chewed his food, raked his fork across his plate, lifted his glass of iced tea to his lips. We lazed around the sprawling table like lazy cats after the meal, the blond marine biologists, Jane and Henry, still indistinguishable from one another, tossing around words like estuarine and detritus. The bearded linguist ambled over to the coffee urn that gleamed silver in the evening light. His stubby fingers grasped the bone white china cup and he chortled an abrupt laugh that made me want to smile. Michael reclined, golden and bronze in his chair, telling Evie stories about Lake Michigan while Mr. Austin and Debbie conferred over some bit of business, heads bent together.

“Coming to church with us tomorrow?” Nate asked me. The collar of his shirt turned under and I wanted to straighten it.

“Sure,” I said. “I guess.”

The linguist asked if he could go along and Mr. Austin said that everyone was welcome. Stephen Oden poked his head into the room, and the easy camaraderie of the evening halted.

“Mr. Austin,” Stephen said, taking long strides to shake hands. “Mrs. Austin. You’re looking lovely tonight.” Debbie smiled and motioned for him to sit down.

Evie tensed forward and laced her fingers together. “Hi,” she said. Stephen nodded to her and smiled, his teeth whiter than the china cups. He still had that ridiculous mustache and I wanted to pin him down and pluck it out hair by hair.
Michael raised an eyebrow at me and I cleared my throat to introduce them but Nate beat me to it. “This is Michael Holden,” he said. “He’s here doing research.”

“What field?” Stephen asked, and the table relaxed as Michael talked about the Gulf Stream and the biologists interjected excitedly and the linguist moved his pen across the page of a small spiral notebook.

Stephen picked up the iced tea pitcher and filled Evie’s glass, then his own.

I filled my lungs and exhaled. That night I slept without dreams.
Chapter Four

The Baptist church in Hatteras was small and the congregation arrived in everything from yellow fishing waders to wide-brimmed pastel hats. Despite Evie’s proclamations that she would never sacrifice comfort for style, she arrayed herself in a silver skirt with a sequined belt that highlighted the flat line of midriff between it and her purple shirt.

“You’re going to freeze in that,” I said. The morning dawned crisply, full of salt and promise. Rays of sunlight filtered through the windows of the Inn, catching dust motes. The only dress clothes I had were the ones I wore to my father’s service, so I went to Evie’s room to plunder.

“Fifty one,” Evie said. “That’s the maximum temperature for Hatteras in January.” She slid on white heels and fastened the ankle strap. “It’s supposed to be in the seventies today.” Still, she slung a furry white jacket over her ensemble.

“Can I borrow some clothes?” I asked. This promised to be an adventure as Evie was at least five inches shorter than I and a good deal flatter. But I didn’t want the black silk of the funeral clothes touching my skin.

“Sure,” Evie said, slinging open her closet door. She pointed out the divisions of her wardrobe—comfortable, trampy, and good girl. “You should probably stay away from my pants,” Evie said.

“But I’ve always wanted to get in your pants,” I said, thumbing through her clothes.

“Get in line,” Evie said.
I pulled out a hot pink fringed tank top. “Wasn’t this the swimsuit you wore when you were ten?”

Evie pushed the shirt back into her closet and twisted my shoulders toward the good girl section of clothing. “You stick to these,” she said. “I need to glory in the trampiness while I still can.” She smoothed a hand over her stomach and did a little spin, stopping with her hand on her hip.

I selected the most churchy looking dress I could find, a black and teal polka-dot number that barely skinned my knees, and Evie undid the black leather cord she always wore around her neck.

“Here,” she said. “This’ll go with your outfit better.” A chunky gold cross dangled from the worn leather strip and Evie tied it around my neck.

Nate stood on the steps and whistled as we came down. He was dressed in a suit jacket and tie, his only nod to the beachy day a pair of sandals instead of loafers. “You look nice,” he said to me.

I felt my cheeks grow warm.

Nate turned to Evie. “Okay,” he said. “Charlotte and I are going to church. We’ll pick you up on your street corner afterward. Is 12:30 good?”

“Shut up, Nate,” Evie said, prancing down the stairs in her heels. She flung open the windows and leaned outside.

“Is Michael coming?” I asked.

“Michael doesn’t do the church thing,” Nate said. “He’s a scientist.” Nate sneered the word. *Scientist.*
Michael walked across the room in his bare feet, a bagel in hand. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said. “I’ve got services scheduled at the lighthouse beach in half an hour.” He flopped on the chintz sofa and crossed his legs, jiggling his right foot up and down.

“There’s no church at the lighthouse beach,” Evie said.

Michael’s eyes sparkled with blue and green light.

“Church of the Atlantic?” I said.

Michael nodded.

“He’s going surfing,” I said to Evie.

“Water temp isn’t even fifty yet,” Nate said.

Michael popped the last bite of bagel in his mouth. “I got a wetsuit.” He stretched his arms above his head. The breeze from Evie’s open window wove through his hair and I felt like singing.

In church, I tugged the hem of my dress to my knees and crossed my legs at the ankles. The wooden pew was scratchy and hard but the rose-colored light streaming through stained glass windows made up for it. The church buzzed with voices and Evie put her hand on my arm and groaned.

“Oh, God,” she said. “Just hide me.” Evie unfolded a hymnal in front of her face.

“You’re a little hard to miss in that outfit,” I told her. The sequins on her belt caught the light and a little rainbow danced around her.

“There’s Misty Garber,” Evie said. A petite blonde with Chiclet teeth wound her way through the aisle toward us, waving a program up and down. Misty Garber had been
Evie’s sworn enemy since kindergarten when they had both brought in seahorses for show-and-tell and Misty stomped Evie’s into the ground.

“Evie Austin,” Misty cried in a singsong voice, advancing on us and stopping with her hand on Nate’s shoulder. “And hello, Nate,” she said, teeth poking out as she smiled.

“Good morning,” I said. Evie didn’t introduce me.

“So when are you heading back to school?” Misty asked Evie, cocking her head.

“I don’t know yet,” Evie said. The church hummed a little louder as the choir filed in, Debbie leading the line. Their red robes swished as they walked.

Misty leaned in toward Evie. “I’m glad I decided to stay here and work at the store,” she said. Misty’s family owned a small general store in Hatteras. “I can’t imagine being so far away from home. But at least you have Stephen,” she said.

Evie stopped pretending to shuffle through her hymnal and closed it. “Can’t seem to get rid of him,” she said.

Misty walked away and the singing started. Then the praying and the preaching and the praying. I looked up at the candles flanking the altar and thought about the power outage last summer. The way the candlelight played across my father’s bald head. How it was his last rain storm. How we opened the windows and let the droplets mist in and the wind chimes we’d bought at the beach which swung madly, singing and clanging and echoing. They pealed round full notes that rolled around the emptiness inside of me. The emptiness that did not match up to the glorious heaven the preacher described that awaited us all.
And something in me cracked. I wanted to believe. I couldn’t. And I couldn’t not believe, couldn’t go on thinking that nothing of my father remained. I pulled Evie’s jacket over my hands, ran my finger across the Baptist program and the thin line of a paper cut stung through me. The church felt stuffy and the pew pressed the backs of my legs. Nate and Evie sat on either side of me and I turned my shoulders to try to create space, to try to breathe, but it wasn’t working, nothing was working, and I was trapped until the last hymn, the last prayer, the last handshakes and then Evie and I got in the car and waited for Nate and I begged him to take me to the beach.

“Please,” I said. “I need to get away.”

“What’s wrong?” Nate asked. “I always feel better after service.”

“I don’t, okay?” I balled my hands together to keep from pounding the dashboard. I wanted to run behind the car and push it to the beach,

Evie patted my bare knee. “Let’s go see if Michael’s still surfing,” she said.

The lighthouse beach was about ten miles up the island, the spot just above the jutting cape of Hatteras. The curve of the island created some of the best surf on the East Coast and I wondered how this beach had fared after the Nor’easter, whether it was eaten like the one in Frisco. Nate parked the car in a paved lot and I scrambled out into the wind and sun. I looked up into the blue space where black and white had spiraled for so much of my life. A ring of stones commemorated the spot, the home of the lighthouse from 1869 to its move inland in 1999. Like a ghost lighthouse. The ocean thundered and I threw my shoes into the car and ran toward the sound.
The wind was alive, steadily blowing my hair behind me like a kite. My calf muscles strained as I plowed up the sand dunes and sharp bits of dried sea grass poked my toes. The lighthouse beach had fared better than Frisco, the strip of sand still visible, and I ran down it until I was out of breath.

Salt stuck Evie’s dress to my body, coated my skin, and I opened to it, stretching my arms to the sun and the sea. The waves crashed in hollowed curls that receded in a mesmerizing rhythm. Two fishermen stood to my right with their feet planted in the sand. Michael rose out of the water, carving his surfboard into a wave, skimming, sailing, flying. He made the board look like a part of him, an extension of his feet, and when the wave lost strength I was surprised to see it shoot out in front as Michael fell back into the water.

I sat in the sand for a long time, watching the breakers, the swoop of gulls, the scurry of sandpipers. Evie and Nate walked up the beach in the other direction and I breathed in the thick air. Evie’s jacket didn’t have any tissues in the pocket, just a movie ticket stub. *The Last Sign.*

I dug my hands into the sand. The grains pricked my paper cut and I gathered damp handfuls, throwing them as hard as I could. It satisfied me to see the sand splattering apart, and I moved down to the water, bending as if I were making snowballs, heaving them into the ocean and smiling when I disrupted the white foam. I threw until I couldn’t distinguish the wetness on my face from the sea spray. My dad had known the earth and the sky. He was a geologist and a teacher. I missed him with an ache so sharp that I thought it would pierce my skin. A sandpiper flitted across the sand, delicate
footprints in its wake, and I moved up to the middle of the beach to write a message in the sand.

The sun was hot on my back, the breeze sharp and cool and salty, and I drug deep furrows with my toes, my heels, spelling out tall block letters. *Dad,* I wrote. *Let’s pretend you’re out there watching.* I stood beside it, breathing the clean air and letting the waves crash all thought out of my mind. I turned to walk back to the dunes, glanced over my shoulder and a glint of gray, a shine of silver sluiced out of the water. More than I had ever seen in my life; twenty, thirty, fifty, leaping and arcing and surfing in the waves and coming close to the shore and to Michael. I ran up the beach, shouting, waving at Evie and Nate, at Michael bobbing on his board. Evie and Nate dashed to meet me and we climbed onto the dune for a better view. Sleek noses rising and falling, tail flukes slapping the water, light glinting on curves of dorsal fins. They broke free of the deep, soared and splashed.

Michael surfed in and dropped his board on the beach, ran up to the dune and stood beside me. “I almost touched one,” he said.

We clustered together until the dolphins moved down the beach. “Let’s follow them,” I said.

The four of us raced down the shoreline, kicking sand on each others’ legs, splashing water into the air, laughing into the wind.
Part Two

March
Chapter Five

The air was sticky with humidity the week of Evie’s wedding to Stephen Oden. March pretending to be July. We crossed the Herbert C. Bonner Bridge over Oregon Inlet and I rolled down my window. Wind rushed over my face and lifted my hair. Down below the currents of the Atlantic Ocean met with the Pamlico Sound in swirling, green-bottomed eddies, and shoals of sand rose out of the shallows. From the top of the bridge the distinction between sand and sea, sea and Sound, blurred into blue.

“Maybe I’ll name it Herbert,” Evie said. She sat in the front seat beside Michael and peered over the bridge at the ocean. Something had changed in Evie. Her laugh was sparse and sharp nowadays, her lips a tight line. We were taking a day trip to Nag’s Head to arrange the wedding details and to find Evie a dress.

“How about Bodie?” I asked. I pronounced it the way it looked, not the way it was spoken on the island, *body*. Evie’s color drained until the contrast between her black hair and white skin grew sharp and she asked Michael to stop the car. I stood with her on the sandy shoulder of the
road, passing her a tissue and reaching inside for my water bottle. Evie drank and handed it back to me. “You keep it,” I said. Evie nodded, got back in the car and crossed her legs beneath her.

“All right?” Michael asked, starting the car and pulling back onto the road. The beach houses of South Nag’s Head began appearing, brown and weathered and capping the shore.

Evie crumpled the tissue and threw it on the floor. “Great,” she said. A gull cawed and we passed out of the National Seashore limits and into Nag’s Head, the red-and-white striped awning of a Kentucky Fried Chicken marking the difference. “Just great.”

~ ~ ~

Mavis Bridal Shoppe was housed in a corner of The Beach Barn, a yellow building filled with new-age trinkets, beach souvenirs, and clothes. Evie pulled a fuchsia blouse off the rack and splayed it over her chest. I put it back and handed her the first white dress I saw. “I think Stephen might like it,” Evie said.

“I think your mother might prefer a more traditional look,” I said. “Try this on.”

“I will if you will,” Evie said, grabbing another dress and dashing to the changing room. “There’s no rule that says the bride and maid-of-honor can’t match.”

I crossed my arms. “We don’t have time for this,” I said. “Michael will be back in a few minutes.”
“All you ever talk about is Michael,” Evie said, pulling the curtains around her with a flourish. The shopkeeper looked up over half-moon spectacles and I shrugged a shoulder in Evie’s direction. She smiled and went back to pricing stained glass wind chimes.

Evie made struggling noises from inside the curtain then stepped out in a pouf of white.

“Pretty,” I said.

“I look like a cupcake,” Evie said. She squinted at her reflection and bobbed her arms up and down against billows of fabric like a penguin flapping its ineffectual wings.

“Is there something I can help you with?” The voice and the man were thin and reedy.

“Wedding gowns,” I said.

“Bridesmaids,” said Evie.

“Mother-of-the-bride, flower girl, tuxedos.” I ticked them off on my fingers.

“We’ve got a lot to do.”

“I take it you’re the bride-to-be?” The reedy man looked at Evie and smoothed his purple tie.

A smile twitched across Evie’s lips but all she said was, “Yes.”

“I’ll start a room for you with a selection of gowns,” he said, and walked smoothly off to the white aisles lining one end of the shop.

Evie went back into the dressing room to retrieve her jeans and sneakers. Before Stephen left for school at the end of January, he and Evie took a walk on the beach. Evie
saw a set of little footprints, like from a child running in the sand. She took it as a sign, and they decided to get married.

Evie started off to the white section and I followed. “Hey, Eves.” I paused and placed my finger in the center of an iridescent sequin adorning a white gown that trailed the blue carpet. Evie turned to face me. “Are you sure?”

“Sure of what?” Evie’s right leg jiggled up and down, the taffeta dress vibrating.

“Stephen. The wedding. The baby. All of it.” The words clawed into an ache at the back of my throat. “Are you sure he’s right for you?”

Evie exhaled through her nose. “I’ve made my decision. This is it.” She outstretched her arms at the dresses surrounding us, fingers flicking open.

I stepped toward her, lowered my voice. “But it doesn’t have to be. You can keep the baby and not marry him.” Evie’s head turned to the side, her jaw stiff. “He left you once before, Evie. How can you trust him?”

“Look,” she said, turning to meet my eyes. “Not everybody’s perfect. Maybe he left, but he came back. And whatever kind of asshole Stephen can be, I can handle it.”

“But you shouldn’t have to.”

“I do.” Evie glanced over her shoulder to the man collecting gowns to put in her dressing room. “And that’s just how it is. And you can either support me on that or go home.”

The gnawing hollow in my stomach deepened and I raised my left hand to my face, rubbed the bridge of my nose, closed my eyes. “Of course I support you,” I said.
The words toppled over each other in a rush. “I always will; you’re the most important thing to me, that’s not what I meant.” My voice dropped out from under me.

“Okay, then.” Evie said, her chin raised. “Let’s go try on dresses.”

I didn’t notice the sequin between my fingers until I dropped it on the floor.

~ ~ ~

Sometimes I didn’t realize how much I loved Hatteras until I left and came back. Crossing the Bonner Bridge with that wide expanse of water and shallows and birds hopping and boats skimming, then touching down on the island, and just being home. The sky that evening was china-cup blue and clouds mirrored the upswept sand dunes. Mrs. Austin had caught a ride up the island and we met her in Manteo to choose flowers. Evie settled on pansies because they were in bloom. This ride, Evie sat in the back seat with her mother, and I rode up front with Michael. He drove with his right hand at the bottom of the wheel, elbow resting on the console, left arm across the windowsill as if he wanted to press through the glass to the outdoors.

“Talked to your cousin today,” Michael said to me.

“Is she coming to the wedding?” I asked. I didn’t tell him that Troia and I had spoken yesterday and I received an earful of their relationship woes.

“Yeah, I think she might try it,” Michael said. “Take a sick day and fly to Norfolk.”
“Good,” I said. “I haven’t seen her since—” I leaned against the headrest. “It’s been a while.”

Michael’s eyes looked like bits of sky when he turned his head to look at me. I motioned him to watch the road.

Evie’s voice rose over the backseat in singsong nonsense. “Ya’ll ya’ll ya’ll,” she said. “What are ya’ll talking about up there?”

“Troia’s coming for the wedding,” I told her. I turned around in my seat to talk to her.

“Maybe,” Michael said.

“She’ll come,” I said.

Mrs. Austin cleared her throat. “Where will Troia be staying?” She pronounced Troia’s name like it caused a bitter taste in her mouth.

“I’m not sure,” Michael said. “My trailer’s pretty cramped.” His job with the National Seashore included government housing—a dirt-colored camper van in the Buxton woods that sucked in its sides whenever there was wind. We drove on and the first beach houses of Rodanthe crowned the distance. Tall gray towers perched on the ocean and shorter houses lined Highway Twelve.

“It would be nice to have an RSVP if she’s planning on staying at the Inn,” Mrs. Austin said.

“We didn’t exactly send out invitations, Mother.” Evie shifted in the backseat, tapping her index finger on the door handle.

“I realize that,” Mrs. Austin said.
“Troia can stay in my room,” I said. “If she needs to. We won’t be a bother.” I doubted that, despite her complaining, she would leave Michael’s side for a second of her weekend down here, but sharing a room with my favorite cousin was a welcome prospect. Troia had always been my idol. Four years older than I, she could read tarot cards, bend herself into bridge pose, and erase a headache by pressing her thumb against my hand. I still saw her as magic.

“Looks like the weather’ll hold,” Michael said. Blushes of pink wisped up from the horizon as the sun went down. “Red sky at night, sailor’s delight.”

“I’ll have the prettiest little shotgun wedding ever,” Evie said.

“Don’t speak like that,” Mrs. Austin said.

“It’s true.” Evie curled a piece of hair around her finger.

“We are going to have a perfectly fine wedding with a perfectly fine bride and groom,” Mrs. Austin said. She clicked her tongue on the roof of her mouth. “And of course, Troia is welcome to stay,” she said.

The last of the villages trickled off into sand and waving sea grass. “It’s going to be a lovely wedding.” Mrs. Austin said it as though a reporter lurked in the far corners of the car, tape recorder extended, red light on.

~ ~ ~

Hi Charly,
I finally got to cleaning out the closets today. Did you want to keep any of your Dad’s clothes for any reason? I can’t look at them anymore. If not, I’ll take them to Goodwill tomorrow. I think I’ll look for a new bedroom suite, too. Wish you were here to shop with me. I miss you so much, and James does, too. I wish we could be there for the wedding, but I’m glad Troia’s coming. At least you’ll have some family nearby for a while.

Love,

Mom
Chapter Six

When Troia arrived from Norfolk the first thing she did when she saw me was drop her bags on the floor and cry. Michael stood with a hand on her back. I ran over, wiping the scallions I’d been chopping from my hands, and hugged her. Troia’s face was wet against my shoulder and I inhaled the vanilla and cedar scent of her hair. She felt unbearably light in my arms, like her bones were filled with air.

“I’m sorry.” Troia pulled back and wiped her eyes. “It’s just that you look so much like him.”

I nodded and shouldered her paisley duffel bag, swallowing hard.

“How’s Evie?” Troia asked.

I led them down the hall to my room. “Good,” I said.

Michael hefted the other bags onto my floor. “Sure you want to stay here?” he asked Troia.

She turned away from him and looked out the window.

Michael shrugged, one blue flannel shoulder rising and falling.

I went back down the hall into the sitting room, and Michael and Troia followed. I sat on the chintz sofa. “So what are you guys doing today?” I asked.

Troia sat beside me. “I just want to get settled in and hang out with you,” she said.

Michael picked up a book from the coffee table. *A Celebration of the World’s Barrier Islands*. The cover was a swirling blue batik print. He sat down in a rattan
rocking chair and flipped the book open. “We could all have dinner later,” he said, looking down.

Troia lay down across the sofa, arms behind her head, stretched her legs over mine. “Are the restaurants even open this time of year?” she asked.

I patted her knee. She wore jeans that were a soft faded blue. “The Tide Table keeps regular hours,” I said. The Tide Table was the restaurant we went to at least once every vacation for their crab cakes. “And didn’t you get a coupon last time we were there?” I asked Michael.

Michael nodded. “Did you know that there are barrier islands in Iceland?” he asked.

Troia turned her head to look at Michael. “I suppose you’ll apply for a research grant there next,” she said.

Michael closed the book and put it back on the coffee table. “As opposed to studying ocean currents in Michigan?” He stood up. “I should get back to work,” he said. His footsteps sounded heavy as he walked toward the door.

Troia sat up and watched him go. She frowned and crossed her arms, then shook her head and turned to me.

“That was awkward,” I said.

“Sorry,” Troia said. “Old argument.” She stood up, pulled me up beside her.

“I’m here,” she said, touching my arm and smiling.

I led her out to the narrow deck overlooking the Sound and the garden. We sat in a double hammock swing and pushed it back and forth with our toes. The Pamlico
danced where the sun brushed it, bits of light pricking up on wavelets of water. Troia took a deep breath at the same time as I did and her laugh when she exhaled was silver like I’d remembered.

“I can see why you need to be here,” Troia said. Her hair blew forward over her face but she didn’t shake it off. The breeze felt soft and cool.

“It’s healing,” I said. “And Evie needs me.” A trio of mallards swam by in the Sound, honking and quacking. I thought about the time James found a picture of me as a baby feeding the ducks, wearing a hooded sweatshirt. He swore up and down that the picture was of him.

Troia pulled her legs up and wrapped her arms around her knees. The swing moved off kilter with just me pushing it. “Do I really look like Dad?” I asked. People usually said I resembled my mother.

She nodded. “I always felt like he was my father too, you know?” Troia’s father and mine were brothers. Her father had left when she was ten.

A ruckus erupted from the garden below. From where we sat, Troia and I could see the empty swimming pool covered with a tarp and the garden that stretched out to the Sound. A few yellow Jessamine twined along the water, and bleached-gray marsh grass waved in the wind. Nate was balancing stacks of folding chairs on both his arms. “I don’t know where to put them,” Evie hollered. “I don’t even know why we have them. I don’t want the whole damn island showing up.” She circled around the empty swimming pool and walked down towards the Sound.
“Line them around either side of the walkway,” Mrs. Austin said. Her hair was tied back in a ponytail that fluttered in the wind, and from this distance above them, she and Evie looked alike. “The guests can come in the front of the Inn and go down the back steps. Evie will come down that way, too.”

Mr. Austin walked out with another load of chairs. He and Nate clattered them to the ground and began unfolding.

“Not like that.” Mrs. Austin sliced in front of her husband and snapped a chair open, setting it squarely on the walkway facing the Sound.

“What if it rains?” Evie’s voice winged with desperation. She kicked a chair away from her feet.

“That’s what the tarps are for,” Mrs. Austin said, jerking another chair into place.

“Now, Evie.” Mr. Austin put his hands on his daughter’s shoulders. “I don’t want you worrying over details. Why don’t you go find Charlotte?”

Evie wrenched herself away. “Dad, I’m not twelve,” she said. “It’s my deal. I want to help.” But she strode up the walkway towards the Inn.

I stood up from the swing. “I should go help.”

“I’ll be down in a second,” Troia said.

I ran down the back steps to meet Evie. “Hey,” I said.

“They’re driving me crazy,” Evie said. She went inside to the Inn’s basement floor and I followed. Evie rummaged in the closet that held random decorations for guest weddings and events. “Where the hell is the ribbon?”

I reached up to the top shelf and handed it to her. “Yellow,” I said. “Nice.”
“It’s going to look like a bunch of dandelions exploded.” Evie exhaled and blew the hair out of her eyes.

“I’ve always thought there’s nothing more festive than pollen,” Troia said, poking her head inside the door.

Evie squealed and dropped trails of ribbon to the floor.

Troia laughed and hugged Evie. “Why don’t you and I go get some tea and catch up?” Troia asked.

I picked up the ribbon and twirled it through my fingers. “You should,” I told Evie. “I’ll get this.”

“You have to update me on this Charlotte and Nate thing,” Troia said. “I can’t get anything out of that one.” Troia nodded her head at me.

“We could end up relatives,” Evie said. “Your cousin, my brother.”

The basement door slammed open and closed and Mrs. Austin came by, stopping beside Evie. “If you want to deal with this, then get out there and do it.” She punched up the steps to the second floor.

“I told her we could just do the chairs tomorrow.” Evie shouted the last part toward the staircase. She handed me the rest of the ribbon and turned to Troia. “Let’s go get some tea.

~ ~ ~
I knelt down and tied the last yellow trim to the last brown metal chair, then stepped back to admire my work.

“Looks good,” Nate said. He stretched one arm across his body then the other.

We had been dating for two months now. I was pretty sure it was a momentary relationship. Nate remained convinced otherwise.

The rows of chairs fanned around the garden and shone softly in the late afternoon sun. “I hope it stays this nice,” I said. Nate reached for my hand and spun me in a circle.

“Charlotte,” Mr. Austin said, coming up behind us and dropping a load of blue tarps to the ground. “Could I see you in the office for a moment?”

Nate squeezed my hand and I shook it loose. “Sure,” I said, following Mr. Austin into the Inn. We went upstairs and he settled into a brown leather chair behind a wide desk. I sat across from him and crossed my legs at the ankles, shifted and put my right leg over my left knee. The room was covered in nautical maps of the area, tiny numbers scattering across intersecting lines. I wondered at what latitude and longitude my father would come to rest. His broad smile floated across my mind. I shook it away. “Is everything all right?” I asked Mr. Austin.

“Fine, fine.” He leaned back in the chair and tapped a white pen on the desk, its nib poking in and out. The pen clinked down and Mr. Austin spread his hands over it. “Evie’s mom didn’t get to have the kind of wedding she wanted,” he said. “And I know she’s been a bit—” he paused and raised his bushy eyebrows to the ceiling. “Hard to live with lately.”
I made a small protesting noise but Mr. Austin held up his hand. “But Debbie and I just want you to know that we appreciate all you do around here.” He picked up the pen again and walked it from one finger to the other and back. “Now, we’ve talked it over, and when Evie moves down to Hatteras with Stephen we’d like to offer you a real position here at the Pamlico.” Mr. Austin was the only one who called the Inn anything other than the Inn.

A door closed and voices cascaded from the sitting room. I heard Mrs. Austin’s brisk steps and Evie’s chirp of laughter, so rare these days. “Thank you,” I said. “I don’t know what to say.” I thought about how much my dad wanted to me start college, even though he knew I’d be grieving. It felt like a betrayal that I was even here to begin with.

Mr. Austin leaned forward. “You take your time,” he said. “Talk it over with your folks.” His mouth hung open for a moment and then he glanced down at the desk. “With your mother,” he said, looking up at me and nodding.

“I suppose I should go home sometime,” I said. Dust motes caught in a sunbeam and over the Sound a sea gull cawed. “I’ll think about it.”

Mr. Austin patted me on the back as I walked to the door. “Just know you got a place here, kiddo,” he said, then hitched his thumbs in his pockets and started down the stairs.

~ ~ ~
After Stephen and his family filed out from what Evie termed the as-close-as-it-gets-to-a-rehearsal dinner, Troia and I walked down to the pier. The early evening air was cool and moist, and I pulled my sweater tighter around me. “I thought you’d be at Michael’s by now,” I said.

Troia brushed her fingers over the top of a post, peering down into the water. “It looks like tea,” she said.

“It’s different every day.”

“I think we’re dying.” Troia sat down and crossed her legs, denim brushing against itself.

“You and Michael?” I sat beside her.

“We don’t laugh anymore,” she said. “I can’t breathe around him.”

A flicker of annoyance jumped in my chest, bright and startling. “Then why did you come?”

“I thought it might help, or that I was wrong.” Troia sighed and leaned back on her palms. “Maybe I am.” Troia looked at me and in the gathering night I couldn’t see her expression, just the line of her straight nose and the curve of her chin. The water lapped rhythmically against the dock.

“Let’s go inside,” I said, standing up. But I saw Evie picking her way down through tarp-covered chairs, Nate and Michael behind her. I raised my hand in a wave and waited on the pier for them. The Inn lights flicked on, illuminating their figures as they walked down the pier.
“No red sky tonight,” Evie said. She sat down and dangled her legs over the water. Nate and Michael lowered themselves to the pier and I sat back down too. We formed a crooked semi-circle.

“That’s mostly folklore anyway,” Troia said.


“I never knew that,” I said. Sometimes Nate surprised me.

He nudged my thigh with his elbow. “I know some things.”

“It’s really dust particles,” Michael said. “When the sun sends light through a high concentration of dust particles we see the red. It usually means a high pressure system. Stable air.”

The way he said it made me smile. He sounded like a weatherman.

“Such a scientist.” Troia said it lightly, but the words pricked along my scalp.

“I don’t care if Jesus or Newton said it, I just want rain tomorrow,” Evie said.

“You do?” I asked.

“Do what?”

“You said you wanted rain tomorrow,” I said.

“I said I didn’t want rain tomorrow,” Evie said.

Nate shook his head. “Enough with the weather. It’ll be fine.”

“It is getting cold,” Troia said. “Feel my hand.”

“We should go in,” I said. But we all sat there, silent, listening to the crickets chirp and the water slip back and forth against the posts of the pier.
Hey, kid!

* Aunt Darcy and I went shopping today. We found some furniture for the bedroom, whitewashed oak. Looks beachy. The car magically swerved into Red Lobster of its own accord, so of course we stopped and ate. Sure isn’t as good as the fresh seafood you must be eating every day.

  I’m still so worried about your brother. He won’t talk to me. Maybe you can get something out of him. At least his grades are better. Give Evie and Troia a hug for me, and write soon.

Love,

Mom
Chapter Seven

On the morning of the day Evie married Stephen Oden I woke early and walked the beach at sunrise. The waves were heavy with seaweed and hovered at the crest before plopping into the sand. Five pelicans belly-skimmed across the horizon, heads tucked back into their bodies, bills thrust forward. I scuffed at the sand and watched as the sky plumed orange and pink.

“Should be okay until this afternoon.” Michael’s voice came from behind me and I jumped.

“You’re up early,” I said.

Michael walked toward the rows of sand dunes, stalks of dormant sea grass waving over them in slender sticks. He carried a fishing pole over his right shoulder.

“Up late,” he said.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

He looked at the fishing pole. “Thought I’d go chop some wood,” he said.

We sat in the sand. Gray clouds stifled the earlier blue sky and the wind bit through my jacket.

“I ran into Lester O’Neal at the ramp out there,” Michael said. Lester O’Neal was an old islander who passed his time sitting on the porch of a small store in Frisco. Conversations with Lester were interesting because his brogue was thick and he had no teeth. It was my goal each vacation to make Lester smile.

“Did you have a good chat?” I asked.
“I think he said to use mullet today. Or he was telling me I had a mullet.”

Michael scooped a fistful of sand, letting it trail through his fingers.

“You hair is getting long,” I said. I twirled a piece of dried seaweed around my finger. “But I wouldn’t go so far as to say mullet-esque.”

“You should have been there,” he said. “Lester could have used a smile.”

Michael’s face in the fading sunrise was sharp and beautiful and for a moment I understood my cousin’s pain. I couldn’t breathe around him.

~ ~ ~

The Inn buzzed warmly when I got back. I stepped in the kitchen to check on breakfast and found Evie’s Aunt May standing in front of the refrigerator, demure in a black lace dress. “You taking the job?” she asked. News really did travel fast on an island.

“I don’t know yet.” I peeked into the dining room where Mr. Austin was listing off the juices to the guests.

Aunt May cracked an egg onto the griddle. “Lord helps those that help themselves,” she muttered. “I’m helping myself to this here egg,” she said to me, nodding at the popping mass of white and yellow.

I wiped off the counter and looked out the window. Nate crossed over the walkway to the kitchen, his hair dark and tousled in the gray morning.
“Ladies,” he said to us, grinning and grabbing an oatmeal bar. “Charlotte, I need to show you something.” Nate swept his arm forward like an usher and held open the door.

We walked down to the garden. Pink camellias spotted the sloping ground and Nate picked one for me, tucking the damp stem behind my ear. We wound our way to the water’s edge and I paused. “Should I take off my shoes?” I asked.

“Nah. It’s not far.” Nate strode along the thin strip of mucky sand that bordered the Sound and disappeared among the reeds. I followed him. The land bent into a shallow cove and Nate splashed out to a small, flat-bottomed boat. Its white hull bobbed happily as Nate patted it. “You think Evie will like it?” he asked. “I figured they might want to make a getaway after the ceremony.”

I waded into the cold water, shoes and all, to stand next to him. “When did you do this?”

“A few weeks ago Billy Scarborough found a skiff washed up on the shoals.” Nate ran his hand along the smooth rail of the boat. “He didn’t want it, so I fixed it up for Evie.”

I touched Nate’s hand, brown against the white boat. “She’ll love it.”

Nate leaned forward, hesitated, then kissed me, his lips dryly brushing mine. I wondered how, surrounded by all this water, his lips were not moist. I wondered why the deepest feeling I could muster for him was tenderness. I laced my fingers around his neck and pulled him closer, but my feet were cold and a fish flipped out of the water and I moved away to go find Evie.
“Give me the scissors,” I said. Evie hunkered on the floor by her dress, blades poised.

“Do you see this?” Evie pointed with the scissors to a row of fluffy white balls lining the hem. “I don’t want to get married standing in a vat of cotton balls.”

“It’ll be better once it’s on,” I said. I slid the scissors from her grasp and took them to my room. When I came back, Mr. Austin was standing in front of Evie, a green velvet box in his hands. I stopped at the doorway.

“They’re pearls,” he said. “My mother’s.” Evie hugged him fiercely. The top of her head barely brushed his shoulder.

Evie pulled back, her eyes glinting. “I’m sorry,” she said.

Mr. Austin lay his hands on her shoulders. “Evie, honey, I’m proud of you.”

I went back to my room and leaned against the cool yellow wall. It hurt to remember that my father wouldn’t see me get married. It hurt. Troia had left the closet door open and the box of ashes poked out. I kicked it and closed the door, then picked up the scissors. They were heavy and cool in my hand, and for the first time in months, I placed a sharp silver blade to my skin.

“Charlotte.” Troia’s eyebrows jerked together as she caught sight of me.
I smacked the scissors on the dresser and dodged around her, but Troia grabbed my arm. “Let go,” I said. She wouldn’t. I sat down on the bed and hugged a pillow to my chest.

“Are you cutting yourself?” Troia said the words softly.

“Of course not.” I heard Evie call my name from down the hallway. “We’ll talk about it later,” I said to Troia. This time she let me walk away.

~ ~ ~

Evie’s wedding went perfectly. She winked at me before I walked down the steps to the aisle. The fluffy white balls lining the edge of her dress had disappeared. I stood beside Evie in my lilac dress and smiled at all the right times. Stephen’s blond hair was bright against his tuxedo, and when he said his vows, even I believed him. At Evie’s insistence, he had shaved the mustache. Guests filled the folding chairs and the sky remained a uniform gray. No rain. Evie placed her hand in Stephen’s and pledged her troth. After the ceremony, everyone gathered under a large white tent. A band played jazzy love songs and Aunt May attempted to sing. Mr. Austin grabbed the microphone from her and proposed a toast. Stephen dipped Mrs. Austin during their dance. Michael danced with Troia. She curled against him like a comma. After the toast and the dancing and the cake, Evie tugged on my arm and motioned back to the Inn. We went into the large bathroom downstairs where we had changed and I unzipped Evie’s dress for her. She stepped out of it, sat on the cold tile floor in her underwear, and cried.
“Evie.” I wrapped my arms around her and stroked her hair like I would a wounded child. Sobs ratcheted through her body and her face flushed red. The pearls around Evie’s neck grew slippery with tears.

“I can’t do it,” Evie choked. “I don’t want to be married. I don’t want to be a mother.” She raised a shaking hand to her face and wiped her nose.

“Shh,” I said. I leaned forward to grab some toilet paper but Evie dragged me back down. The pansies haloing Evie’s head crushed against my collarbone, pink and sweet. We rocked back and forth. I let her cry until she stopped.

“I think I need a Kleenex,” she said, face mottled and blotchy.

“I think you need a fire hose.”

Evie laughed hoarsely, and I passed her a handful of toilet paper and hung up her dress. It floated from the hook in the wall like a wraith, forlorn and deflated. Evie stood up and foraged around the cabinet for the clothes we’d brought down earlier.

“You ready?” Aunt May’s voice came from the other side of the bathroom door.

“Folks are gathering out front to see you off.”

“Almost,” I answered. Evie buttoned her pants over the small swell of her belly.

“You can go out the back,” I told her. “Nate has a surprise.” Evie nodded and pulled her shirt over her head, petals from the pansies flitting to the floor.

She splashed off her face. “How do I look?”

I tugged the hem of her shirt straight. “You’re beautiful.”

Evie rolled her eyes. “Okay,” she said. “I’m ready to go.”
The raindrops rolled in with the darkness that night, and I turned on my side in bed, aching with exhaustion. Troia went to Michael’s and would leave from there in the morning. I had managed to avoid any conversations with her before she had to go. My eyes burned but sleep would not come. I slipped on a robe and padded down the hall. Light glowed from the office and illuminated Mrs. Austin’s form, bent over the desk. She looked up at me, the lines on her face deepened in the lamplight. Old pictures of Evie scattered around the desk. She picked one up by the corner, showed it to me.

“She’s known Stephen since kindergarten. They’ll be a good match.”

“I hope so,” I said.

Mrs. Austin sighed. “Would you open up that window?” she asked.

I raised the blinds and tugged the window open, bracing myself against the frame as the wind coursed in. Rain drizzled off the eaves and pattered onto the deck. I turned back to the room. Mrs. Austin’s hair blew around her face as she gathered up the photos and put them in a drawer. I could see her shoulder blades through the thin cotton of her nightgown and suddenly I wanted my own mother so badly I almost cried. Instead I said goodnight and walked back to my bedroom and cracked my window open. The sheets were cool against my skin, salty and moist. Sheathed in water, I slept.
Hi Baby,

Just a note before bed. Hope everything went well with the wedding. I bet Evie was a beautiful bride. Wish I could have been there, but, of course, there is always work. Those kids won’t teach themselves, that’s for sure!

Any news on the boat? I’ll feel better once it’s all settled and we know who is taking us out. Wouldn’t it be easiest to have Nate do it? Let me know what you find out about the houses, too.

I miss your Daddy every day. It’s so hard sometimes.

Well, I should get off to bed. Write me when you get the chance.

Love,

Mom
Part Three

May
Chapter Eight

I took the job. Mr. Austin wanted a combination secretary, chef, and accountant. I told him I was hopeless with numbers. He hired me anyway. Spring slipped on to Hatteras in whispered shades of green. The sea oats lining the beach turned from brown to tan. Little white flowers popped out along Highway Twelve, and Mrs. Austin’s garden was awash in pink and yellow. It was May, but I couldn’t shake my autumn frame of mind. I learned new recipes, walked different beaches, even fished with Nate. Nothing made me feel new.

Evie was only seven miles away, but she might as well have been seven hundred. Her little white house on Elizabeth Lane was chipped and peeling inside and out. She had a new job at a real estate agency in Hatteras, and during her free time, Evie primed and caulked. The paint would have to wait for Stephen, who returned from school the following day. I envied Evie’s new life, however lilting and tenuous it was. Mine seemed to be straining. The day after Troia left, Michael had knocked on my bedroom door.

“Kid,” he said, sitting at the foot of my bed. “Troia says I need to look out for you.”

I turned around in my desk chair and looked at him. “That’s ridiculous,” I said. “You don’t have to worry about me.”

“Have you thought about talking to someone?” Michael asked. He looked solid and masculine against my flowered bedspread.

I didn’t answer.

“Troia thought you might be cutting yourself,” Michael said.
My cheeks burned. “She’s always had a vivid imagination.” I chipped at the antique wood of my desk. “Remember when she thought the lighthouse was falling down?”

“There were some beams loose,” Michael said. “Troia’s got an imagination, but she’s not always wrong.”

He leaned forward and I smelled the spice of his aftershave. It distracted me. I stared at the picture of a seagull that hung over my bed. I hated that picture. The gull had beady eyes. “Do you want to pad my wall?” I asked. “Take away my shoes so I can’t hang myself with the laces?”

“I don’t think you’re crazy,” Michael said. He stood up and looked over my head at the window.

“You’re getting sand on my floor,” I said. I brushed my bare foot along the carpet.

Michael walked over and put his hands on my desk, bent over to look me in the eye. His body radiated warmth. “Charlotte,” he said. I couldn’t focus. His eyes were too blue. “Are you cutting yourself?”

I walked away to the door. “Look, Michael, why don’t you think for yourself instead of doing Troia’s dirty work?”

“You didn’t answer me,” he said.

“I’m not going to.” I grabbed my sweater and left. Down at the pier a little boy threw crumbs into the air for a gathering flock of cawing gulls. He looked at me when
approached, then squealed and tossed another handful at the birds. I felt a twinge of irritation that he’d taken my thinking spot. I turned and walked back to the Inn.

~ ~ ~

Layers of clouds stacked the May sky, flat periwinkle into tufted gray, the sun filtering through in streaks. I came to the Marina to find a boat. I was in the right place. Lines clanked against masts and white hulls lined the Sound like a row of perching gulls. It smelled of fish. I stood to the side of the Marina store listening to the putter of an outboard motor before I went in.

The motor died. I walked up the wooden steps to the marina store. A bell jangled when I opened the door but the store was deserted. I walked around, thumbed through racks of brightly colored T-shirts with thrashing marlins superimposed over American flags. I thought of the ratty shirts my father would wear. One year he found a vibrant turquoise T-shirt in an abandoned campsite, *Schwarkopf Family Reunion* emblazoned across the front in bubbly font. He wore it for years, could never let anything go to waste.

“Can I help you?” A man spoke from the back of the store, a bald man with a clipped gray beard standing beside a line of fishing rods. He wore a denim shirt, jacket, and jeans.

I nodded. “I need a boat.”
He moved toward me, his head shiny under the fluorescent lights. “We got boats,” he said. “Anything in particular you’re looking for?”

I spun a rotating rack of sunglasses. “It’s for ashes.” My throat tightened. I swallowed. I should have been able to talk about it. I wasn’t. The room filled with the high-pitched hum of the lights.

The man gestured to the right side of the store where a chest-high desk lined the wall. “Richard can take care of you over there.”

I didn’t want Richard to take care of me, didn’t want to have to say it again. “Do you have a restroom?” I asked.

“Right around the corner, under the grouper,” he said.

My shoes squeaked on the shiny linoleum and I greeted the big orange fish mounted above the bathroom door as I went in. “Sorry about your luck,” I said to it. It stared back at me with a glassy eye and jutting lower jaw. I closed the bathroom door and rested my head against it, pulled away. It was cold and damp. I washed my hands and swished them under the air dryer. I sat down on the floor. When I went out the Weather Channel was broadcasting from a small television over the cash register. They were calling for abundant sunshine.

I walked over to the tall desk and rang the bell. It reverberated over the synthesized music that accompanied the forecast. I looked out the window at the boats swaying in the Sound.

“Yeah?” Richard was chewing grape bubble gum. He wore a baseball cap that covered his eyes.
“I need to arrange for a boat in July,” I said. I took a deep breath. Said it again.

“For an ash scattering.”

Richard flipped open a large green notebook. “Any particular day?” he asked.

“July fifteenth,” I said.

“Two months from today.” He skimmed a finger along the page.

Today was the fifteenth. My dad died on August fifteenth. Every fifteenth of every month since then had been unbearable. But today I forgot.

“It’s available. Should I put your name down?”

I nodded. “McConnell,” I said.

“You’d be surprised how many people want this to be their final resting place,” Richard said. “Once I arranged a boat for the ashes of a dog.” He popped his gum.


I walked to the door, flicking the little gold bell on my way out.

~ ~ ~

Sometimes the trick of pretending to move with strength and grace was that a bit of it actually seeped in to your real life. I felt brave after setting up the boat. I turned on the radio and drove up the island to see Evie. The realtor’s office where Evie worked was set up on stilts, like many houses on Hatteras. Graceful white pillars lined the front porch. The ceilings were high, the floors shiny and wooden. The whole building smelled
new and rich. I couldn’t remember the old office, which had been destroyed in Hurricane Isabel. Another thing not remembered today. Glossy brochures stacked carousels inside the door. Windsurfing. Kiteboarding. Hang gliding. I picked one up and tucked it in my pocket. *Bungee jump at Waterfall Park.* I thought my brother might like it.

Evie walked out from the private offices on the left and placed a book on the bookshelf tucked beneath the stairs. She hadn’t quite gotten the hang of business casual. She wore khaki pants and an old red long-sleeved T-shirt with a frayed neckline, her stomach and breasts swelling against it. Evie was still making do with the loosest clothes she could find in her closet. We hadn’t been maternity shopping yet. She saw me and walked over.

“Are you free for lunch?” I asked.

“I packed my lunch today,” Evie said. She stepped behind the curved receptionist’s desk and tapped at the computer keys. “I usually eat outside. I’ll share if you want to stay.”

“No, I don’t want to eat your food,” I said. “Besides, I’m getting paid now. I could take us both out.”

Evie rattled the computer mouse back and forth. “Stupid thing sticks,” she said. Her fingernails were polished a bright blue. “I don’t want to waste what I brought.”

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll stay with you while you eat.”

Evie reached beneath the desk and pulled out a brown bag. “Come on,” she said. I followed Evie to the back of the building. Offices bracketed the hallway and somewhere a phone rang. We went outside and down steep wooden stairs. The sky was
clearing. We walked across the scrubby grass to a grove of live oak trees clustered in the corner of the yard. They grew close together, limbs jutting out horizontally and low to the ground. Evie sat on a branch that bent a few inches from the dirt. Light speckled through the canopy of leaves, and with her lunch bag in her lap, Evie looked young and fragile.

“Don’t freak out,” Evie said, opening the bag. “But there are gravestones just behind that pampas grass.”

I parted the tall tufts of grass and peered forward. Three weathered gray stones slanted out of the ground. “You eat in a graveyard?”

“It’s just a little family plot,” Evie said. “When you live on an island there’s not much space for bodies.” She crinkled her nose.

“I guess it is kind of peaceful.” I let the grass close back together and sat on the ground. “In a morbid sort of way.”

Evie rummaged in her bag and pulled out a banana. She held it up against the sky. “I was thinking of this color for the baby’s room.”

“I like it,” I said.

Evie peeled the banana, broke it in half, and handed me part.

“You could do inner-banana color for the living room,” I said.

“My house will look like an ice-cream sundae.” Evie leaned back against the tree. Her stomach rounded out in front of her. She laid the banana peel on top of it.

“The baby’s room could have a border of sprinkles,” I said.
“Hell, the baby’s name is going to be Sprinkles at this point,” Evie said. “Do you know how often I have to pee? And it’s not even big yet.”

“Boy or girl, do you think?” I asked.

“Boy,” Evie said. She looked up at the green leaves waving in the wind.

“Stephen thinks it’s a girl. Then he gets mad because he wants a boy.” Evie took a sandwich out of the bag.

“Have you thought of names yet?” I asked. I raised my hand to decline Evie’s offered half sandwich.

“We decided not to tell people,” Evie said, brushing crumbs off her pant leg. “I told Mom one of my names and she made a face. We figure it’s our baby, we should be the ones picking the names.”

“Oh,” I said. I picked a leaf off a tree root that curved into the ground like a talon.

“Didn’t you always want Katherine for a girl?”

Evie wiped her mouth with a napkin with little blue teddy bears on it. “Yeah,” she said. “But Stephen’s got an aunt and a half-cousin named Katherine, so that’s out.”

“How about Lily?” I asked.

“We’re just really not going to talk about it,” Evie said. She pushed the napkin into the bag and crumpled it closed.

“We always used to talk about names for our kids,” I said.

Evie stood up. “That was when they were imaginary,” she said. “I should get back to work. We got a new listing today.”
I stood up too, knocking leaves off the backs of my legs. “Did you still want help painting this weekend? I can do it so you don’t have to be around the fumes.”

“Yeah, that’d be great,” Evie said. “Stephen gets home tomorrow and then he’ll be busy looking for a job, so I want to get it done.”

Evie and I walked across the lawn. I paused at the steps. “I think I’ll go around the side to the car,” I said.

“See you later, Meehonkey,” Evie said. She walked up the steps, feet splayed sideways, and disappeared inside.

~ ~ ~

Charlotte—

_Seriously. Enough with the not talking to me. Call me tonight._

Troia

~ ~ ~

It was a busy evening at the Inn, the microwave breaking and new guests arriving late. Nate wanted to go out. His hair had gotten longer and curled around his face and the back of his neck. He looked so sad when I told him I was busy I said I’d meet him on the pier when I got a break. After dinner was served and the kitchen cleaned, I walked down to the water.
The weather on Cape Hatteras never ceased to astonish me. Moments shifted form gray and shrouded to sheer blue. That evening, the clouds lifted and the sun set in swaths of pink and gold. Nate sat on one of the Adirondack chairs at the end of the dock, gazing out at the water. I thought he looked like an old sea captain.

“I should get you a pipe.” I said, sitting down in the chair beside him.

“Why?” Nate asked.

“So you look more like a salty old tar,” I said.

“That’s not all I am, you know.” Nate squinted at the sunset.

“I know,” I said. I saw a flutter of white out of the corner of my eye. An egret sailed into view and landed on one of the dock posts beside my chair. It tucked its head into a backwards C shape against the rise of its back.

We sat still and watched the bird and the sunset until I slapped at a mosquito and the egret flew off. The sky turned purple and finally I got up to go.

Nate stood up too. “Can you come with me?” he said. “I want to show you something.”

I looked back at the Inn’s slanting roofline and warm yellow windows. “I still have some work to finish,” I said.

“We could meet a little later,” Nate said.

I kissed him on the cheek, his five o’clock shadow prickling my lips. “Okay,” I said. “I’ll see you later.”
Nate’s car was a square old Isuzu Trooper with a stick shift and a lingering dampness. A black and white oval sticker clung to the bumper. It resembled the ones tourists stuck on their cars and SUVs proclaiming to have visited the OBX—Outer Banks, but Nate’s read BOI—Born On Island. Not many people could claim that anymore. We got in and started south on Highway Twelve. The road unfurled like ribbon in the moonlight, a luminescent strand between rows of tall pine trees.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

All Nate would say was, “You’ll see.”

We rode on. “I saw Evie today,” I said.

“Me too,” Nate said. He cracked the driver’s side window and cool wind streamed over my face. “I’ve been having breakfast with her before Captain Bob needs me to load up the charter boat for the day.” Nate glanced at me. “We’ll have enough money for a new buoyancy compensator soon.” Nate had started a small wreck diving venture with his friend Bob Jenkins. Between the perilous shoals off Hatteras and the German U-boats of World War II, they never lacked for shipwrecks.

We turned onto the twisting road that led to the National Seashore campground.

“I never thought the beach would get back to normal after that Nor’easter this winter,” I said.

Nate nodded, flicked his brights on. A rabbit scurried across the road. “Barrier islands are fragile, but they’re tough,” he said, turning right and steering the car into the tiny parking lot of the Billy Mitchell airport.
“What are we doing here?” I asked. The airport consisted of a small wooden
open-air building with a pay phone and radio tower, a skinny landing strip, and a patch of
tarmac behind a chain link fence.

Nate got out and opened the door for me. He took my hand and led me across the
pavement. A small flock of planes nestled on the tarmac, moonlight licking their wings.
Nate walked to one, reached up and touched the hull. “Someday,” he said, “she’s going
to be mine.”

“An airplane?” It was a stupid question. “I mean, right, an airplane.” I nodded
and walked around it like I knew what I was doing.

Nate followed me, kicking at the tires and touching the nose. “I figure I’ll get the
wreck diving up and running, then use the profit from that to finance a plane.”

I had to admit, flying did have a certain romance to it. “You’d have to take
lessons,” I said.

“Already started.” Nate’s smile was bright in the moonlight. “The way I see it,
you can always count on rich tourists.” Nate rocked back on his heels, hooking his
thumbs through his belt loops like I’d seen his father do. “This way I can ferry them
across air and sea.”

“It’s a good idea,” I said.

Nate put his hand on my cheek. It was rough and smelled faintly of motor oil.
“I’m not just screwing around on boats all day,” he said. “I’ve got a plan. For the
future.” He kissed me, pulled back. “It’s a whole other world from up there,” he said.

He kissed me again. I pulled away.
“What’s wrong?” Nate asked.

“What’s wrong?” I said. “Pilots are sexy.”

Nate moved closer, wrapping his arms around my waist. I stepped back and bumped my head on the belly of the airplane.

“Ouch.” I said into Nate’s neck.

Nate braced his hands against the plane and looked into my eyes. His intensity scared me. I ducked under his arm and stepped away. “We should get back,” I said.

“Your parents will wonder what we’re doing.”

“I’m not ready to go back,” Nate said. He bent his head and breathed out heavily. Then, “Goddammit.” He slapped his hands against the airplane. It rocked back and forth, groaning against its chains. “Can’t you see I’m doing this for you?”

“You’re buying a plane for me? That doesn’t make any sense.” I squinted out toward the dune line but it was too dark to see it.

Nate turned to me. “Michael says you need stability in your life right now. I’m trying to show you I can do that.” Nate looked up at the sky, rubbed his jaw. “I’m trying to say that—”

“Maybe I don’t want stability from you,” I said.

Nate crossed his arms. Uncrossed them. Took my hand. “I’m trying to say that I love you.”

My stomach dropped. “You do not,” I said. “You don’t even know me.” I strode across the lot towards the building, smacking the silver chain link fence on my way. Nate followed me.
“Why are you getting so upset?” he asked.

I spun around and faced him. I hit the fence again, satisfied by its clanky rattle.

“You know I’m not ready for this.”

“Then what have we been doing for the last four months?” Nate said. He gripped his fingers in the diamonds of the fence.

I swung away and ran up the steps of the building, searching my pockets for change. I picked up the pay phone and slammed it back down. The crickets paused and then started humming again. “Do you have a quarter?” I asked.

“Who are you calling?” Nate asked. He looked sad and confused under the flickering yellow lights.

“I’m calling Evie to come get me.” I held out my hand for a quarter.

“Charlotte, don’t do this,” Nate said. “Evie’ll be asleep by now anyway.”

I sighed, put my hand down, raised it to my face and rubbed my forehead. At that moment, standing there with Nate, I felt hopelessly alone. My eyes blurred and I turned away from Nate and the lights and walked to a small wooden bench.

Nate sat beside me. “It’s okay,” he said. Slowly, he put his arm around my shoulder.

I stiffened. “I like you,” I said. “I like getting to know you. Just don’t push love on me right now.”

Nate lifted his arm away, raised his eyebrows. “Sorry,” he said.

I bent myself in half over my knees. I could see grass waving through the cracks in the wooden plank floor. I sighed, sat up and faced him. “Don’t apologize,” I said.
Nate brushed my hair off my face. “I’m sorry I pushed you.”

I put my hand on his leg, squeezed the tight muscle. Nate started to bend towards me, stopped, leaned back on the bench. As much as it frightened me earlier to be close to him, I was then scared he’d move away.

Nate rested his arm on my shoulder again. I linked my fingers with his and rested back. I couldn’t think of anything to say.

“We can go slow,” Nate said.

“I’m not really sure how I feel about anything right now,” I said. Nate’s arm was pulling on my hair but I didn’t want to say so.

“I’m sorry I swore back there,” Nate said. “I shouldn’t have taken the Lord’s name in vain.”

“You really believe that, don’t you?” I asked.

Nate jiggled my hand back and forth in his. “Yeah,” he said. “Don’t you?”

“I don’t know,” I said. I watched the shadow of our hands move across the floor.

“My dad didn’t.”

“Really?” Nate stilled our hands.

“He was a scientist to the core,” I said. I shifted under Nate’s arm, tugging my hair loose.

“Doesn’t mean he couldn’t have faith,” Nate said.

“You think he was wrong?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t say wrong,” Nate said.
The building’s lights flickered and buzzed. I wiggled my hand loose from his.

“Let’s go home,” I said. Nate and I were quiet on the ride back, the moonlight showering over the road like melted silver.

~ ~ ~

C-to-the-harlot,

I’m getting a new surfboard for summer. Bribery from Mom for pulling my grades back up. I’m not above it. What else? Learning to play the guitar, fucking loud.

The thing is, I was pretty pissed off at you for leaving. I still am.

James
Chapter Nine

Early the next morning I stopped by Michael’s trailer on my way to Evie’s. He answered the door bare-chested wearing green plaid flannel shorts. He rumpled his hair and yawned.

“I did for a while,” I told him.

“Cut?”

I nodded.

Michael opened the screen door and motioned inward.

“I can’t stay long,” I said. His trailer was dark and narrow. Brown wood paneled walls tapered it further. I moved a pile of papers off a tan easy chair. The fabric scratched my arms when I sat. “I really don’t want to talk about it,” I said. “But I didn’t want to lie to you.”

“I did some research,” Michael said.

“I’m doing better now,” I said. The depth of aqua Michael’s eyes held in the dim room startled me. “I couldn’t feel anything right after.”

“From what I’ve read, it’s not an uncommon reaction to grief.” He stood up, went to his bedroom, came back pulling on a T-shirt.

I wanted him to understand. “I arranged a boat yesterday for the ash scattering. I feel like it’ll really be over after that.”

“Is that good or bad?” Michael asked.
“I don’t know,” I said. I looked around the trailer, my eyes adjusted to the faint light. Michael had posters of waves and water taped up on the walls. “Would you ever want to live here for good?” I asked.

Michael leaned forward, grasped his hands together in front of his knees. “I wonder about it sometimes,” he said. “Good spot for research, that’s for sure.”

“But pretty isolated,” I said. “I can’t imagine growing up here like Evie and Nate.” I looked at a poster of a tiny surfer poised on the tip edge of a surfboard, wave cresting over his head.

“I wonder if I would’ve learned to resent all this wind and water the way I can’t stand being closed up in Ohio hills,” Michael said.

“That’d be a shame,” I said. “Still, I’m not ready to go home.”

“Not even for a shopping mall?” Michael asked.

“Maybe for a mall,” I said. “If there was a sale.”

“Can’t resist a good sale,” Michael said.

I stood up, feeling lighter. “Evie’s waiting for me,” I said. “I’m painting today.” I tugged on the ratty bandana covering my head as evidence.

Michael walked me to the door. “Stop by any time, kid,” he said, pulling me into a quick tight hug. His skin warmed me.

“I will,” I said. I made sure my hips swayed a little as I walked down the trailer’s steps to my car.
Evie’s little white house nestled back from the road in a copse of loblolly pines. She was one of the few locals in the neighborhood; most of the other houses were tall pastel rentals or old gray-shingled squares perched on stilts. Gables peaked up over Evie’s screened-in porch and shallow steps led to the front door.

“It’s starting to feel like summer,” I called out as I walked into Evie’s kitchen and plunked a box of doughnuts on the table. It was a warm day and everything seemed pulled by the wind. Clouds tugged out in streaks across the sky and trees bent their branches sideways.

Evie’s kitchen sprawled across the right side of her house like a lazy cat. Appliances stuck out at odd angles over the counter top and cardboard boxes huddled in the corner near the door. Evie walked in and sat at the table. She picked out a jelly-filled. “Stephen’s out, so it’s just you and me,” she said. She raised the doughnut in a toast. “Here’s to paint,” she said.

“To fresh coats.” I grabbed a glazed and met it to Evie’s. “But you’re not painting.”

“It’s not like I’m going to lick the walls,” she said. “We’ll open the windows. It’ll be fine.” She licked red jelly off the side of her hand.

Evie stood up and we walked through the small living room to a side-by-side set of bedrooms. She gestured to the one on the left with her half-eaten doughnut. “I’ve been sleeping in here, but I think I’ll move my stuff,” Evie paused. “Our stuff, out to the other bedroom, since it gets the morning light. That way it won’t bug the baby.”
I went to the living room and sat on the floor beside a small tower of paint cans.

“I just saw Michael,” I said. “I could call him. I’m sure he’d come help.”

“Nate’s working all day?” Evie knelt down and passed me a screwdriver to pry off lids.

“He’s taking out charters until dinner,” I said. “I’ll go call Michael.”

Michael agreed to come over. I went back downstairs and found Evie standing swaybacked on a dresser, reaching up with the paintbrush where the wall met the ceiling. Her belly poked out between her jogging pants and T-shirt and a hospital mask covered her mouth and nose. She looked like a pregnant bandit.

“You getting ready to rob banks?” I asked.

Evie looked down at me and dripped paint on her shoe. It puddled like drops of buttercream. She tugged her mask down. “I stole it from the doctor yesterday,” Evie said. “She said I’d be okay to paint in it.”

“You didn’t tell me you had a doctor’s appointment,” I said. I picked up a brush and dabbed it in the paint tray, the fibers separating then glomming together. “I would’ve gone with you.”

Evie turned back to the wall. “It’s no big deal,” she said. “I have a sonogram in Nag’s Head on Tuesday if you want to go.”

Michael poked his head into the room, swung a paper sack forward like an offering. “Hey kids,” he said. “I brought bagels.”

Evie put down her brush and hunkered to her knees, then slid off the dresser. She gave Michael a hug and took the bag.
“Maybe you can convince her to stay away from the paint fumes,” I said. I globbed some paint at the wall.

“Nice technique there,” Michael said.

I handed him the brush. “Teach me, oh great one.”

He gave it back to me and closed his hand around my hand, stretched our arms up and down, stroking V shapes against the wall. “Like that,” Michael said. His face was close to mine.

Evie pulled down her mask. She looked at me. “Maybe I will go get some air,” she said.

~ ~ ~

That afternoon the doorbell rang. Aunt May walked in, leading a tiny brown Chihuahua on a leash.

“You got another Walter,” Evie exclaimed, putting her paintbrush down and walking over to pet the dog.

“Not yet,” Aunt May said. “This is Orville, the neighbor’s mutt. I’m going down to Ocracoke later today to fetch a new Walter. Figured puppiesitting this guy’d get me in the dog mood.”

“Are you getting another Yorkie?” I asked. Orville looked up from Evie to me and smiled, pink tongue poking out of his mouth.
Aunt May nodded. “Yep,” she said. “Evie’s coming with me. Paint smell ain’t good for that baby.”

“I told you,” I said to Evie.

Michael came in from the kitchen with glasses of iced tea. “More lovely ladies,” he said, kissing Aunt May’s concave cheek.

Aunt May patted Michael’s chest. “I like this one,” she said.

“When are you going to Ocracoke?” Evie asked. “I’ve got to finish these rooms.” She sat on the floor to play with the dog, waving her hand in fluttering motions around its head.

“I called up your dad,” Aunt May said. “He’s coming over. There ain’t no sense in you doing all this, especially when I seen that husband of yours out on a jet ski when I did my drive down the beach. That boy didn’t even wave, just turned back to the water like he knew he was caught doing something he shouldn’t have been.”

“I thought he was looking for a job,” Evie said softly. Orville stood up, licked her on the chin, grabbed her mask and tugged at it. Evie pushed him away.

“Let’s go outside,” I said. I was suddenly angry. I wanted to get Evie out of the paint smell. I didn’t want to be there when Mr. Austin arrived to help. I wanted to go find Stephen and push him off his jet-ski. I wanted my dad to come help me, and I felt guilty and juvenile for even letting that thought rise. We walked onto the porch and I sat on the railing. Mr. Austin’s truck rolled up and he stepped out, waving.

“Why don’t you go on to Ocracoke with Evie and May,” Michael said to me. He rested his hand on my back. “Mr. Austin and I can finish up here.”
“Yeah,” I said. I wanted to lean against his hand forever. I thought of Troia and sat up straight.

Mr. Austin walked up to the porch and wrapped Evie in a hug.

“I’ll take Orville for a walk before we leave,” I said, taking the leash from May before she could reply.

“We ain’t in that much of a hurry,” she shouted after me, but I was already down the street.

At the end of the block was a small pond lined with tall waving pampas grass. Orville sniffed around the edge and I watched my reflection. A warm breeze blew across my skin. It was breezy like that on the day my father died. He died at home, the sliding glass door of my parent’s bedroom open all that last night, breeze wafting against the sheet covering his body, blowing over the peaks of his cheekbones, his bald head. I tried to push it away, the rasped breathing, the open jaw. If I let it in, it would color my whole day. Orville and I walked down the street, turned toward the Sound. Mom had perched on a stool beside him, holding his hand. It was a sticky night, but the breeze was cool. It reminded me of the roll of the ocean, and I hoped my dad could hear it. A band of golden sunshine woke me in the morning, and the wind gusted through the green trees outside.

Orville barked and I turned to see Michael jogging down the street. The dog took the leash in his mouth and growled, shaking it back and forth. I walked toward Michael.

“You look sad,” Michael said.

“Sorry,” I said.

“It’s allowed.”
“I was thinking about my dad,” I said. “I feel like I should be over it by now.”

Michael stared across the highway at the dune line, crossed his arms. Orville shook the leash against his leg. “Do you ever just feel like running?” he asked.

“What do you mean? Running away?”

“No,” he said. “Just running. Like when we were kids.” He sprinted down the road.

I ran after him, Orville yapping at my heels. The wind on my face was cool and free. “It feels good,” I said. I turned around backwards so I could see Michael and tripped over something in the road, landed hard on my hands.

Michael ran to grab me but I was already on the ground. “That didn’t feel good,” he said, kneeling beside me. He took my hand and helped me up, held on and looked at me. “Talk to me instead, okay?”

I gave Michael the dog leash and brushed off my hands and my pants. Orville sat down on the pavement. The wind blew and he shivered, looking up at me with round eyes.

“You did know that Chihuahuas were bred to resemble babies, right?” Michael said. “So that rich ladies could carry them around.”

“That’s creepy as hell,” I said.

Michael and I took Orville and walked back to Evie’s house.
The ferry boat to Ocracoke ran from five a.m. until midnight every day, and every day the road through Hatteras village swelled a little more with traffic as summer approached. I pulled my painting bandana off my head and leaned out the window of Aunt May’s truck. We crossed the bridge over the canal that marked the center of the village, passed the grocery store and post office and library and giant taxidermied marlin that hung by the fire station. I leaned across Evie to talk to Aunt May. “Why aren’t we taking the Celtic?” I asked.

“Getting her painted,” Aunt May said. “Green to match the beach bus.”

Evie shifted the seatbelt around her waist. “I’m getting so fat,” she said.

“At least you stopped throwing up,” I said. “No way you’d be sitting in the middle seat a few months ago.” The truck bounced past the marina and a shopping plaza to the ferry terminal. We inched through the line of traffic and onto the ferry.

Aunt May waved out the window at the men directing cars onto the boat. “Going to go say hello to Jerry,” she said, hopping out of the car and walking over to one of the blue-vested men chucking wooden blocks under car tires. Aunt May knew or was related to most people on the island.

“I’m going to the bathroom,” Evie said.

I got out and stood by the railing, looked over at the ferry terminal and the green water. It was a warm spring afternoon with a soft breeze. Children filed out of cars, tearing up bread to throw at the gathering sea gulls and the ferry took off with a slow bump and a blare of its horn. I watched little rain clouds pucker across the horizon and went to the bathroom to find Evie. I knocked on the heavy door. “You okay?” I asked.
Evie cracked the door open. “Come on in,” she said.

“What’s wrong?” I closed the door. The room was tiny and dark and sloshed back and forth against the waves.

Evie looked in the mirror, scrunched up her nose at her reflection, turned to the side and smoothed a hand over her rounded stomach. “Nothing. I’m just so pregnant.”

Evie blew her nose and walked out onto the deck. I followed. “You and Michael looked cozy when you got back to my house,” she said.

I flushed. “We were just talking. And running.”

Evie looked at me hard. “You know Nate would do anything for you, right?”

“What do you know?” I said. I snaked through rows of cars to the front of the boat. “Let’s look at your track record,” I said under my breath. Evie followed me.

The wind blew strong up there and Evie shouted to be heard. “Anyone can see the way you look at him.”

I turned around to face her. “He understands me, that’s all.”

“Why?” Evie asked. “Because you both went to fancy schools before you dropped out and decided to slum it with a bunch of ignorant island hicks?”

I looked away from her, over the water. I walked back to the truck and shut myself out of the wind. Evie slammed in beside me. We sat listening to the grinding of the boat’s motor and the slap of the waves.

Evie turned on the radio, fiddled with the knob, turned it off. “I don’t think you think I’m stupid,” Evie said.

“Good. Because I don’t.”
Aunt May’s gray head bobbed along outside my window. She opened the driver’s side door and propped her foot on the running board. “Getting close to Ocracoke,” she said. “Can’t imagine riding this boat twice a day to get to school and back like those O’cocker kids do.” She studied me and Evie, her face pinched. “What’s wrong with you girls?” she asked.

“Nothing,” I said.

“Affairs de la coeur,” Evie said, faking a French accent. “If you must know.”

Aunt May climbed into the truck and settled her arms across the steering wheel. “I never married, but I sure had my share of love affairs in my life. I didn’t always look like this, you know.” She gestured to her caved in jaw line. “When I was your age I was real pretty.”

“And you got pregnant once,” Evie said. “You told me before.”

“That was Harvey. The mainlander,” Aunt May said. “I was going to tell you about his rival.” The boat geared down and slowed. Aunt May reached down to the floor. She brought up a pink flowered purse and rummaged through her wallet.

Aunt May slapped a photograph against the dashboard. I picked it up. A fair-haired man in a uniform looked back at me. I handed him to Evie.

“He looks like Stephen,” Evie said.

“He’d be Stephen’s great-uncle,” Aunt May said. “Tom Oden. Went to school together then he joined the service. He was a good man, Tom Oden.” Aunt May paused and for a moment I saw her as a young girl. “He’d take me bottle hunting. Could always
count on him. And then Harvey came to town one summer.” Her pronunciation of *town* rhymed with *came*.

“What’s bottle hunting?” I asked.

Aunt May glanced at me. “It’s hunting for bottles.”

“Like beach glass?” Evie asked.

“Like bottles,” Aunt May said. “You go out to abandoned houses and look for bottles. Medicine bottles, drink bottles, it doesn’t matter. But that ain’t the point. Point is, Harvey came along and made my heart beat fast. Couldn’t believe such a fancy thing would look twice at someone like me, but he did. More than twice, in fact.” The ferry boat docked and men walked around removing the wooden blocks. One of them waved at Aunt May but she didn’t notice. “So I took up with Harvey but at the same time didn’t tell Tom any different.” Aunt May started the truck and followed the other cars off the ferry. “Heard there’s a chowder cook-off tonight at Blackbeard’s Tavern.”

We drove onto Ocracoke and turned right. Ocracoke was known for being the place where the pirate Blackbeard was beheaded. It is told that he buried his gold somewhere in Ocracoke’s sand. The land was bare except for the dunes lining the beach and the reedy sea grass. The sky turned gray as the clouds thickened and spread out.

“Fine, I’ll ask,” Evie said. “What happened to Tom the bottle hunter after you hooked up with the mainlander?”

Aunt May pulled the truck over to the side of the road and got out. A tall split rail fence stretched in a large square along the side of the road. Behind it, three tan ponies swished their white tails. I got out to watch them. Evie stayed in the truck.
“Shame they had to fence in the wild ponies,” Aunt May said. Legend had it that the wild ponies of Ocracoke were descendents of Spanish stallions shipwrecked on the island many years ago. Another telling had the ponies coming onto Ocracoke from Sir Walter Raleigh’s settlement on Roanoke, miles and miles to the north. The Park Service fenced them in during the 1950s because they ate the newly planted sea oats. One of the ponies whinnied and shook its head.

“Did you love him?” I asked.

Aunt May stood with her hands in her pockets. “Which one?” she asked.

“Either,” I said.

“Yes,” Aunt May said.

I sighed. “What happened?”

“Same thing that always happens when you love two people at once. Someone got hurt.”

Evie got out of the truck and walked over to us. “What are you doing?” she asked. The wind blew her hair back from her face, blew her shirt against the round of her stomach.

“I remember the Boy Scouts used to catch them ponies, then float saddles onto them in the Sound,” Aunt May said. “Back when the world was wild.”

“I have to urinate,” Evie said.

Only Evie would say it like that. “Let’s go,” I said.

A fine rain misted down. “I’m not going to say I’m sorry,” Evie said. “I don’t want you to hurt Nate.” She looked out at the ponies. Their manes lifted in the breeze.
“Nate can handle himself,” Aunt May said.

“I’m not trying to hurt anyone,” I said.

“Of course you ain’t,” Aunt May said. She took my face in her hand. She smelled like Vicks VapoRub. “A man ain’t something worth fighting about. Now let’s go get Walter.”

I lifted my face to the cool rain for a moment, then followed them to the truck.

~ ~ ~

Charlotte—

I’ve been re-reading Wuthering Heights lately. It makes me think that we would have been like the Brontës if we were born in that time. You know, provided that we were actually sisters. And had any literary talent. And looked good in bonnets. But oh, Heathcliff. Le sigh.

Anyway, I’m so ready for the beach. I need to get away. Guess I’ll settle for the moors for now. I am going to a wedding this weekend, anyway. Why is it everyone I know getting married lately? It strains the imagination. Should I wear the blue dress, you think? Or go shopping for a new outfit? Ridiculous question.

Love you,

T.
Chapter Ten

I was surprised to get a phone call from Evie on Tuesday asking me to go to her sonogram with her. She hadn’t been following up on her promises to call me. We drove to Nag’s Head quietly. The summer traffic hadn’t yet hit and we made it to the doctor’s in under an hour. Stephen was looking for a job—for real this time.

Evie and I sat in the green waiting room. She started to draw her knee up to her chest, frowned, put it back down. “Can’t sit like that anymore,” she said.

A nurse called Evie’s name. We went into the dim, cool room. Evie undressed and put on a faded blue hospital gown printed with fleur-de-lys. She grinned, put her hand to her mouth like she was trying to stop it, then turned to me. “Check out my boobs,” Evie said. “They’re getting enormous.” She flashed me then sat on the table.

“Nice,” I said. I looked around the room. Fish swam through coral in pictures on the walls and a big monitor sat on a cart beside the bed.

The sonographer came in and squirted Evie’s stomach with jelly. “Cold,” Evie said, looking down as the sonographer rolled the wand over her belly button.

The monitor turned gray and swooshed with sound like a paintbrush on dry canvas. The gel on Evie’s stomach smelled rubbery. Blobs of color and light swam in a curve along the screen. Evie’s heartbeat, or maybe it was the baby’s, I couldn’t tell, rolled like ocean waves. The picture on the screen stabilized and I saw a white line of spine, a round head.

“It looks like a lava lamp,” Evie said.
The sonographer pointed to the screen. She had gold rings on every finger. “There are the baby’s hands.” She tapped at the keyboard, zoomed in. Two hands like tiny blossoms pressed against the top of Evie’s belly, curled back in.

“Wow,” I whispered.

Evie reached over and touched the screen. I wanted to cry.

“There are the legs,” the sonographer said. “See, they’re crossed.” The baby kicked up, flipped over. The image blurred. “Did you want to know the sex?”

Evie looked at me. “I shouldn’t,” she said. “My husband isn’t here.” She chewed on her lower lip.

“Can you feel it move?” I asked.

“Not yet,” Evie said. She turned to the sonographer. “Is it healthy?” she asked.

“Everything looks normal, as far as I can tell,” she said. “We’ll get the doctor to review the images in a minute, and then you can go.” The sonographer moved the wand around a few more times, shut the monitor off and wiped Evie’s stomach with a towel, smiled and left the room.

“That was incredible,” I said. “It was moving around so much.”

Evie looked down at her stomach. “I feel like a science experiment,” she said. “Maybe I should have found out the sex.”

“Does Stephen want to know?”

“I don’t know,” Evie said. “I don’t know if I want him to know.” Evie sat up, dark hair falling around her shoulders.

“Do you think Aunt May’s right?” I asked. “All men are pricks?”
Evie shrugged. “No more than anybody else, I guess. Nate’s not. Michael’s not either.”

“Maybe they’re just the good ones.”

“Maybe. My husband, on the other hand.” Evie raised her hand into the air.

“High probability of bad prickdom. You don’t know how lucky you are.”

“Are you kidding? I’m confused and crazy and right now I don’t want either of them,” I said.

“Liar.”

“Okay, fine. Maybe I want them both.”

“I thought so,” Evie said. She leaned back on her elbows. “If you screw over my brother I might have to hate you.”

“Are you going to leave Stephen?”

Evie breathed out, lay down the rest of the way. “This ceiling looks like it has coffee splattered all over it.”

We sat in silence.

“Hey, Charlotte,” Evie said.

“Yeah?”

“You want to see my rack again?”

~ ~ ~
That night, I had a dream. In it, I swam in the ocean, dove through clear cold breakers and floated on the waves. My dad bobbed beside me. His hair was dry, brown streaked with red. “Are you my favorite daughter?” he asked.

“I’m your only daughter,” I said.

He hugged me tight and the sun was bright in my eyes. We floated up over a wave. “Alley-oop,” he said as we went up.

We floated back. “Alley-down,” I said. My dad chucked me on the chin, winked and clacked his tongue, and swam away.