

THE WITCHES OF SILENT HARBOR
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CHAPTER ONE

The sky had been crystal clear since the first rays of the dawn, and the waves landed with hardly a whisper along the shoreline where families with red-checked beach blankets and seashell-patterned umbrellas dotted the narrow strip of beach. Two long jetties, built of boulders and concrete, made the boundaries of the beach and served as anchors to the floating docks that held fishing boats of all sizes. The jetties pointed like fingers at Drop Island, a small landmass covered with trees, which rose like the shadow of some enormous sea monster in the very middle of the harbor. On the beach, small children splashed in gentle lapping waves. Their mothers and fathers watched them from a comfortable distance, chatting and laughing with other beachgoers. In spite of the sweltering heat, it was a glorious day.

A little ways uphill from the shore, in the town center, a few cars circled lazily on the road that looped around the gazebo and large play park where the Silent Harbor Founders' Statue stood. Around the edge of the park, which was better known as the Emerald Oval, stood the Town Center Shoppes. This was a ring of two- and three-storied whitewashed buildings with wobbly-looking staircases that twisted up their sides, dangling over the narrow driveways that divided one from the next. People rented the small apartments in the upper levels of many of these buildings, but the ground levels were home to a kaleidoscope of colorful windowfronts. Tourists roamed the sidewalks, strolling from one shop to the next cafe, peering in at Mrs. Villanueva's flowers in Sherwood Florist and sniffing the scented candles and sage bundles for sale in Attwater Botanicals.

In the very middle of a long side of the Emerald Oval, Donald Knitt stepped out the front door of Fish 'N Beans Dry Goods, Seafood, & Coffee. He waved at Mrs. Villanueva, who was watering a rack of potted orchids in front of her store with a spray bottle, and headed for his large blue truck,

which was parked in the side alley. He kept his gaze on the ground and his hands in his pockets as he walked. He didn't get much more than a few paces when—

Plop—plop—plop.

Don stopped. Three enormous raindrops, the size of half-dollar coins, had just spattered on the sidewalk in front of his feet. He looked straight up into the sky, which was still bright blue and brilliantly clear, and frowned.

He did a slow turn on the spot, and as he did, a strange smell filled his nostrils—like saltwater, but not at all like a sea breeze. Even as that thought registered in his brain, the salty smell grew stronger, and took on a burnt and smoky edge, stinging his nose and making his eyes water. It was then that Don noticed the daylight changing. The trees in the park across the road began to bend and shake as a hot wind picked up, carrying with it that overpowering burnt-salt smell.

“Get inside!” Don rounded on Mrs. Villanueva, waving his arm in the direction of her shop. She began scrambling to collect a display of daisies that had just toppled over onto the sidewalk, and Don ran to her, seizing her elbows and helping her stand. “There's no time!”

People were running. The cars had stopped moving on the loop road around the Emerald Oval and adults in the park were dashing about, looking for their children. The awnings of the Town Center shops were snapping angrily in the high winds, straining at the metal frames that secured them to the storefronts. A pack of tourists had stopped on the sidewalk in front of Fish 'N Beans and was gazing upward, openmouthed. The sky was no longer clear. Enormous blackish-gray clouds were roiling, tumbling towards the center of town from the direction of the waterfront, and the light had taken on a distinct sickly, greenish tinge.

More rain began to fall, in enormous spatters, larger than any raindrops Don had ever seen—and he had been out on the harbor in some whoppers. Having hurried Mrs. Villanueva inside her own store, Don jogged over to the tourists, shielding his face with one arm.

“You all need to take cover!” he yelled over the roaring wind, pushing into the knot of people outside his door. “Get inside!”

None of them moved, and Don followed their gaze. The green-black clouds, now gathering into a furious, writhing knot above Port Hill, had started to take on a sinister shape: they were spiraling around each other, centered on a dark hole that was starting to extend a long, dark funnel downwards, like a finger reaching out to touch the hill’s peak.

Beside Don, a woman in red pedal-pushers and a white blouse took a step forward, squinting at the dark, round hole that was opening in the clouds like a gaping mouth. She pointed. “Is that...?”

“No, Bunny, they don’t get those out here—”

“Get inside!” Don bellowed.

The wind was louder than ever, now, and more rainwater—or seawater, picked up by the wind, Don thought, as he got a faceful and had to blink away the burn of salt—was hurtling through the air in all directions, splashing sideways across windowfronts, soaking the people on the street as they all began to run for cover. There was a scrum at the door of Fish ‘N Beans as everyone pushed and shoved their way inside. Yells echoed across the Emerald Oval as the cars parked along the street began to creak and sway in their spots, rattling in the tremendous gale.

Don, still out on the sidewalk, could see that the angry storm clouds were starting to flash with lightning. Before he could get inside, the winds kicked up by the tornado lifted one of Mrs. Villanueva’s orchid pots and smashed into the window of Fish ‘N Beans.

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At three-thirty in the afternoon on the first of August, the cordless phone in the little blue house on Mountaintop Avenue in Solstice Springs, California started to ring, and it did not stop.

Abby Bell had just gotten home from summer school, where she'd wound up because of her abysmal math grades. She was kneeling on the floor in her bedroom, pressed against the side of her bed as she sorted her collection and ate peanut butter straight from the jar. Abby never answered the phone when she was home alone. Nan—Abby's great-aunt, who also lived in the little blue house—always said that the only people either of them ever needed to talk to knew she worked at the Solstice Springs Library until four, anyway. So, she ignored the ringing phone and picked up her favorite piece of her collection: a rough, cream-colored stone about the size of Abby's palm, with tiger stripes of orange, black, and white.

This was the original piece of Abby's collection, which had started off as just a box of pretty rocks she found and saved on hers and Nan's trips to the beach. But in the last few years, it had grown to include other things as well: marbles and beads, seashells, scraps of colorful material, buttons, ribbons, and even a small geode, which she'd purchased on a school field trip to the Museum of Natural History, because it was the smallest in the bin, and she didn't think anyone else was ever going to want it. At least once a week (though it had been a little more often, lately), Abby took every single item out of their tin cookie box and arranged them, inspecting each one closely, and then laying them out in a specific pattern. She never knew exactly how these special patterns would turn out before she started them—only that when she finished, she could feel, as if they were living creatures, that the objects were telling her they were happy to be laid out that way. Abby had tried to explain this feeling to others before—but adults thought she was playing a game or pretending, and

her classmates at school told her she was crazy. She had given up trying after the boy who lived across the street told her that if she thought she could talk to garbage, she should go and live in a dumpster.

Today, something was wrong. The collection wanted to be arranged in a very confusing pattern—nothing seemed to want to be anywhere near each other, the odds and ends spread far across the quilt, as if they'd been dropped and scattered. That was when the phone started ringing for about the tenth time in the last half-hour. Frustrated, Abby finally put aside her peanut butter and answered it.

It was their neighbor, Mrs. Stone, who lived at the other end of Mountaintop Avenue and rented them their house. Mrs. Stone was watching the news, and wanted to know if Abby and Nan had seen the report. Before Abby could remind Mrs. Stone that they did not have a TV in the house, Nan came in the front door. When she saw Abby on the phone, Nan gave her a questioning look.

“It’s just Mrs. Stone,” said Abby. “She wants to know if you’ve seen the news.”

Nan put down her bag and keys and held out a hand for the phone. “Alice? Hi, it’s me. What’s wrong?”

Abby watched Nan frown as she listened to Mrs. Stone chatter. “What’s up?” Abby whispered, but Nan waved a hand at her, indicating that she should go back to her bedroom.

“Which channel is this?” Nan asked, when Mrs. Stone’s voice stopped. She paused for a reply. “Right. Right.” Nan walked slowly out of the kitchen, towards the back door, and sat down on the step, allowing the door to shut behind her. Abby followed, watching her through the window in the top half of the door. For a minute, she thought about picking up the other phone in Nan’s bedroom to listen in but she decided against it. First, there was the obvious reason: Nan was the only

parent Abby had, and her rules about listening to private conversations were as strict as those of anyone else's mother or father. Second, and most importantly, Nan always told her everything. She and Abby were always one hundred percent honest with each other, so when Nan hung up, she was sure to find out what was happening. Besides, the last time Mrs. Stone had called about something on television, it was because she'd thought a pet food company had stolen her fat gray cat. She had called the company and actually yelled at several important people in upper management before Nan had found the cat hiding in the linen closet in Mrs. Stone's house.

Abby walked back to her bedroom and frowned at her collection, still scattered disjointedly across the bedspread, and knelt down to resume work on it. She moved a few pieces around leisurely and scooped up a spoonful of peanut butter, popping it in her mouth like a lollipop. That was when the back door opened. A moment later, Nan appeared in Abby's open doorway and gave her a small smile.

"That's your jar, right?"

Abby nodded, swallowing and trying to unstick her tongue from her teeth. Nan had long ago given up trying to stop Abby from eating all the peanut butter in the house directly from the jar, and started buying and labeling separate jars for each of them—Nan loved peanut butter almost as much as Abby did, but didn't love finding every new jar she bought scooped clean within a day.

"What's up?" Abby asked, when she'd swallowed and put her spoon down. She grinned at Nan. "Did Mrs. Stone see Chuck on TV again?"

Nan, however, did not smile—and without knowing why, exactly, Abby felt her stomach sink. According to Mrs. Stone, Nan explained, a tornado had struck a small town in Massachusetts called

Silent Harbor, and it had done a lot of serious damage. Many people were hurt, and many more were missing.

“Silent Harbor,” Abby repeated. “Isn’t that where...?”

“That’s where we’re from,” Nan nodded. “That’s right. And we... well, we still have a lot of friends there.”

“Are they... okay?” Abby asked slowly. She didn’t point out that she knew nothing about any of Nan’s friends in Silent Harbor because it didn’t feel like a very nice thing to say at the moment. She felt sorry for the people who were hurt, and of course, a tornado sounded like a terrible thing to live through, but Abby had no memories of Silent Harbor at all, because she and Nan hadn’t lived there for more than eleven years.

“I’m not sure if they are or not,” Nan replied slowly. “The phones have been knocked out. I may start trying to get in touch with people, but...” She seemed to lose her train of thought, and stared at a spot over Abby’s shoulder for a minute. “What I’d really like to do right now is go over to Mrs. Stone’s and watch the news. Are you okay here by yourself?”

“I’ll come with you,” Abby said quickly. She could see how upset Nan was, and wanted to be helpful, though she wasn’t sure how. Nan smiled tensely, seeming to understand, and squeezed her hand.

They spent the rest of the evening at Mrs. Stone’s house, where Abby sat on the soft green carpet of the TV room and held Chuck on her lap—his favorite place to be whenever Abby came over. In one hand, she gripped her tiger-stripe stone, which felt almost as comforting as Chuck’s weight on her knees. Next to her, however, Nan looked strained and miserable as she watched the newscast.

Abby had only read one book on weather patterns and meteorology (borrowed from the Solstice Springs Library) before, but she knew that a tornado hitting a seaside town was a pretty unlikely event, and that seemed to be the main thing the reporter wanted to talk about. Even the people who lived in Silent Harbor who were interviewed on the news seemed unsure whether it had been a tornado or a hurricane.

“Not that there’s very much difference, when you’re talking about damage,” said Mrs. Stone knowledgeably, as she poured them lemonade in tall glasses. Abby wondered how she knew this, because Mrs. Stone had lived her whole life in southern California, where they had neither hurricanes nor tornados.

After a little while, Abby started to wonder if Nan was looking for something on the newscast, because she kept leaning forward and balancing on the edge of her seat whenever something moved in the background behind the reporter. Three times, it turned out to be unidentifiable people in windbreakers crossing the sidewalk, and once it was a newspaper blowing by in the wind. A minute later, the reporter said she was going to interview a member of the Town Council, and Nan jumped and turned up the volume on Mrs. Stone’s television. Then a round-faced man with dark hair and a mustache appeared beside the reporter, and Nan huffed and stood up to go and get ice cubes for her lemonade.

She didn’t return until his interview was done, and sat down quietly, absently putting a hand on Abby’s head. Abby had never seen Nan mesmerized by a television, let alone a news report. Normally, she liked to listen to music on the radio and sang loudly at all hours of the day and night, or sometimes she recited dramatic speeches from her favorite Shakespeare plays—but she was not the type to be “glued to the tube,” as she said. But when the broadcast began to repeat itself, Nan flipped

channels to find another station covering the storm, and stayed that way—quiet, distant, and strange—until all the news reports had finally moved on to another topic. That was when they said goodnight to Mrs. Stone and walked home in the gathering darkness. Nan didn't say a word all the way home, until they walked in the front door and heard the phone ringing again. And for the second time that day, Abby had a feeling that something very bad had happened.

Nan seemed to feel a change in the atmosphere as well, because she left her keys in the door and ran to pick up the phone in her bedroom, which was closer to the front door than the kitchen; Abby followed her and watched through the doorway as she answered.

"Hello?" Nan said, almost breathless. She paused. "Hello? Yes, this is she."

Abby frowned. Nan wouldn't talk to Mrs. Stone that way. But who else would be calling them at this hour?

Nan pressed her fingers against her free ear, as if it was hard to hear the person on the other end of the phone. Abby heard a crackling voice on the other end, but couldn't make out the words. Nan then did something very strange. She glanced at Abby, and seemed to hesitate a moment before answering. "Yes, that's—that's who I am."

"Nan," Abby mouthed, trying to get her attention.

The voice on the phone was speaking again. Nan turned away from Abby and said slowly, "Well, yes, I can—I can hold, but can't you just—hello?"

"Nan?" Abby asked. "Who is it?"

Nan stared down at the phone in her hand; both she and Abby could hear muffled, staticky electronic hold music playing from the earpiece. Suddenly, the music stopped and a man's voice crackled through the phone. "Mrs. Knitt?"

“Yes—just a minute, please,” Nan managed to say, sounding almost breathless. She took three steps to the door and looked directly at Abby. “Go to your room, sweet pea,” she said—and then she shut her door in Abby’s face.

Too stunned to speak, Abby stepped back. Nan had never, ever done anything like that to her before. Automatically, Abby turned and walked down the hall, her mind buzzing as though it were full of static too. When she got to her bedroom, she stopped and looked at her bed. Her collection was still scattered across the comforter. Something inside of her seemed to prickle, like goosebumps, but inside her chest. She could tell that the little odds and ends weren’t happy at being left that way, but she didn’t want to sit down and try to make a new pattern. Carefully, she swept the collection back into its gingerbread cookie tin, snapped on the lid, and placed it on her bookshelf.

Abby turned back to her bed. She had left her tiger-stripe stone lying on the comforter, and picked it up before she lay down on top of the blankets. Down the hall, she could hear Nan talking on the phone. Nan taking a private phone call wasn’t so strange, she told herself firmly—but a little voice in the back of her head disagreed with that. Nan was not acting like herself, not at all—she hadn’t even corrected the person on the phone who had called her “Mrs. Knitt.” She didn’t like to be called “Mrs.,” because she wasn’t married anymore—Abby had heard Nan correct people on that point for as long as she could remember.

Nan was kind of like Abby’s grandmother. She and her former husband (whom Abby knew was called Uncle Don, though she did not have any memories of him) had raised their nephew, Matthew, after Abby’s biological grandparents had died. Matthew had grown up in Silent Harbor alongside Nan’s daughter Sasha, and eventually married a woman named Elisabeth, and together, they had Abby. Then, when Abby was just a baby, Sasha, Matthew, and Elisabeth were all killed in

an accident on a boat in Silent Harbor, and Abby was left in Nan's care, as the only living family she had left in the world. That was when Nan had an enormous fight with her husband, because he had never liked Abby's mother in the first place, and Nan decided to take Abby and leave Silent Harbor. Nan never said much beyond this; she told Abby it was more important to look to the future, not dwell on the past, and Abby could tell how painful the subject was for her to talk about. The one thing that she always insisted Abby remember was that the two of them were a family, just like any other.

And when Abby was small, having a different kind of family hadn't seemed like such a big deal. After all, Nan didn't seem to mind it, and Nan was her favorite person in the entire world. But in Solstice Springs, where everyone Abby knew had families with two parents, big houses, nice cars, and weekly horseback riding lessons, they were certainly the odd people out. And as Abby had gotten older, she had started to notice things like how Nan avoided parent-teacher coffees at school, and the way she preferred to work alone at the Solstice Springs Library.

Nan was what the average person in Solstice Springs would consider extremely unusual—her laugh was big and filled a whole room, she could never stand still, and she had a habit of sticking things in the bun she usually wore in her hair: pens and pencils, sure, but occasionally colorful paperclips, flowers, and other odds and ends she found attractive. Most of the kids in school called her "Mrs. Knutt" behind her back, partly because they knew it annoyed Abby, but also because they really thought Nan was nuts. Once or twice in her life, however, when Nan had done something truly embarrassing (like volunteer for a school Halloween party and turn up with a guitar to teach Abby's fourth grade class her original 'Halloween carols,' which were just Christmas carols with

zombies and werewolves instead of angels and jingle bells), Abby had secretly wished for a ‘normal’ set of parents.

But even though Abby knew it wasn’t kind, knowing that Nan didn’t really fit into Solstice Springs made her feel slightly better about her own misfortune: she had lived in the same neighborhood and gone to the same school as most of the kids in her grade for her entire life, but Abby had never made a single friend in her almost-thirteen years on earth. She hadn’t even had a birthday party since she’d turned nine, just because she didn’t want to suffer the embarrassment of not having anyone show up again. It wasn’t one big problem, but lots of little ones that all added up to a universal, friendship-repelling truth: Abigail Elisabeth Bell was Weird with a capital W.

In kindergarten, she somehow taught the classroom’s pet rabbit to sit up on its back legs and wiggle its body like it was dancing. She didn’t know exactly how Mr. Bun had learned this from her, just that she’d stopped paying attention in class and was imagining a line of tap-dancing rabbits. When she pointed this out the class, the teacher sent her to the principal’s office because he said Abby must have given the rabbit food from her lunchbox, and the rest of the class said she was a bunny-killer—even though Mr. Bun was completely healthy and lived until they were all in fourth grade. In second grade, she cried in front of everyone at recess when a boy in her class stomped on a ladybug in front of her. Later that day, he had opened his pencil box, only to have a dozen ladybugs come zooming out right at his face. Abby’s teacher didn’t believe that she’d stolen the pencil box and put the bugs inside—which was lucky, because she hadn’t—but the rest of the class did. So, by the time the boy who had told her to go and live in a dumpster told everyone in fifth grade about her collection and the fact that she spoke to it, Abby was well-established as the Weirdo of Solstice Springs Elementary School.

Things had gotten slightly better last year in sixth grade, when she went to the big local junior high and got to change classrooms for every subject. At least then she could get through most of her classes by pretending to be invisible in a room full of kids who had gone to different schools and didn't know anything about her. But she had happened to share her math class with everyone who had ever been nastiest to her at Solstice Springs Elementary, so that by the middle of the school year, Abby felt like she couldn't even breathe without someone making a joke about her. She had started spending as many of her math periods as she could pretending to be sick in the nurse's office, or in the library, when the nurse didn't believe her and sent her back to class, where Ms. Hall would tell her to stop being so sensitive. Abby didn't mind that she had almost completely failed sixth grade math, because at least summer school was free of all of her least favorite people—students and teachers.

Abby kicked off her shoes and rolled onto her side, still on top of the blankets, still holding her tiger-stripe stone. There was no point getting ready for bed yet; she could still hear Nan's voice in the other room, and Nan would probably want to come in and explain about the mysterious phone call once she had hung up. While she waited, Abby tried to imagine how she would feel if she heard about a terrible tragedy that had befallen Solstice Springs, after she was all grown up and had moved somewhere far away from the hot suburb with its cookie-cutter houses. Unless Nan was one of the people in trouble, it was hard for Abby to imagine that she would be as upset as Nan clearly was about Silent Harbor.

The shadows on Abby's wall grew larger, and started to spin and twirl before her heavy-lidded eyes...

Her dream was a strange one, and somehow, Abby had a feeling that it was not the first time she'd dreamed it. She was walking alone along a forest path, littered with leaves that crunched under her feet. It was nighttime, but it was darker than any night Abby had ever been in.

Abby looked up to the sky. As if she'd wished it to be there, a sliver-thin moon now hung high over her head, partly blocked by clouds. A cold wind began to lift the leaves around her. At first, they shifted ever so slightly, with just a few rustles and whispers, but the wind picked up almost immediately, growing more and more in its power until Abby the wet leaves and chunks of loosened mud and rock were hurtling through the air, scratching, slapping at her face and arms, whirling like a tornado. She could barely keep her eyes open against the mess of leaves and dirt pelting at her, but she tried to, because in the darkness beyond the whirlwind, she could hear the sound of something enormous creeping past her, circling her—

Abby woke up in her own bed, her heart pounding and her whole body covered in sweat. She clapped her hand over her mouth. Had she screamed out loud, or just in the dream? She listened closely to the quiet outside her bedroom, feeling grateful for the warm glow of the lamp on her bedside table. If she had really screamed, Nan would come running in, she was sure—but Abby couldn't hear any noises coming from her bedroom. She checked the clock. She'd slept for almost an hour.

She wiped her face with both hands, trying to remember her dream, but couldn't, as if all the details were slipping away into the shadowy corners of her room. Something about a tornado, she knew that much. Clearly, she'd been thinking about Silent Harbor. But had someone said her name? Part of Abby felt certain that someone had called her name...

Feeling too shaky and nervous to sleep, Abby got up and changed into her pajamas before scrambling back into bed, where she drew her blankets tight around her. Then, though she didn't have a good reason why, she leaned over and grabbed her collection off the bookshelf, tucking her tiger-stripe stone into the tin box, and the box under her pillow; it just seemed like a better place for it. She knew her affection for tiny, abandoned objects didn't make her any less strange to her classmates, or even to Nan, sometimes, but she couldn't help it. These little things caught her eye and sparked her imagination, almost as if they spoke to her—and she thought that if she kept them close for long enough, they might turn out to be good luck charms.

CHAPTER TWO

The little red car bumped along an unevenly paved and patched country road. The only light for a mile in any direction came from the glow of the car's headlights; there were no streetlamps on this narrow lane as it twisted back and forth, surrounded on both sides by tall trees that blocked all but the smallest bit of moonlight. Inside the vehicle, the outlines of dials and buttons on the broken radio glowed acid green, and the carpets were littered with crumpled wrappers and empty fast food bags. There hadn't been very many stops on this road trip, even though it had taken full week. In that time Abby had seen places she'd never heard of before, let alone imagined herself staying.

She was not in a great mood about this trip in general, but Abby was at least grateful the car was still running, and they were not stranded somewhere on the side of the endless stretch of road they'd driven on to cross Wyoming, or at the King's Kastle Motel of King Flats, Nebraska.

At the moment, Abby was pretending to be asleep in the front seat, although that was getting difficult because both of her feet were starting to tingle painfully from being crossed beneath her. She did her best to ignore this. Her head was cradled in the shoulder strap of the seatbelt, and she kept her eyes open just enough to watch through the blur of her eyelashes as Nan took another sip of coffee from a paper cup. She was still pretty annoyed at Nan, so she hoped secretly that the coffee was too cold to taste good at all.

The morning after they had watched the evening newscast of the tornado in Silent Harbor, Abby had been woken up by a heavy weight sinking onto the mattress beside her. Half-asleep, she almost jumped out of her skin until she realized it was Nan, who was still in her work clothes from the day before. She looked pale, and her eyes were red. At once, alarm bells started going off in the back of Abby's brain.

“Morning,” she said slowly. Nan gave her a smile that somehow, didn’t look quite natural.

“What’s wrong?”

Nan sighed. “We need to talk.”

“About what?” Abby yawned into the back of her hand.

“Your uncle.”

Abby looked at Nan. “My what?”

“Your great-uncle, actually. Uncle Don.”

Abby shook her head, sure that she must have misheard. Nan never talked about her ex-husband unless Abby asked specifically about him, which she had not done since she’d first asked questions about her parents, years ago. It had bothered her greatly—more than she would ever admit—to hear Nan say that Uncle Don had not liked the idea of Abby’s parents marrying.

“Oh. Why do we need to talk about him?” she asked. Then, she remembered how the person on the phone had addressed Nan last night. Something inside her head clicked into place. “Wait—is that who called here last night? He still lives in Silent Harbor, right? Did he call you to tell you about the storm?”

Nan sighed. “Not exactly—”

“Then why’d he call?” Abby interrupted.

“He didn’t,” Nan said firmly.

Abby frowned. “I don’t get it.”

Nan’s resolute expression seemed to waver. “That phone call was from Silent Harbor, but it was the hospital.” Her voice was quiet, forced calm. Abby suddenly felt herself going very still, like she was sinking into concrete. A split second before she said it, Abby knew what Nan was going to say.

“Don was hurt, trying to help people during the storm. There was nothing they could do. He—
passed away.”

Abby looked down at her bedspread, a funny hollow feeling expanding in her stomach. “Oh.
That’s...”

But she didn’t know what else to say. There was a long silence, in which she felt Nan looking at
her. Then, Nan drew her into her arms and held her tight. Still, Abby didn’t know what to say. She
couldn’t look at Nan, and so gazed down intently at her hands, picking at a hangnail. Finally, she
mumbled, “Do you... um... what do you have to do now?”

Nan sniffled and cleared her throat. “Well... I’ve just been thinking about that.”

“About what?” Abby frowned, pulling back.

Nan looked up at the ceiling for a long moment. There were damp spots on her cheeks, and her
eyes were redder than before. Then her gaze moved around Abby’s bedroom, as if she were trying to
memorize every bit of it. Abby looked with her. There was the tangerine flowered wallpaper (Mrs.
Stone’s choice, not Abby’s, but they weren’t allowed to change things like that when it wasn’t their
house), her mismatched bookshelves of various heights, and the folding card table that served as a
desk. Most of the furniture in their house had been borrowed from Mrs. Stone, or picked up at yard
sales; Nan didn’t have lots of money to spend on new furniture.

“Nan?”

Nan looked at her again.

“What were you thinking about?” Abby prompted.

Nan squeezed her fingers and smiled. “You trust me?”

What does that mean? Abby had wondered.

But she hadn't had to wonder very long. When she came home from summer school that day, she walked into the house on Mountaintop Avenue to find her great-aunt digging around in the closet that held their few raggedy old suitcases.

"Nan?"

Nan straightened up. "Oh—good, you're back. Get packing, okay? We're going on a trip." She reached into the closet and produced a bright yellow duffle bag, which she pushed into Abby's hands.

Abby looked down at the duffle bag. "But—what? Nan?"

Nan was now studying a flowered carpetbag critically. She seemed to decide it was all right, and tossed it through her own open bedroom door. "Where did that old blue suitcase with the lock go?" she asked Abby.

Abby shook her head. "Uh, hello?"

"Hi, sweet pea. How was school?"

"Nan, you can't just say stuff like that—where are we going?"

"We're going on a trip," Nan said calmly, handing Abby a second duffle bag, this one bright green with blue stripes. "I said that already. Get moving."

"You can't—"

"I absolutely can, unless you've started paying the rent around here and didn't mention it?" Nan asked, still in that tone of deliberate calm, which was becoming unnerving to Abby. Abby shook her head. "That's what I thought. Come on, sweet pea, get going."

And again, she had turned abruptly and left Abby standing there in shock. Now becoming frustrated, Abby burst out, "Nan, seriously, you can't just—"

“Abigail, you know very well I never just do anything,” called Nan from her bedroom, where it sounded like she was opening drawers. “I give it a lot of careful thought first and then dive headfirst into it with a whole lot of enthusiasm.”

She was trying to make Abby laugh; Abby wasn't falling for it. She dropped the green bag and marched into Nan's bedroom. “Where are we going?”

“To Silent Harbor,” Nan said, folding a shirt. “For a few weeks. Maybe a month. Depends on how long it takes to get your uncle's affairs in order.”

“But—what about school? What about your job?”

“Don't worry. I'm handling all that.” Nan looked at her. “Make sure you pack all the clothes you can. I don't know what we'll have in the way of a washing machine. Not too many books, all right?”

“But—”

“Abby, please. I want to be on the road by the day after tomorrow.” Nan started pulling the hangers out of her closet and rolling up the clothes, stacking them in the carpetbag she'd chosen.

“We can discuss this when the packing is done.”

“That doesn't make any sense!” Abby retorted. “We can't discuss a decision you've already made!”

Nan shrugged. “Fair point. Get packing.”

They had left at dawn two days later and Abby had barely spoken to her great-aunt since, unless it was absolutely necessary. Nan didn't seem bothered by this; she was too absorbed in making lists, packing the car, and muttering to herself as she walked around the house. But all the stubbornness and silent treatment in the world hadn't stopped the old red car from starting its journey across the country.

Abby still didn't believe it was real. She'd packed up her collection and her favorite books into her old school backpack, she'd helped load up the car with hastily packed bags of clothing and toiletries, and she'd even waved goodbye to Mrs. Stone, who came to see them off as they pulled out of the driveway of the Mountaintop Avenue house, but it still didn't feel real. She would never admit it, but Abby could not fathom why she was so very set against this trip. It could have been the start of an adventure, like *Treasure Island*. Instead, Abby was dreading it without knowing exactly why, apart from the fact that she didn't like the way Nan was dropping everything all at once for Uncle Don, who had never once tried to contact them while he was alive.

The one thing that was a very small comfort to Abby was the idea that, if she returned late to the start of the school year in Solstice Springs, maybe people at school would be so sorry about what had happened, they would stop being so mean to her.

Now, after almost eight days of daily, almost non-stop driving, sleeping in grimy, cheap motels and eating in the car, Abby was getting well and truly sick of being on the road. Fortunately, it seemed like they were finally getting close to the end of the trip. Abby opened her eyes when the car gave an ominous, creaking rattle as they bounced over a set of train tracks, nearly invisible in the dark. Nan placed a hand on the dashboard above the radio.

"Sorry, sorry—not far now," she said to the car, with a reassuring pat.

Abby closed her eyes for a moment longer, before another bump made her bounce in her seat, and she lifted her head.

"Oh—sorry, sweetheart," Nan said, glancing sideways at her. "I didn't mean to wake you up."

Abby shook her head, looking around through eyes that itched and stung with tiredness. "Where are we?" she asked.

“Not far,” Nan told her, but Abby could hear the worry in her voice.

“We got off the highway ages ago,” Abby pointed out. “We aren’t there yet?”

“We’ll be there soon,” said Nan. “You can go back to sleep, if you want to.”

Abby didn’t answer. She leaned back against the vinyl seat, which was damp from her body heat. She rubbed both eyes with her fingertips and uncurled her long legs from under her on the seat, trying to stretch away the pins-and-needles tingling.

“I talked to Uncle Don’s friend at that rest stop. Told him we’d be there tonight.” Nan gave her a tense smile. She seemed to feel encouraged by the fact that Abby had started speaking to her again.

“He’s got a place all set for us. He’s excited to see you again.”

Abby doubted this. “I don’t remember anything about Silent Harbor,” she said for the umpteenth time. This had been her response every time Nan tried to bring up the subject. She looked over at her great-aunt, whose curly gray-and-brown hair was drawn back from her face in a messy knot; the motels they’d been staying in hadn’t had very good showers.

“You were so little when we lived there,” Nan agreed.

Abby shrugged one shoulder. Nan looked sideways at her again as they drove around a narrow corner that took them past a red barn with a sagging wood-shingled roof that looked about ready to cave in on itself. A moment later, it too vanished into the darkness. Abby moved her gaze to the glowing yellow dashes on the road, trying to track them with her eyes as they appeared in the faraway edge of the headlights’ glow, and then vanished under Nan’s side of the car.

“We’ll get a good night’s sleep tonight,” Nan said, “and then tomorrow, we’ll figure out the lay of the land. See what needs to be done about—” she broke off and took a hasty sip of coffee. “Maybe I’ll show you around town.”

Abby nodded, crossing her arms. Then she heard an exasperated huff.

“Abby.” Nan’s tone wasn’t sharp, but it made Abby sit up in her seat; suddenly, she could sense that Nan, too, was coming to the end of her patience. Nan took another gulp of coffee and glanced at her. “Sometimes, we have to do the difficult thing, because it’s also the right thing. We have to take our own desires—” she hesitated. “We have to understand that sometimes, our own comforts and desires can’t come first. Do you understand?”

Abby looked over at Nan, whose knuckles were white as she gripped the steering wheel, her gaze fixed ahead as she wove the car back and forth along the winding road.

“Nan,” Abby began.

“I’m not saying that to scare you, or to make you agree with me on everything. That’s not what I want,” Nan told her, her eyes strangely bright in the darkness, “but I’m asking you to trust me when I tell you that what I’m doing is for a good reason. Okay?”

“Nan,” Abby said again, and this time she pointed at the display of dials on the dashboard over the steering wheel, which was flickering.

“Oh, no, no,” Nan muttered, as the car started to sputter and shake. They had slowed to a crawl. She turned the wheel as far as she could to pull over, and the car crunched onto the gravel and rolled to a stop, letting out a sound like an exhausted sigh as the headlights flickered and went out.

“What happened?” Abby asked.

“Stay here,” said Nan, unbuckling her seatbelt and pulling a lever under the steering wheel that made the hood of the car pop open. She reached behind her seat and fished an emergency flashlight out of the kit from the first gas station they had passed outside of Solstice Springs, got out and went

around the front of the car. Abby watched her raise the hood and prop it open, then unbuckled her seatbelt and climbed out of the car, too.

Nan was hunched over the exposed engine, frowning as she pointed the light down at the dark mass of parts that Abby could feel radiating heat into the balmy late summer night air. The engine was making a soft, slow ticking noise that made it sound like it was relieved to not be running anymore. Nan glanced up when Abby came and stood beside her, but didn't tell her to get back in the car.

"It's just overheated," Nan told her, though she sounded nervous. "We'll let it cool off. Pass me a water bottle."

Abby went back to her side of the car and rummaged among the empty containers for a full water bottle. She came back to her aunt, who took it and poured its contents into a plastic container near the front of the engine.

"It'll start again, right?" she asked, as Nan put the hood down with a metallic thud. She didn't like the idea of being stranded out here until the next time someone came wandering along this dark, deserted road through the woods. They hadn't seen another car for miles.

"Of course it will," Nan said, leaning against the side of the car and switching off the flashlight. "It just needs some time."

"Can you turn that back on?" Abby asked at once.

Nan did, and set it on the hood of the car, so that it cast a little circle of light around them.

"Sorry," she said. "I forgot."

Abby moved next to her aunt, resting her arm on the side mirror. She was almost thirteen years old, so of course, she wasn't afraid of the dark—but she didn't really like it, either. There were just

too many things that could happen in the dark—too many things she couldn't predict. And, of course, there was her dream, which she hadn't even told Nan about yet.

She remembered more details of the tornado dream she'd first had in Solstice Springs, for the simple reason that she had dreamed it nearly every night since. Every time she did, she woke up with more memories—the smell of the woods, the crackle of the leaves, and, she thought, the echo of a voice whispering her name—and found herself unable to fall asleep again for a long time, if at all.

“Are you all right?” Nan asked, putting a hand on hers. Abby could see Nan's lined face, her worried brown eyes as she studied Abby over the top of her silver-framed glasses. Even though Nan was her father's aunt, most people did really believe she was Abby's mother. They were both tall and stockily built; they had the same long nose and round face, and wide-set brown eyes, although Abby's were a lighter hazel color. Nan's twin sister had been Abby's grandmother, and Nan often said that Abby looked like her. But where Nan's short, curly hair was light brown streaked with gray, and very fine, Abby's was long, wavy, and thick. It was dark brown, almost black, like her mother's, Nan had told her—and she kept it in a long braid down her back, because it wasn't as heavy that way.

“I'm fine,” Abby said, though she scooted closer to Nan, who wrapped an arm around her shoulders. She was wishing that she hadn't thought of her nightmare; suddenly, the trees on the sloping hillsides around them were looking a little too much like the ones she chased the stranger through in her dream. There were even some blown-about piles of leaves and few fallen limbs, probably from the storm. She looked down at her own knees, trying to block the trees even from the corners of her vision. Beside her, Nan was quiet. Abby stole a glance up at her aunt, whose free hand

had gone to the necklace she wore. It wasn't one Abby had seen her wear before they'd left California; the pendant on it was a plain gold ring.

"I'm sorry I haven't been talking to you," Abby said to the tops of her sneakers. "I didn't mean to be... I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

Nan laughed suddenly and hugged her. "Sweet pea, you're going to have to do better than that to hurt my feelings."

Abby rolled her eyes, but didn't let go of her. Eventually, Nan pulled back, and they looked each other in the eye for what felt like the first time in over a week. It was the longest fight they had ever had, and Abby felt a wave of relief that it was finally over.

"Sweet pea... look. I'll make you a deal. Give it two weeks, all right? Two weeks. If it's really, really bad... if there's nothing you can do to help me around here..." Nan hesitated. "I'll send you back to California while I finish up."

"Really?"

Nan sighed. "As long as I can convince Mrs. Stone to let you stay. I promise. Deal?"

She held out her hand for Abby to shake. After a moment, Abby took it. "Two weeks," she said.

A breeze picked up, making a skittering, slithering sound as it lifted the dead leaves along the side of the road. Then there came a noise like metal being bent, creaking and swaying in the wind. Abby looked back, thinking she'd left her car door open, until she saw something tall planted on the side of the road about a hundred feet back from where the car had finally stopped.

It was a large road sign, though from here, she could only see its back, which had no writing on it. Abby hadn't noticed the car pass it while she and Nan were talking. Releasing her hold on Nan, she took the flashlight and walked back down the road.

“Abby,” Nan called, “don’t go far. Are you listening?”

“I’m right here,” she called over her shoulder, keeping a firm grip on the flashlight. She walked quickly to the sign and faced its front side. It was white, with a black border and a decorative design of three six-pointed stars across the top.

**Now Entering
Silent Harbor
A Charming Community!
Est. 1632**

Abby’s flashlight made the white background of the sign glow in the dark, and she wondered how she could have missed it when they first drove past. Nan was walking towards her, and came to a stop by Abby’s side, gazing up at the sign.

“We’re closer than I thought,” she said. All of a sudden, Abby didn’t think she sounded very happy about it. Nan was frowning, like she was thinking about something. “This is the town line. Come on, let’s see if we can get the car going again.”

She tugged Abby’s hand and walked back to the car. As Abby opened her door, another breeze picked up, and she heard the leaves rustle and the sign behind them creak again. Then, slowly, Abby began to feel a little prickle along the back of her neck. She couldn’t identify it at first, but she soon began to feel as though something was coming towards them from the trees. Her eyes raked the darkness, her heart starting to beat faster—then the car’s engine roared to life and Abby jumped into her seat, slamming the car door and switching off the flashlight.

“There we go,” Nan said happily, as she shifted the gear and the car lurched forward; it seemed she hadn’t noticed anything strange at all.

Abby's heart was still hammering in her chest, and she was too frightened to look out the window again. She started to say something—and then changed her mind. She couldn't shake the feeling, however, that someone had been watching them from the woods.

She gripped the sides of her seat and stared down at her knees, trying to keep her breathing even while Nan drove them along the remainder of the winding country road. At long last, the car reached a stretch of road that wasn't nearly as wild-looking as it had been at the town line. The trees were farther back from the pavement, and every now and then, they passed a house with a fence, or a field where corn was growing, but hadn't gotten very tall yet. As they went along, the street appeared to branch off on both sides, leading to smaller lanes with rows of widely-spaced houses that Abby could barely make out in the gloom. As they passed these homes, clearly inhabited by real people, Abby began to feel silly for letting her imagination get the best of her. She had obviously worked herself up because of the darkness of the woods and her exhaustion from the long trip, tricked herself about the sighing wind, and that was all.

When they reached the pool of light cast by the first streetlamp, however, she sat forward, frowning.

“Oh, wow,” Nan said softly. The car slowed to a halt.

They were staring at an enormous tree trunk, downed on the sidewalk to the right of the car. The trees that lined the streets had been stripped of most of their leaves, while branches, bits of trash, and dirt were strewn across the curbs and road. The huge tree, which blocked a good thirty feet of sidewalk, was surrounded by a flimsy plastic mesh fence. In the darkness, Abby could see leaves, dirt, rocks, tree limbs, even things that looked like little bits of a house—roof shingles, a mailbox, a bent

screen door with a hole punched through it, half the roof of a doghouse, and a tire swing still connected to a branch that had snapped off a tree.

“The storm did this?” Abby asked. For reasons she couldn’t quite understand as she gazed at the wreckage, little stars of fear were prickling all along her skin again.

“I knew it was bad, but I had no idea.” Nan pressed her lips shut. She edged the car forward and pointed. The headlights illuminated more of the tree, which was partially blocking access to one of the little avenues off of this main road. Clearly, the residents had just been driving around it until the cleanup workers could attend to the tree. Nan’s expression was faraway and distracted. “This is where our house—I mean, Uncle Don’s house—is,” she said softly. She pointed at the street sign, which read Heliotrope Lane. They had pulled past the little side street.

“You need to back up, don’t you?” Abby asked.

“Hm—why?”

“Aren’t we going there?” Abby waved a hand at Heliotrope Lane.

Nan stared at her for a moment, apparently too lost in her own thoughts for a moment to respond. Finally, she seemed to hear the question and shook her head. “No, we’re—I thought maybe we should—”

She broke off, looking confused, and wrapped her hands around the steering wheel again, making a fuss of checking all her mirrors and putting on her turn signal on the deserted road. “We’re staying at the store, in the upstairs apartment.”

“Uncle Don’s store?”

Nan didn’t answer. She took her foot off the brake and the car moved, this time carrying them a little faster past the debris of the storm. They followed a curve in the road and as they did, an

enormous structure of wrought-iron loomed into view, arching gracefully across the road, like the topper of a set of gates—only there were no gates. The sight of it, like the mess from the storm, gave Abby an uneasy feeling. There were curling letters worked into the arch that she could make out, even against the dark sky: Silent Harbor. The iron sign seemed to creak as they passed beneath it—or perhaps that was just the wheezing of the car’s exhausted engine.

All the same, Abby kept an eye on the sign until it was out of sight—crossing the border it made between the outer edge of the town and the center gave her an uneasy feeling. Like the time she’d seen a strange, stray dog walking alone down their street in Solstice Springs, her instincts were telling her not to turn her back on it.

“This is the Emerald Oval,” said Nan, as they pulled onto a wide street that made a loop around a medium-sized park. Here, too, leaves and trees and stray objects littered the corners of the road, and a small tree was on its side by a curb. Abby saw cracked windshields, taped-up windows, and missing mirrors on the cars parked along the curbs. In the park, there was a white gazebo that had most of its roof torn off. The trees here, too, had lost a good number of their leaves, and the edges of the park were dotted with small mountains of broken pieces of wood, trash, and random objects like bicycle parts, parking meters, and even the shredded remains of a violet awning. Though the work clearly wasn’t done, the town center had evidently still received the most attention from whoever was organizing the storm cleanup.

Overall, Silent Harbor looked as though it was mostly made up of pale-colored wooden buildings that were very well taken care of when they weren’t scarred and missing pieces. Nan’s car rolled past darkened window fronts, many of which were cracked, or missing and replaced by plastic sheets. In the copper-colored pools of light cast by the streetlamps, Abby saw signs—some hanging crooked,

others gouged and damaged—for grocery stores, bookshops, clothing boutiques, restaurants, and coffee shops, all stacked on top of one another in tall, skinny buildings that sat very close together, with barely enough space for a car to park between them. A few streets veered off the center’s loop road; the larger ones had names like Museum Way and Port Hill Road, while the smaller ones were called Fairbank Circle and Wildes Avenue.

“I used to work there,” Nan said, slowing down to point along one of these little side streets. Not far down the block, Abby could see an enormous stone building with at least three stories. “That’s the library.”

Nan kept going on the loop road, eventually pulling the car up to the sidewalk with a faint squeal of the brakes. Abby climbed out of the car and looked up at the row of shops with dark windows. These buildings faced a long side of the Emerald Circle, or whatever Nan had called it.

“Get your bag,” Nan told her, coming around the front of the car with her own. She was digging in the bottom of it for something. Abby bent into the back seat and dragged out the tin box that held her collection, as well as the backpack she’d been using to carry overnight supplies for the motels, and shut the car door. Nan was already walking away, towards a shabby building with peeling white paint. The black lettering on the precariously dangling sign was barely legible: Fish ‘N Beans Seafood & Coffee. Another sign was taped in the cracked windowfront: OPEN FOR BUSINESS.

Abby stood back on the sidewalk to get a better look at the building. It was tall and skinny, with a second floor above the shop, where the curtains were drawn. It was also clearly not in the best shape, and she wasn’t sure that was all because of the storm.

Then Abby became aware of a faint tingling on the back of her neck—for the second time that night, she felt as though she were being watched. Her heart started to pound again, and she couldn't seem to get her voice working to call for Nan.

Now certain that there was something standing directly behind her, Abby forced her feet to start moving and, keeping her eyes focused on the ground, bolted after Nan, who had vanished around the side of Fish 'N Beans. She rounded the corner at high speed and nearly slammed into Nan, who was bent over at the foot of a set of rickety-looking wooden stairs that stuck out from the side of the building.

“Whoa, slow down. I have to find the keys,” said Nan, catching Abby from falling by flinging out an arm to catch her. She was looking underneath one of the six mismatched ceramic flowerpots (five of which had no plants in them) that adorned the sides of the three bottommost stairs. She put the flowerpot back down and pointed back in the direction of the car. “There's someone behind you, did you see?”

“What?!” Abby spun around.

A gray and brown cat stared at her intently from beneath a nearby mailbox. She could have laughed with relief.

“Oh... hi, kitty,” she said, squatting down and holding out her hand. “Hi there...”

The cat blinked at her and looked the other way. There was a jingling noise, and Abby looked back; Nan held up the rusty-looking ring of keys she'd just found underneath the green flowerpot.

“Up we go.”

“Up?” Abby joined her aunt and looked up at the stairs, which led to an exterior door on the second floor.

Nan patted her back. "Positive attitude, please."

"I'm positive I'm about to get fifty splinters in my hand," Abby muttered under her breath. She gingerly put her hand on the railing of the creaky old stairs and began to climb. The wooden steps were stronger than they looked. At the top, Abby stood back so that Nan could unlock the door by the yellow glow of the lamp above it.

Ushering Abby inside first, Nan reached for the switch on the wall and a light clicked on, illuminating a small, grubby half-kitchen that was separated from the main room by a high countertop. Abby saw an old television coated with dust, a worn leather chair, and a decaying blue fabric sofa that had a pile of blankets and a pillow draped over its arm. Along one wall were two doors, one of which stood open to reveal a dreary-looking bathroom; the other showed a small bedroom with a bare mattress on a frame.

Nan moved towards the couch, smiling as she exhaled a big breath, like this dismal little space was everything she could have hoped for them to see when they arrived. "Okay. I'll stay out here. You can sleep in the bedroom," she told Abby. She pointed at the bathroom door. "Go brush your teeth."

The bathroom was about half the size of a roomy closet, and while Abby disliked small spaces, she was even more creeped out by the very large spider that had made itself at home in the shower. She brushed her teeth, put on her pajamas, and dashed out to the living room, where Nan had made up a bed on the couch, but was nowhere to be found.

"I'm in here, sweet pea." Her voice came from the bedroom, and Abby followed it. Nan had put on her nightgown and turned off the overhead light, but she had made the bed in here as well and turned on a small lamp, so that the room wasn't totally dark. She smiled as Abby sat down on the

bed next to her. Nan pulled the elastic tie from the end of Abby's braid, letting her hair loose. Abby passed her the hairbrush, and Nan began combing—and then she started to hum.

Nan had the most beautiful singing voice Abby had ever heard. As she listened, she felt herself relax, like she'd been holding her breath but hadn't realized it. She'd heard this song almost every night of her whole life, as far back as she could remember; Nan used to tell her that she and Abby's grandmother had learned to sing it at school in Silent Harbor.

*“Six stars in the sky, as clear as can be,
Shine o'er a small town, at peace from the sea.
The water is clear, and the clouds dare not stay,
The sun hanging high o'er the wide-open bay.
And by night the stars come to dance with the moon:
Six stars in the sky sing the old charmer's tune.”*

When Nan stopped singing, Abby leaned back against her.

“Hm?” Nan rubbed Abby's shoulder. Abby didn't need to know Nan as well as she did to understand the question. What are you thinking about?

Abby blinked quickly, looking up at a small crack in the plaster ceiling. They hadn't done their bedtime routine since... Abby couldn't remember when. The night before they'd heard about the tornado, she was pretty sure. And now, for the first time, she felt she was starting to understand everything that had happened—that everything she had ever known was now thousands of miles away. The thought made her throat ache.

“That song doesn't make sense,” she mumbled, trying to get rid of the lump in her throat.

Nan chuckled, and Abby could feel her laugh vibrating in her chest. “Why not?”

Abby couldn't think of a good answer; the lump in her throat had gotten too big. When the question she really wanted to ask did come to her, she could barely unstick her voice to say it out loud.

“Nan... why are we here?” she asked.

Nan leaned down and kissed the top of her head. “You trust me?” she whispered. Abby frowned, but Nan didn’t wait for her to reply. “It’s going to be all right. I promise you,” Nan told her, smoothing her hair. “Now, get some sleep.”

And before Abby could ask her to be serious and answer the question, she was asleep, with her head in Nan’s lap.

CHAPTER THREE

Abby heard muffled voices first thing the next morning. As she lay in bed with her eyes shut, wondering what time it was, the voices become clearer—Nan’s cool, even tone, and a deeper voice, both coming from somewhere beyond the bedroom door. She opened her eyes. The bedroom was grayish-blue in the light from the curtained windows, so it couldn’t be too late in the morning. Abby checked the clock on the bedside table; it was almost eight o’clock. She started to roll over and go back to sleep, when she realized that the voices she heard were coming closer, as if they had moved into the living room.

“It was nice of you to come and check on us, Al,” said Nan.

Abby sat up, listening carefully.

“Least I could do. I really am sorry about...y’know,” said Al in a deep voice. There was a pause. “I got over here quick as I could, once the storm passed, but—”

“I understand,” said Nan. “Really. You were his best friend, I know you—you tried to help.”

Abby got up quietly and moved carefully towards the door. They were clearly talking about Uncle Don, but Abby hadn’t heard Nan sound so emotional since the very first morning after she’d gotten the news.

“It’s been a hell of a year around here,” said Al, lowering his voice. “Three people washed away in that flood, and that lightning storm back in April... now this. Wish we knew what was happening. Maybe we’d be able to do something about it.”

Abby frowned. What did that mean?

On the other side of the door, there was a long silence. “So... you all—you’re thinking this was...?” Whatever Nan was asking, she didn’t seem to be able to say it out loud. Abby felt a thrill of curiosity.

“Don’t know,” said Al heavily.

There was another long silence; Abby strained the ear she had pressed against the door, but neither Nan nor Al spoke again, until—

“Well, if you feel like bringing Abigail, I’m sure Egg would love to meet her,” said Al. Abby frowned. Was he speaking in code?

“Sure,” Nan replied. “I’ll let you know.”

The floorboards creaked, and Abby heard Al’s footfalls moving towards the door, which opened a second later. “Good to see you, Eve.”

“You too,” Nan replied.

It took Abby a moment to realize that “Eve” was Nan. She’d only ever heard other adults call her aunt by her given name, which was Evangeline. Abby herself hadn’t been able to pronounce “Great-Aunt Evangeline” when she was small, so “Nan” had been the best compromise, and it had stuck—but it was strange and unpleasant to hear this stranger call her Eve.

As Abby puzzled over this shred of conversation she’d heard, the bedroom door suddenly swung open, and Nan, her hair damp from the shower and already wearing her clothes for the day, stood over her. Abby didn’t have time to make up a reason why she was standing behind the door, in prime eavesdropping position. Nan gave a sharp sigh, casting her eyes up to the ceiling for a moment.

“Are you hungry?” her voice was clipped as she crossed her arms.

“Sorry,” Abby told her. “I didn’t...”

She hesitated at the look on Nan’s face; she’d been about to say that she didn’t mean to eavesdrop, which was a total and complete lie, and Nan knew it. Abby grimaced apologetically.

“I’ll make us something to eat, and then we’ll go out. Sound good?” Nan asked.

“Who was that?”

Nan paused for a moment in the act of opening a cupboard, but kept her tone casual. “A friend of Uncle Don’s. Mr. Attwater. But he’s going downstairs to his shop. If you’re curious about a private conversation, I’d rather you just asked. Eavesdroppers—”

“Never hear things they actually want to hear, I know,” Abby said quickly. “I’m sorry. So why did Mr. Attwater say he could’ve done something about the storm?”

Nan blinked. “What?”

“When he was talking about the tornado, he said if he knew what was happening, he could’ve done something about it,” said Abby. “What did he mean?”

For a minute, Nan looked distracted, frowning. Then she said slowly, “I think you misheard him. He meant that he wished there was more he could’ve done for Uncle Don, because they were really good friends.”

Abby frowned. This didn’t seem to make sense

“Are you hungry?” Nan asked.

“Uh...” Abby considered this. The last thing she remembered eating was a particularly flavorless grilled cheese and fries at a rest stop in upstate New York, last night; and as if it remembered with her, her stomach grumbled audibly.

Nan smiled. “I’ll take that as a yes. Get dressed and we’ll go downstairs.”

“What are we doing today?” Abby asked.

“Well,” said Nan, walking away towards the bathroom, “I need to go to the town hall, which is all the way up the long end of the Emerald Oval. I need to get some of Uncle Don’s paperwork going. But if you want to, we can take a walk around town and explore a little.”

“Or I could just stay here,” Abby offered.

Nan stopped and turned to give her a look that said, Nice try.

Abby sighed. “Or we could go exploring.” She tried to inject a little false enthusiasm into the end of the sentence, and Nan laughed.

“Fred said we could come downstairs anytime we wanted for breakfast. If you want to shower, I’ll be out of your way in a second,” said Nan, disappearing into the bathroom and closing the door behind her.

Abby remembered the spider in the shower last night and shuddered. “Who?” she asked Nan through the door.

“He works—worked with Uncle Don. He’s been running the store for us.” Nan called back. She emerged from the bathroom, her damp hair now pulled back from her face. “Come on. I’ll meet you down in the coffee shop.”

And she left.

Barely ten minutes later, Abby had decided to brave the shower, which was mercifully spider-free, and dressed speedily, her mind still going over and over the conversation she’d overheard. The more she thought about it, the more she wondered if she was being stupid—their words had been muffled, and she had been half-asleep. She might have just been imagining that Nan and Mr. Attwater were saying something suspicious—like with the feeling she’d had in the woods last night. Abby let herself

out of the apartment, trotting down the splintery wooden steps and pulling her backpack on as she went around to the front door they'd seen last night. As she passed a truck that had parked in the gap between their building and the one next door, the same stray cat from the night before slinked out from behind one of the tires, squinting at her curiously. He—Abby felt fairly sure it was a 'he'—had a friend with him this time, an orangey cat with a piece missing from her left ear. She waved at the cats, but kept moving quickly. The gray one sat down on the cool cement and the orange one meowed loudly at her; and although she didn't see it, they both continued to stare suspiciously at her.

With a tinkle of the bells on the red-painted door, Abby walked into Fish 'N Beans. For a moment, she forgot her curiosity about Nan and Mr. Attwater's conversation, because the bizarre little store she'd just entered looked as though it had been visited by its own very small tornado.

By the front door, there stood a small, glass-lidded freezer with pint containers of ice cream inside. Straight ahead, the only direction that Abby or anyone else entering the shop could go, led into a tangled maze of medium-height shelves that were crammed with an assortment of goods. Abby turned her head in all directions as she walked, taking everything in and wondering if one of these overloaded, sagging shelves was going to finally give up and crash down on top of her. She saw sealed jars of preserved fruit under a sign that read, "From Local Farms!"; a display of beeswax soaps and candles; an entire section devoted to some very suspicious-looking, creamy-brown lollipops that were hand-labeled "Mason's Best Maple Candy." Abby frowned and picked up a single leaf-shaped lollipop, thinking that the creamy khaki color alone was bizarre enough to prevent anyone from tasting it.

She wondered if the overflowing, messy arrangement of the shelves was normal, or if the storm and Uncle Don's death had been such a disruption that the employees had never really finished cleaning up—just thrown things back in the general area of where they belonged.

Abby put the candy back and continued along the warren of shelves. Emerging at last after several hairpin turns, she found herself in the midst of a collection of seriously mismatched tables and chairs. They were crowded together, scattered around the part of the shop that wasn't filled by the fish display counter, which took up most of the back wall.

Past the musty shelves, the entire shop smelled strongly of the ocean, mixed with the equally strong aroma of fresh coffee. Somehow, Abby was surprised to find, it wasn't a terrible combination. The menu, which was painted directly on the wall in chipped blue letters, advertised salmon and egg breakfast plates, crab cakes benedict, and lobster omelets. Abby's stomach squirmed; she'd never loved fish, but fish and eggs?

The fishy-smelling shop was empty, except for Nan, who was sitting at a red-painted wooden table with a banana sitting on it. She held a coffee mug a little too tightly in both hands. Abby could hear a man's voice coming from somewhere beyond the door; it sounded like he was giving instructions to someone.

Nan handed Abby the banana when she sat down. "Breakfast. The gas line to the stove is shut off again."

"Where is everybody?" Abby asked, looking around the empty cafe.

"End of the tourist season. Things slow down around here in August." Nan's eyes drifted around the shop.

Especially this year, Abby thought, remembering the little hills of storm debris that had been stacked up in the park across the street.

“Almost twelve years, this place looks the same,” Nan told her, breaking the silence. She seemed to be trying to keep her voice light. “I think I was probably the last person to freshen up the paint in here.”

Abby shifted a little on her blue plastic seat; the look on Nan’s face was making her uncomfortable. She seemed to be lost somewhere between happy and sad, curious and thoughtful. Abby suddenly remembered a vocabulary word she’d learned that described Nan’s expression perfectly: wistful.

Then, seeming to shake herself, Nan finished her coffee in a single gulp and held out her hand for Abby’s banana peel. She picked up her mug and the peel and took both behind the counter; Abby watched her go, wondering what she was thinking. Was it strange, being in this place where Uncle Don had spent every single day of their almost twelve years apart—where he had been working right up until the day he died? Actually, for all Abby knew, he had died here—the thought made her shiver, and she jumped off her plastic chair.

Nan came back to the table and picked up her purse, checking an orange folder Abby had seen sticking out of her bag for their entire trip. It had the initials D.E.K. written on the little tab. “All right. Let’s get going.” She smiled at Abby.

They made their way back out the maze of stuffed shelves to the front door. As Abby pushed it open, Nan said, “Careful!”

But it was too late—Abby had accidentally opened the door on a tall, thin, nervous-looking man with very thick glasses that made his eyes look like little specks, and graying brown hair, which was only on the sides of his head. He jumped sideways to avoid getting hit in the head with the door.

“I’m sorry!” Abby said immediately, as he danced out of their way.

“Whoop—sorry—” the man quickly righted himself and looked up at Nan. “Eve, I was just coming to tell you—the gas—”

“Fred’s handling it, Al, thank you,” said Nan, sounding suddenly brisk.

“Oh,” Mr. Attwater, blinked several times. “Oh—perfect—that’s great.”

Nan put a hand on Abby’s shoulder and started to steer her around him. “We’ll see you later, Al. Have a good one.”

“Wait,” said Mr. Attwater quickly. He stepped in front of Abby, smiling kindly at her. “You’re Abigail, right?”

“It’s Abby,” said Abby. Nan bumped her in the shoulder and gave her a look—be polite. Abby thought she deserved a medal for not rolling her eyes—nobody ever called her Abigail except Nan, when she was impatient. “I mean—it’s nice to meet you. I prefer to be called Abby.”

Mr. Attwater seized her hand and shook it happily. “My daughter prefers her nickname, too. She’s about your age—you ought to come over sometime! She’d love to meet you!”

“Oh,” said Abby. “Uh... sure. Thanks.”

Mr. Attwater opened his mouth like he was going to ask Abby another question, but Nan interrupted. “We’ve got to get going, Al. I need to get to Town Hall and the bank, and I’d like to get that stuff done today.”

Mr. Attwater's face fell; for a moment, he looked very sad. He addressed Abby again. "I was telling your aunt how sorry I am about Don. We were good friends. He taught me everything I know about running my business," he said, gesturing to his shopfront, a little ways down the sidewalk. Abby could see the sign from here: Attwater's Botanicals.

"Um... thanks," Abby said, in a small voice. She glanced uncomfortably at Nan.

"Thanks, Al. Have a nice day," said Nan, taking hold of Abby's shoulder and steering her away up the block.

"Bye, now!" called Mr. Attwater.

Abby waited to speak until she and Nan were farther away, and she had checked over her shoulder to see Mr. Attwater walking away from them, whistling to himself. "He's... kind of weird," she said to Nan.

"Be nice," Nan replied. "He means very well. He's the one that made sure the apartment was all ready for us. He and Uncle Don were best friends in high school."

"He's your age, but he's got a daughter my age?" Abby asked skeptically.

"Excuse you," Nan laughed, "what do you think you mean by my age?"

"Like... I don't know," Abby shrugged.

"For your information, he is a hundred and sixty-four years old, and I'm only a hundred and sixty-two," said Nan, in her best snobby librarian voice. Abby laughed, and so did she. "He just got married a little later on in life."

They walked on a little ways, until they reached a sign planted in the sidewalk that made Abby stop and look up. It was made up of four stacked blue and white rectangles, and each one had an arrow indicating the direction in which one could find the attraction listed: SILENT HARBOR

MARITIME MUSEUM, with an arrow that pointed straight ahead; HARBORFRONT and DROP ISLAND FERRY, with arrows indicating the next right turn, and SILENT HARBOR FOUNDERS' STATUE, with an arrow pointing directly to the left, into the Emerald Oval.

“Founders’ Statue,” Abby read out loud. Nan, who hadn’t noticed her stop walking, was a few paces ahead of her, looked back.

“What?” asked Nan, bewildered.

Abby pointed at the sign. “What’s a Founders’ Statue?”

Nan came back swiftly and looked at the sign, too. She read it silently for a moment before answering. “Oh... well, there’s a statue out there, in the middle of the park,” she said, with a gesture in the general direction of the Emerald Oval. “It shows the people that founded Silent Harbor. That’s a really common thing in New England—a lot of towns that were part of colonies have statues of the people that founded them.”

“Oh,” Abby said. She’d read some books about the early European colonies in the northeastern part of America, too—enough that she wasn’t so sure they necessarily should be celebrated with statues. She read the attraction sign again. “What’s Drop Island?” she asked Nan.

Nan was digging in her bag. “Hm? Oh—it’s an island, in the harbor—”

“I guessed that,” Abby muttered under her breath.

Nan had pulled out her orange folder, and checked inside for something. “Come on, sweet pea, we’ve got to get moving. Town Hall opens at 9:30.”

She continued down the block, and Abby followed her past stores that were just starting to open their doors. As they went further, and saw more of the park, Abby started to notice small teams of women and men in orange vests and yellow hard hats stamped with the letters SHTC. These teams

occupied the sidewalk, the road, and the park. They seemed to be the people in charge of piling the debris of the tornado into the tiny mountains Abby had seen last night, and then removing it. The nearest team they passed was scooping branches and leaves from the nearest debris pile into a barrel, while one woman dropped the broken-off top of a parking meter into a large barrel with a thud.

Abby followed Nan past a store with a lot of dried plants hanging in its cracked window front, a bookstore that was so jam-packed, it had displays on carts along the sidewalks, and a store that was missing its window completely and had temporarily replaced it with plywood, but clearly sold clothing, as a row of mannequins in flowered dresses stood outside the front door.

As she tore her gaze away from this strange combination of sights and sounds, a shout from nearby pulled Abby's attention, and she looked around to see a group of children in the park across the street. They were all about her own age, and they were sitting on the large metal jungle gym. There was a tall black boy, a girl who looked like she could be his twin sister, and a very short girl whose frizzy blonde hair was pulled on top of her hair in a ponytail that more closely resembled a dandelion puff. The short girl was doubled over with laughter. The twins, who were perched on top of the jungle gym, and the blonde girl, who had been in the process of climbing up beside them, were all yelling at a freckled boy with short brown hair to get down from the monkey bars, where he was hanging upside down by his knees and had gotten himself stuck.

"Charlie, you idiot!" yelled the girl twin, as the others howled with laughter at Charlie's expense. Abby couldn't see the boy's face from here; he was fighting too hard to right himself, and he, too, seemed to be breathless with laughing at his own predicament, which was not helping. She was so absorbed in watching them that she was surprised when she realized Nan had stopped walking too, and was now talking to her.

“How about it?”

“How about what?” Abby asked.

“We’ll go to Town Hall and see about what I need, then we can go to the bank, and then maybe we’ll pick up something for lunch and go down to the beach,” Nan smiled. “Maybe you can find some new things for the collection.”

“Uh-huh,” Abby agreed, still only half-listening as she watched the two boys and two girls running off along the park.

But Nan’s idea was swiftly derailed. The appointment at Town Hall ended up taking twice as long as it should have when she ran into an old friend working in the office. Then, it turned out that Nan was missing several key pieces of paperwork, and so she and her friend spent almost two hours composing lists of the documentation Nan needed to track down—and catching up on each other’s news as they waited on hold with the bank and a lawyer and other important people who could answer Nan’s questions about Uncle Don.

Abby spent that time sitting on a hard bench in the lobby. She flipped through the books she’d brought in her backpack, but she’d already read them, and it was too hot to concentrate. She stared longingly at the doors to the front steps of Town Hall. Through the tinted glass, she could see the trees in the park rustling and waving in a breeze. Sneaking a peek at the office, where she could still hear Nan asking questions, Abby got up and let herself out into the sunshine.

It was still hot, but at least the breeze, which smelled like something flowery and light, made it so that she could breathe. Abby hitched her backpack on her shoulder and spotted a shaded bench in the park across the street. It faced Town Hall, and Nan would be able to see her as soon as she came

outside. Abby checked both ways and crossed the empty street—the little road that looped around the whole park, the one that she and Nan had driven on last night.

She settled onto the bench, and, deciding it was better than nothing, picked out one of the books in her bag to read again. It was then that she became aware of someone watching her. Abby looked up.

“What are you reading?”

It was the blonde girl with the dandelion-like hair, and she was frowning at Abby curiously, her brown eyes narrowed. Up close, Abby saw she had a very round face with cheeks like shiny red apples. She looked like a painting of a baby angel, like in an art book Abby had looked at once—except that instead of a vacant smile, this girl wore a curious, skeptical frown.

Abby held out the book so the girl could see. She examined the title and handed it back, then smiled. “Treasure Island. Never read it,” she said cheerfully. She stuck out a small hand, which Abby stared at for a moment.

Apparently put off by Abby’s hesitation, the girl dropped her hand. Her frown became less curious, and more suspicious. “What’s your problem?”

“I don’t have a problem,” Abby began, hastily putting aside her book and holding out her own hand. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“Are you a tourist?” The girl’s sharp brown eyes were scanning Abby now, up and down. It made her feel uncomfortably like she was being x-rayed for weaknesses. “Why are you hanging out here?”

“No,” she replied, a little more defensively than she perhaps meant. To her embarrassment, she felt herself turning red. She seized *Treasure Island* and opened it to a random page, forcing herself to stare at it as she felt heat creeping up her neck and face.

“You’re kinda weird, you know that?” the strange girl asked.

Abby bristled, wanting to retort something—but nothing came to her. She closed her mouth and lowered her head again, gripping the cover of her book so tightly its corners dug into her fingers.

“Do you talk at all?” Now the girl was laughing. Then, from a short ways away, someone called her.

“Thora, let’s go! We’re going to be late!”

Thora’s three friends—the twins, and their friend Charlie—were standing a little ways off.

“Just a minute!” Thora bellowed back at the girl, who had called to her. Abby suddenly had a feeling that Thora was a little more intense than her small size, round face, and pink cheeks suggested. She turned and regarded Abby shrewdly again, and then at the Town Hall across the street. “So, what are you doing here?”

Abby stiffened, shrugging uncomfortably.

Thora snorted as the girl twin called her name again, now approaching the spot where Abby sat on the bench.

“What are you doing?” the twin asked, waving her arms irritably. “Who’s this?” she added, with a half-second, unimpressed glance at Abby.

“Tourist,” Thora smirked. “Say hi.”

The girl twin glanced at Abby again. “Let’s get going, come on.”

“Nice to meet you too,” Abby muttered under her breath, not daring to look up from her book.

“What’d you say?” she snapped.

Startled, Abby shrugged quickly.

“Who’s this?” Now the two boys had joined them, closing a loose sort of circle around Abby’s bench. She closed her book, casting a nervous glance at the front door of the school, hoping Nan would appear soon.

“Don’t know, she doesn’t talk,” Thora said brightly.

“Weird,” grinned the boy twin, crossing his arms.

She shifted nervously in her seat. “I talk. I’m Ab—”

“Tourist Girl Ab, that’s her name,” Thora announced to the group; the other three laughed, and Abby flushed. “I’m Meredith. That’s Charlie,” she said, pointing at the boy twin. Then she pointed at the other boy. “That’s Gideon. And this is Thora.” She pointed at the girl twin.

Abby hesitated, confused. “I thought... you were Thora,” she said, pointing at the blonde girl. Then she turned to the freckled boy. “And I heard them call you Charlie.”

The boy, who had been examining a crack in the sidewalk, raised his eyebrows. “Creep-y,” he said in a sing-song way, sticking his hands in his pockets.

“What, were you spying on us?” laughed the girl twin—Abby thought she must be Meredith, but she couldn’t be sure. “Super creepy!”

Now Abby felt a hot surge of irritation in the pit of her stomach. “No, I wasn’t—I just noticed you earlier and I overheard from across the street—”

“Wow, you’re such a stalker!” exclaimed Meredith. All four of them laughed even harder, and Abby turned even darker red with embarrassment.

A car horn honked, and they all turned. A woman with dark skin and long braids like Meredith’s was waving at the kids from an idling car by the sidewalk.

“See you, Abe!” Thora called, as she and her friends strolled off towards their ride.

Abby scowled. "That's not my name," she muttered through her teeth. "Stupid..."

The car pulled away, with all the strange kids inside. Abby watched it go, turning just in time to see Nan emerging from the Town Hall, a broad smile on her face that indicated she was in a better mood than she'd been for weeks. The sight made Abby feel more annoyed than ever. Nan put up a hand to shield her face from the sun, watching the car pass. When it had, she crossed the street and joined Abby. "Sorry about that, sweet pea. I think we got everything in order, but I've got some homework to do."

Abby dropped Treasure Island into her backpack and shouldered it, fiddling with the strap. "It's fine. Can we go back? I'm hot."

Nan's face fell slightly. "I didn't mean to hold things up. I had no idea I needed all this stuff."

"Whatever," said Abby, trying not to sound too annoyed. "It's fine, I get it."

"We can still go to the beach."

"I'd rather just go back to the apartment," Abby insisted. "We're not tourists."

Nan was quiet for a minute. "Good point."

Abby started walking, and Nan followed her. After a few minutes, while Abby stared at her feet, Nan spoke again. "But how about just one more stop? Not the bank," she added, at the look on Abby's face. "Somewhere you'll like."

"Do we have to?" Abby asked. Nan reached over and tugged her braid gently, but Abby jerked her head away. "Don't."

Nan held up two hands in mock defensiveness. "Sorry, ma'am," she replied, in a tone that just made Abby more aggravated. "But I promise it'll be quick, and it's on our way back if we walk around the park."

Abby sighed. "Fine."

CHAPTER FOUR

Nan seemed to realize Abby wasn't in a good mood, so she gave Abby a little more room as they started to walk. "I promise you'll like it. It's not far," she said.

"I already said it was fine," Abby replied, trying to get a handle on her irritation, reminding herself that Nan hadn't really done anything wrong—Thora and her stupid friends had. Abby was used to kids in Solstice Springs being rude to her, but she hadn't even done anything to attract attention from these ones. She and Nan walked in silence for a bit, side by side. The park was still full of small groups of adults and older teenagers in the orange vests stamped with SHTC. Some were filling garbage sacks with the storm debris they'd collected into large piles; others were loading the sacks into trucks. Abby watched as two men lifted a bent bicycle rack into a truck bed.

As they walked, Abby saw another building across the road that looked similar the town hall in design, though it took up more room, and was not as tall—it looked like a school. As they passed, several volunteers in vests came out carrying heavy-looking trash barrels.

Finally, Abby looked back at her aunt. "Is that where you and your friend at Town Hall went to school?"

"I did," said Nan. "Helen went to Silent Harbor Academy."

"What's that?"

"It was a boarding school up on Port Hill," Nan replied. "That's a neighborhood up...that road," she looked around and pointed at the nearest side street off the main town circle. "It's full of some gorgeous old houses. Some of them have been there since the town was founded."

"A boarding school? People lived there?"

Nan nodded. “Most of the students, and quite a few of the teachers, I think. I don’t know, I never actually went up there when it was operating.”

“It’s closed?” Abby asked. “Because of the tornado?”

“Oh, no,” Nan shook her head. “No, apparently the tornado came around the other side of Port Hill and missed that neighborhood completely. But the Academy had a fire, years ago, and had to close down. I think they just didn’t have the money to rebuild. Oh—watch your step, sweet pea. Left turn here.”

This stretch of sidewalk along the park had clearly been used as a dumping area for the bags and piles of dirt, branches, and leaves that had been cleared from the park by the orange-vested workers.

Abby and Nan rounded a corner, and immediately had to sidestep a mountain of stuffed bags. This street, like the neighborhood they’d driven through last night—Nan’s old neighborhood, Abby thought—clearly hadn’t received as much cleanup attention. They picked their way along a little strip of sidewalk strewn with roof shingles, broken glass, dirt, and broken branches. A mailbox with its flag broken off lay in a nest of pine needles and leaves that clogged the edges of the street and the storm drains. One telephone pole tilted ominously over the road, marked off by an orange plastic fence.

“How long is it going to take to clean all this up?” Abby asked, eyeing the telephone pole warily.

“Well, they’ve been working at it as much as they can with a team of volunteers,” Nan replied. “I asked Helen. She said it took almost a week just to survey everything—to figure out what all the damage was, and what would have to be done about it. The Town Council is hoping cleanup will be done and reconstruction’s underway, maybe finished, before it gets too snowy. November, maybe.”

Nan pointed ahead suddenly. “Here we go.”

They were approaching an imposing building of gray stone, which Abby realized was the one Nan had pointed out last night. It was three stories tall, with a dark roof and two short chimneys on the far ends. Abby counted fourteen rectangular white-edged windows in three rows: five on top, which stuck out of little peaked sections of the roof (which Abby was pretty sure were called gables), five on the second floor, and two on either side of the front door. A large white doorway with a fancy top piece shaped like an open book framed a narrow black door. Below this top piece were painted black letters spelling out “Silent Harbor Library.”

An uprooted tree had fallen across the lawn, but had been dragged to one side, and someone had raked all of the scattered junk up into bags, which were gathered around it.

“Come on, Abby,” Nan called, already halfway up the flagstone path. She turned back and gave her a knowing sort of smile. A sudden rush of affection for Nan wiped away much of her gloomy mood; Abby smiled back and followed her. Nan wrapped an arm around her shoulders as they pushed the front door open together. “Wait till you see the inside.”

Nan let Abby walk in first. There was a gloomy little entrance room that almost looked like it could have belonged in a very, very old mansion. A rickety staircase, roped off with a dusty DO NOT ENTER sign, led upwards to spaces unseen.

“Keep going,” said Nan’s voice from behind her. “Follow that light up ahead.”

Abby could see through a set of long lace curtains to the brightly lit doorway of the next room. The thick layer of green carpet muffled her footsteps. On she went, until she was suddenly hit by the wonderful, familiar smell of books. Old books, new books, the special dust-smell that only books seemed to collect—she couldn’t stop her smile as they emerged into an enormous, round room.

Whatever this building had been before it was a library—and it looked like it could have been the largest mansion in the entire town—that was nothing compared to how grand it was now, in Abby’s opinion. She and Nan stood at the bottom of a well; overhead were two balconies, perfectly round and stacked one on top of the other.

High above, where Abby thought there ought to have been a ceiling hung with chandeliers, there was now a glass roof, dotted with low-hanging fans that rotated their umbrella-like blades slowly, keeping the space cool. On the ground floor there were shelves ten feet high, fitted with ladders that slid on brass rails. The shelves fanned out from the very center of the room like the iris of an eye. In the center, the pupil of the eye, was an arrangement of tables with green-shaded lamps, old wooden swivel chairs, and squashy reading chairs with fraying upholstery. Enormous bouquets of roses and snapdragons in every color—yellow, white, pink, orange, red—stood in crystal vases on every available surface, giving the entire room the atmosphere of a greenhouse (where books were grown, too.)

But the thing that was most stunning to Abby, who until now had spent most of her afternoons with only Nan for company in the dimly empty library of Solstice Springs, was the sheer number of people in the library. There were people everywhere.

Teenagers older than Abby sat hunched over textbooks at the tables. Small children and their parents squeezed into armchairs, looking at picture books together. An old woman was reading a story to a small circle of little children. Two men with identical long, white beards and bald heads sat across from one another at a table with a teetering pile of books, each of them making notes in composition books with their fountain pens. Abby could hear even more voices coming from the upper levels. This was like no library Abby had ever seen.

She turned to Nan, beaming, and whispered, “This is awesome!”

“You’re right, I am,” Nan whispered back, and Abby rolled her eyes.

“Eve?”

Both Abby and Nan turned to see a small, round woman with white hair, older than Nan, who had stopped short in an aisle with a wheeled cart full of books. Her cherry-red cardigan matched her patent-leather shoes and the flowers patterned daintily on her blouse. Abby knew instantly, somehow, that this was the person who brought in and arranged the snapdragons. Her fingernails were long and painted the same cherry-red as her sweater, and she had an assortment of heavy gold jewelry on her wrists and neck. She wore bright red cat-eye glasses on a beaded chain around her neck, and at the moment, she looked like she had never been more surprised to see anything in her life.

“Carolyn!”

Nan practically ran at the woman and enveloped her in a hug; hesitantly, Abby followed. Nan and the stranger were talking over each other, so excited that they didn’t realize how loud they were being.

“I can’t believe you’re here—”

“I can’t believe you’re here—”

“Where else—oh, sorry!”

The old men sitting at the table had just shushed them simultaneously. Covering a laugh with her hand, the librarian lowered her voice.

“How long have you been back?” she asked Nan.

“Less than a day. I would’ve written to tell you, but I didn’t have any time,” Nan replied, almost breathless.

“And how long are you here?”

“For...a while. We’re playing it by ear,” said Nan, with a glance back at Abby.

The librarian looked suddenly flustered, and very embarrassed. “Oh—oh, of course—so silly of me.” She grasped both of Nan’s hands in her own. “I was so sorry to hear about Don, dear. If there’s anything I can do...”

“Thank you.” Nan nodded and gave her a tight sort of smile. Then she turned and held out one hand to Abby, gesturing for her to come forward. Nervously, Abby did. “Carolyn, this is Abby. Matt’s daughter. Abby, this is Mrs. Conroy, she’s the head librarian here. My old boss.”

The old woman clapped one hand dramatically to her breastbone with a gasp. “Of course you’re Matty’s little girl. Oh, my goodness, I remember you when you were just a teeny tiny—oh, it’s wonderful to meet you, darling.” She flung her arms suddenly around Abby and squeezed her in a tight hug.

Abby didn’t even have time to raise her arms and return the gesture, she was so startled. “Uh... nice to meet you.”

“And fabulous manners! You can just get used to calling me Carolyn, you sweet little thing,” she replied, giving Abby a wink as she released her. “Are you free for coffee? Dinner? I must see you,” Mrs. Conroy turned to Nan and grasped both of her hands again with a jingle of her bracelets.

“Come over to the house. I insist. Bring this one. Do you have a place to stay?”

“We’re staying in the rental room over the shop,” Nan replied.

“Not at the house?” Mrs. Conroy looked genuinely confused. “But I thought—”

“I’d love to catch up, though,” Nan said, talking over the rest of her sentence.

Mrs. Conroy waved a jingling hand. “Done and done. Come over anytime you like.” She smiled at Abby. “I make great peanut butter cookies. Your father used to love them.”

Abby felt a little jolt of surprise, but smiled. “I like peanut butter, too.”

“I know we’ll only be here a few weeks, Carolyn, but is there any chance you can set us up with a guest card?” Nan asked, laying her hands on Abby’s shoulders.

Mrs. Conroy beamed once more. “Of course! Give me just a minute. I’m right in the middle of re-shelving and I’ll never remember where I am if I stop now. Go over to the circulation desk, I’ll be right there.” She pressed her lips together in a smile that Abby thought was almost as wistful as Nan’s had been in the coffee shop this morning. “It’s so good to see you both. Welcome back.”

“Why was she asking about Uncle Don’s house?” Abby whispered, as Nan led the way down an aisle between the shelves. Up ahead, Abby could see a hanging sign that read CIRCULATION DESK.

Nan looked back at her, and Abby recognized the expression too well. “It’s complicated,” they said simultaneously. This made Nan laugh, and then she stopped walking, taking Abby by the shoulders in the aisle. “But it’s going to get less complicated now that... we’re here. Okay? I promise.”

Abby frowned. “What does that mean?”

“It means...” Nan’s eyes roamed the shelves, as if she thought the words she wanted might be hiding in one of the books. At last, she settled on, “You’re getting older, and we’ve got some important stuff to talk about. And once we’ve handled everything with Uncle Don, we will. I promise.”

Abby was so surprised by this answer, she couldn't formulate a response.

There came a sudden jingling sound, and Mrs. Conroy appeared in the aisle, looking flustered again. "Eve—Eve, I forgot—" she saw Abby, and hesitated, before hitching up a brilliant smile. "I need to borrow you, for just a minute. Would that be all right?"

Nan blinked, but patted Abby's shoulder. "I'll be right back, sweet pea. You go wait at the desk, all right?"

"Why?"

But Nan was already walking away.

Abby turned and walked the other way, puzzling over the strangeness of her great-aunt's behavior. She'd thought packing up the little red car for this open-ended trip to deal with Uncle Don's death had been the most unexpected thing Nan had ever done, even compared with her more unusual habits and behaviors. Apparently, Abby had been very wrong, and in spite of how irritated she was at being tossed in the car like just another suitcase... she had to admit, her curiosity about Silent Harbor, and Nan's old life here, was starting to get the better of her.

When she reached the circulation desk, Abby leaned against it and faced the rest of the great glass room, and to her own surprise, she began imagining herself spending the next two weeks here, working her way through one section of books after the other. She might start on the top floor, where she imagined the oldest, dustiest, all-but-forgotten collections were kept...

And then, once again, Abby felt a prickle on the back of her neck, like someone was looking at her. She turned and looked around the library. The only other people she could see from this spot were the two little old men at their table, a father and his toddler daughter, who was scampering around and playing hide-and-seek between the shelves, and a woman with long auburn hair and a

flowery skirt that brushed the floor; she had balanced a teetering stack of books on the arm of her reading chair as she scribbled notes on a pad on her lap. Abby shook herself off and faced the circulation desk again. Abby heard people coming up behind her, moving quickly. She turned around to see Nan three steps ahead of Mrs. Conroy, both moving at top speed.

Nan had one hand out, reaching for Abby's arm. "Abby, honey, we've got to go."

Mrs. Conroy stood a little ways behind Nan; she had clasped her hands over her mouth worriedly. Confused, Abby stared at Nan; nearby, the little girl playing hide-and-seek with her father had stopped at the sharpness in Nan's voice, and was now watching them curiously.

"What about my library card?" Abby asked. "I thought—"

"Listen to me, Abby, we can't today," Nan insisted, looking around. More people were stopping to look at them, now. Nan saw the woman with the notepad in the armchair and the little old men staring at her, and went even paler. "We've got to go," Nan said suddenly, in a harsh voice that wasn't like her own at all. She grabbed Abby's wrist. "Come on. We're going. We've got to go."

And she wheeled Abby around, practically dragging her by the backpack towards the exit.

"Wait—Nan!"

Mrs. Conroy started to follow them. "Eve!"

"Keep going," Nan said to Abby. "Don't stop."

"Nan—what are you doing?" Abby asked, nearly tripping over her own feet. "Nan!"

"Not now, not now."

Abby wasn't sure if Nan meant those words for her; it almost sounded like she was pleading for something. She could still hear Mrs. Conroy calling after them, and nearly everyone in the round sitting area looked up in surprise as Nan rushed Abby out the door.

“Okay—hey—let go of me, I’m going!” Abby wriggled herself free of Nan’s grip as they burst out of the library into the humid sunshine. “Nan, what—?” But Nan wasn’t listening. She was still walking, her stride long and quick, back in the direction of the town center. Totally bewildered, Abby hurried after her. “Nan! Nan!”

It was almost half a block before Nan finally stopped walking and dropped onto a park bench with several broken slats, so suddenly that Abby actually ran past her by a couple of paces. Timidly, she approached Nan. She had never seen her great-aunt look so upset, not even when she talked about Sasha, or Abby’s father. Now Nan was taking slow, deep breaths, like she’d always taught Abby to do when she got upset.

Abby hesitated. “Nan?”

“I’m sorry, sweet pea,” she said, looking up at Abby and grasping her wrist again. Something about the way she said it made Abby think she wasn’t only apologizing for what had just happened. Abby felt goosebumps raising on her skin, though it was very warm out. “I—I am so sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“To do what?!” Abby demanded. She felt a burning sensation in the corners of her eyes. Every bad thought, every unkind word she had bottled up inside her for the last ten days threatened to come pouring out of her like lava. “To act like a total freak, for no reason? No problem there, I’m getting used to it!”

Nan lifted her eyebrows. “Do not raise your voice to me.”

“Then tell me why you’re being so weird!” Abby snapped. “Why did you bring us here?”

“You know why we’re here,” said Nan, rising. “Uncle Don—”

“I never even met Uncle Don,” said Abby angrily. “He didn’t care about me.”

“That’s not true.” Nan looked horrified. “He—”

“It is true! He hated me because he hated my mother, you said he never wanted my parents to get married, which means he never wanted me to even exist—”

Nan looked shocked. “I never said—Abby, no, I didn’t mean—”

“He didn’t care about me,” Abby said again, her voice shaking and tears stinging her eyes. “Why should I care if he’s dead?”

The moment she said it, she regretted it. Shame flooded her and she looked away from Nan, wrestling with feelings she couldn’t hope to identify. But when she finally found the courage to look at Nan again, Nan didn’t seem to be able to unstick her voice. Rather than making her feel bad, this sight made Abby’s temper snap. She was so overwhelmed with emotions and questions that she didn’t know what to do—so she ran. She ran away from Nan, from the library—she would have run out of Silent Harbor, if she could have—and she pretended not to hear when Nan called her name.

She came on the Emerald Oval faster than she had anticipated, and slowed to a speedy, purposeful walk. Even if Nan did run after her, which Abby suspected she wouldn’t, it would’ve taken a while for her to catch up. Abby didn’t look like it, but she could run fast when she wanted to.

Angry, remorseful, wounded thoughts chased themselves in circles around Abby’s brain as she darted across the loop road to the shady park, barely noticing where she was going. Abby shook her head, trying to organize her thoughts. She stopped walking at the end of an asphalt path that wound through the park between the trees, and began to pace. She was still out of breath and sweating, but she was having a hard time calming down. Eventually, she stopped pacing, her eyes landing on a plastic bag that the cleanup crew had filled but not yet taken away. Stuffed full, its opening knotted

against its bulging contents, the bag sat beside an iron bench whose bolted-down legs had been partially pulled free from the asphalt.

It wasn't just the fact that Nan was acting oddly. It was that Nan was clearly lying to her—about what, Abby didn't know, but as this thought crystallized in her mind, she felt the burn of fresh anger; she clenched her fists and squeezed her eyes shut against a strong breeze that kicked up, her thoughts swimming—

POP.

Abby jumped and opened her eyes. The ocean breeze had knocked over the bulging bag of storm debris and scattered the contents. The bag had actually burst open, and bits of paper, scraps of wood, bits of glass, and a length of sodden, stained material that looked like part of an awning from one of the shopfronts, were scattered in a wide arc around Abby.

She felt a trickle of something on her shin and looked down. Something had cut her—a piece of glass, maybe. It was a tiny cut and didn't really hurt, but it was oozing a thin trickle of blood down to her ankle. Abby looked around and felt in her pockets for a napkin or something to wipe it away, but found nothing. Straightening up, she decided to just ignore it and keep walking. She didn't want Nan to find her.

Fortunately, Abby had a decent sense of direction, and while Nan might worry that she'd get lost, Abby wasn't a baby. Besides, even if she was bad at navigating, she was pretty sure that she could find her way around a town that seemed to be built around one huge, stupid circle.

She continued along the walkway. No one was out, except for a tiny old man who walked past with his Great Dane, which was almost taller than him. Abby didn't even see the cleanup crew.

Maybe all the volunteers had gone somewhere for lunch, she thought. And it was so hot, the few tourists who were still in town were probably down at the beach...

Abby kept her eyes on her feet, plodding a slow, steady rhythm so she could watch as the little line of blood on her shin reached her sock and began to dry. She almost didn't notice when she had reached a wide circle of asphalt.

She thought this must be the center of the Emerald Oval. Abby was standing at the end of one of five narrow walkways that converged here, snaking off in various directions from the center. Again, she was reminded of the iris of an eye. Where the pupil of the eye in the library was a vast, empty space for people to sit, however, the pupil of this eye, in the center of Emerald Oval, was dominated by an enormous rock. It was not tall, but low and flat, striped with streaks of brownish orange, white, and black, and shaped roughly into a slope. The rock jutted out of the ground at this angle, not more than a couple of feet at its high end.

Embedded in the top of this rock was a statue—well, several statues. Abby counted quickly. Six bronze sculptures, darkened with age, but clearly maintained and cared for, stood in a half-circle atop their stone plinth. They were all women, standing shoulder to shoulder in a kind of triangular arrangement, with little space between them. They had been sculpted with long skirts and hair that flowed behind them, their hands reaching for one another as if they were standing together against a fierce wind. Abby walked to the nearest one on the low end—she was tall, even for a life-size statue, and her bronze face gazed stalwartly in the direction Abby had come from. Her right hand was curled in a fist. Her left was open, and her long, gracefully sculpted fingertips reached for those of the woman beside her.

Something about this statue made the back of Abby's neck prickle—not in the alarmed, apprehensive way she had felt last night, when she'd been sure someone was watching her, rather like a sense of déjà vu—like she had seen it before. That's stupid, she told herself.

But no matter what she told herself, Abby found that she was unable to take her eyes off the faces of the women. She followed the natural shape of the sculpture, taking in each figure, until she reached the centermost—and tallest, because of her position on the rock, though she was actually the smallest figure. She looked like the youngest of the six, but her expression was just as fierce as those of the women who flanked her.

Abby stepped so close she stumbled when she walked into something mounted on the waist-high fence that ringed the statue. It was a bronze plaque.

**FOUNDERS' STATUE
and SILENT HARBOR WITCHCRAFT TRIALS MEMORIAL**

She'd heard of witchcraft accusations and executions before—about women in medieval times being burned at the stake for doing things like curing peoples' illnesses, or just generally living so far outside what was considered "normal" that their superstitious neighbors blamed problems like sick livestock on curses and evil spells. Abby had never heard of witchcraft trials happening in America—even early, early America in the seventeenth century. The idea seemed like some relic of the much farther past, as distant and legendary as King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. Abby started to read the plaque.

**FOUNDERS' STATUE
and SILENT HARBOR WITCHCRAFT TRIALS MEMORIAL
dedicated July 1, 1885**

This statue was commissioned by the Silent Harbor Town Council to commemorate the two-hundredth anniversary of the tragedies of the Silent Harbor Witchcraft Trials, in which twenty-four citizens of Silent Harbor lost their lives. Depicted here are six major figures representative

of Silent Harbor's six founding families, all of whom figured prominently in the events of the Witchcraft Hysteria. From left to right: Rebecca Wilder (1629-1700), Mary Deacon (1638-1685), Isobel Foster (1652-1720), Abigail Mallory (center, 1664-1685) Patience Fairbank (1652-1712), and Lillian Attwater (1610-1685).

Three of the figures depicted here were among those who perished during the course of the Silent Harbor Trials of 1685: Lillian Attwater, Mary Deacon, and Abigail Mallory. Abigail Mallory, tried and hanged as a Witch at twenty years old, was the youngest and therefore widely regarded as the most tragic victim of the Silent Harbor Trials. Her image serves as a symbol of hope and faith in the future to all who visit Silent Harbor, and touching the hem of her skirts has become widely regarded as a good-luck charm.

Following the bloodshed of 1685, in which many of them lost family members, all six Founding Families became influential forces in bringing the Witch Panic to a swift and permanent end. Abigail Mallory's surviving sister Meghan Mallory Sheldon (1662-1761), the first Head of the Silent Harbor Town Council, willed funds to the town for the purpose of commissioning this monument; due to persistent superstition and fear of vandalism, the project was not begun until over one hundred years after her death.

-Silent Harbor Town Council, 1890

Abby's heart seemed to be stuttering inside her chest. She read the second sentence of the second paragraph again: Abigail Mallory, tried and hanged as a Witch at twenty years old... Abigail Mallory.

Abby's full name was Abigail Elisabeth Mallory Bell, because her mother's name was Elisabeth Mallory. Nan had always said that Abby's father had picked her first name, but somehow, in this moment, she knew without having to be told that she had been named for the young woman depicted in this statue. And clearly, the Mallory family—her family—were a major component of Silent Harbor's history.

And Abby knew nothing about them, because her mother was gone—and because Nan had never told her anything about them. Why? Because Uncle Don hated her mother that much? Because Nan had secretly hated her too?

Abby gazed down at the plaque again with a growing sense of horror. Twenty-four people, all put on trial and executed for some superstitious belief in witchcraft? And all in the course of a single year? Now with this idea in mind, Abby was starting to see the arrangement of the women in their tight knot, as if they were being surrounded by something dangerous, as more sinister than heroic. She read the plaque twice more as a woman in a long skirt walked a bicycle along one of the nearby paths, and the old man and his Great Dane passed by again.

Eventually, Abby realized her hand was beginning to hurt from pressing so hard against the bronze plaque. As she turned and began to walk away, she ran a finger over the raised letters that had dug into her palm, wondering to herself: What kind of town is this?

It took her three tries to find the right path that would lead her from the Founders' Statue back to Fish 'N Beans once she finally left. Maybe she'd overestimated how good her sense of direction was, after all, Abby thought, as she emerged at last on the correct side of the Emerald Oval and saw the shopfront halfway down the block. She hitched up her backpack and set off, reaching the rickety steps in the alley just as a familiar metallic rattle came up behind her.

"Where have you been?"

Nan's beat-up old red car rumbled to a stop along the curb, its brakes squealing. Nan turned off the engine and jumped out of the driver's side, rushing to Abby. She was frantic. A small part of Abby was pleased about that, even though her anger had mostly worn off and guilt was starting to gnaw at her.

"Sorry," she said. "I... I got a little lost." That wasn't a complete lie, Abby told herself.

“Abigail.” Nan sounded exasperated. She still wore the same miserable expression she’d had at the library, and Abby privately thought it was a good thing, which was unkind, but true. “I’m glad you’re safe. Come inside. We need to talk.”

Abby didn’t move for a moment; this didn’t sound good.

Nan pointed at the apartment door up the stairs. “Inside.”

Reluctantly, Abby turned and climbed the stairs. It was late afternoon, and the sun was shining directly at the rooftop apartment from behind the slope Nan had called Port Hill.

Nan let them into the dusty little apartment. Abby dropped her bag unceremoniously by the door and went to sit on the couch. Nan closed the door deliberately and, after a moment, walked just as deliberately to stand in front of Abby. She clasped her hands in front of her mouth and stared at Abby, as if she were chewing on the words she wanted to say.

“I need you to understand something, Abigail, and I need you to understand it now. Are you listening?” Nan’s voice was calm and steady, but it was somehow even more unnerving than seeing her shaken and upset at the library.

Abby, who had anticipated some kind of explanation—something that would resolve their argument—hesitated. “What?”

“Are you listening to me?”

Abby frowned. “Yes...”

“Good.” Nan dropped onto the coffee table, resting her elbows on her knees and meeting Abby’s eye steadily. She still looked pale, but there was a steely glint in her eye that made Abby draw back slightly. “You are not ever to run away from me like that again while we’re in Silent Harbor. You are not to wander around this town by yourself. Do you understand me?”

Abby's mouth fell open in surprise. "What? Why?"

"Why?" Nan lifted her eyebrows. "Because you disappearing on me while I'm trying to take care of what I need to take care of while we're here is not going to work. Do you understand me?"

Abby stared at her.

"I asked you if you understood me," Nan said, so sharply that Abby felt her stomach clench. Nan had never, ever spoken to her this way. To her embarrassment, hurt tears welled up in her eyes, and she looked down at her knees. Nan was quiet for a long moment. Abby stared at the triangle of golden sunlight on the floor.

Finally, Nan put a hand on Abby's. "All right. We can forget this. It's all right." She stood up. "Are you hungry?"

Abby shook her head. It wasn't true—all she'd eaten since that morning was a banana, and she was hungry and thirsty, but she didn't think her throat would unblock itself to allow her to eat anything at the moment.

"I might be able to get some things from downstairs—"

"I'm tired," Abby muttered. And she got up and marched to the tiny room she'd slept in last night, shutting the door. Abby lay down on top of the blankets and gazed unfocusedly at the windows, full of golden light. All of her emotions had receded now, leaving her exhausted and worn out. The apartment was quiet for a long time again, until a gentle knock came at the bedroom door.

"I'm going downstairs for a minute," said Nan. "In case you need me."

"Fine," Abby replied. There was a pause.

“Honey...” But whatever Nan had started to say, she clearly changed her mind. A moment later, Abby heard the sounds of her footfalls crossing the living room before the apartment door creaked open and shut.

CHAPTER FIVE

Abby didn't remember falling asleep, but when she woke up, she felt hot and itchy, curled on her side. It took her a minute to remember where she was. She sat up, still on the bed in the cramped little bedroom, and a blanket fell off of her. Nan had covered her up, apparently. It was dark outside, and Abby could tell without looking at the clock that it was late. A slice of moonlight shone in the open window. Beyond the screen, Abby could hear a faint buzzing, like insects outside, and even the soft, distant whoosh of the ocean. Her neck and face were coated in sweat.

She rubbed her eyes, had she been dreaming? She thought she had heard someone's voice saying her name. Her mouth felt dry and tasted terrible. Suddenly, she wanted fresh air, and the open window was not enough. She got up, thinking of going out onto the upper landing of the outside stairs, just to cool off for a minute. She opened the door slowly and peered out into the living room. Nan was asleep on the couch, just a shapeless form of blankets. Abby crept to the door and slipped outside. It wasn't much cooler out here than it was inside, but at least there was a slight breeze.

Abby shut her eyes, hearing insects buzz and flutter around the light above the apartment door. If she concentrated hard, she thought she could hear the ocean. Opening her eyes, she looked in the direction Nan had gestured earlier. There were some buildings in the way, but she could make out the point where the town stopped and the shore and ocean began. The water reflected the moon on its rough surface in shimmering flakes.

Other than this, though, she was staring into the blackness, where the dark sky and the dark water melded into one. Then a flash of brilliant light made her jump. Lightning? Abby had never heard of lightning striking when it wasn't raining—it had just illuminated a hulking land mass, like a tiny island, in the middle of the harbor. She squinted, wondering if it was Drop Island. It has to be, she

told herself, how many islands can fit into one harbor? She leaned as far as she could over the railing, straining hard to see as much of the little island as possible.

“Mraow.”

She jumped again and looked down. The alley below their apartment was not empty. Cats’ eyes, reflecting weirdly in the darkness, peered up at her from the shadows. Abby couldn’t make out the individual cats, only the golden-white flickers of their eyes.

A breeze picked up, and despite the heat and humidity of the night, the air around her went suddenly cold. Abby flinched, putting up her hand as another lightning strike illuminated the island on the horizon.

“Abigail...”

The ice in the voice that whispered her name made Abby’s stomach turn over, and she turned to run inside—but now she saw that the cats’ eyes in the alleyway were creeping up the stairs toward her, and they stared unblinkingly at her. But they were too big and too dark to actually belong to cats, clinging to the side of the building like shadows, reaching with long limbs towards Abby, who was rooted to the spot—

And then she was running, so fast she thought her heart was going to burst out of her chest, sprinting between tall trees that reached upward into dark nothingness. Her throat burned as she tried to scream for help, but couldn’t draw breath; she couldn’t see farther than her next step, and knew at any moment, she might tumble over an unseen cliff—but she couldn’t stop running. The pounding feet of the things that chased her grew louder and louder, as Abby’s legs seared with pain and sank deeper into mud and leaves with every step, feeling like lead weights—it was getting darker,

now, and she was starting to sink deeper into the mud as the shadowy creatures began to gain on her...

“Help me—help...”

And she woke up again. It was daylight this time, and she was back in the bedroom. Someone was knocking on the door, and for a split second, Abby felt a leap of fear—until she realized she wasn’t dreaming anymore.

“Yeah,” she called to Nan. “Come in.”

Nan opened the door and gave her a slight smile. “Come on, sleepy, I knocked half an hour ago.”

Abby wiped a hand over her sweaty face. “I—didn’t hear you. Sorry.”

“You answered me,” Nan said, surprised. “I heard you.”

Abby shook her head. “I think—I was having a weird dream.”

“Oh?” Nan asked. “Want to tell me about it?”

“I don’t remember it,” Abby lied.

Nan blinked. Then, after a brief moment, she came into the room and sat down on the foot of the bed. “Okay. Well, listen—I wanted to tell you—I’m sorry for the way I spoke to you yesterday. I get your frustration. I really do. And we were both exhausted, and being somewhere new—it’s a lot to handle. I’m sorry if I wasn’t very patient.”

Abby looked down. She was still wearing her clothes from yesterday. The library... Nan’s strange behavior... their argument... the Founders’ Statue... all of these events and places came floating back to her as she considered Nan’s words—and then remembered what she, Abby, had said outside the library. She bit her lip.

“I’m sorry I said that stuff about—you know.”

Nan nodded and patted her knee. "I know. We can start over today."

"I just," Abby began, trying to find the words, "I just feel like you're not telling me the truth. You've been acting so weird, and yesterday, at the library—"

"I know," Nan said quickly. "I know you must feel that way. I don't have a good explanation, sweet pea. I wish I did. But... it's complicated. Loss—a loved one passing away—is as complicated for adults as it is for someone your age. And Uncle Don and I..." She pressed her lips together, as if she were trying to find the right words. "You know, I always imagined I'd bring you back here, sometime. Before all this happened."

"You did?"

"This is where you come from," Nan said simply. "It's an important part of you."

"I know," said Abby, on a sudden impulse, "I saw the Founders' Statue yesterday."

Nan blinked. "You what?"

"The Founders' Statue, in the park," said Abby. "That's where I went. I saw the statue and—I thought—well..." Asking the question out loud now seemed foolish. "I read about the Silent Harbor Trials. One of them had my same name."

"Oh," said Nan, sounding startled. "Oh—that's right. I forgot. I think that girl was an ancestor of your mother's. Old towns like this often have a lot of families with the same last name."

"Did my mom name me Abigail after her?" Abby asked.

Nan patted her leg again and stood up. "I don't really know, sweet pea. I know your father liked the name Abby a lot. But we're burning daylight. We've got work to do. Come on, get ready."

Abby frowned. "Work?"

"At Uncle Don's house," Nan said as she moved to the bedroom door.

“Oh—can’t you just leave me here?” Abby balked at the expression on Nan’s face.

“I told you yesterday,” said Nan calmly, “I don’t want you wandering around without me. You could get lost.”

Abby shook her head. “I wouldn’t go anywhere.”

Nan took a slow breath, closing her eyes for a moment, and then looking at Abby once again. “I could really use your help, sweet pea.”

With a twinge of regret for what she had said about Uncle Don, Abby nodded.

“You must be starving,” said Nan. Abby could hear her moving towards the apartment door. “You were sound asleep last night. I’ll ask Fred to get some real breakfast going for us. Meet me downstairs, okay?”

“Okay,” Abby called back.

When she left the apartment, showered and in a fresh set of clothing, Abby hesitated at the top of the stairs. Something about her line of sight here made her remember her terrible dream. She turned around and looked towards the ocean—but she couldn’t see it. A tall, skinny building that looked like an apartment complex blocked the horizon; she couldn’t see the water from here at all, much less an island. She turned and continued down the stairs, yawning widely as she rounded the corner of the shop—then nearly tripped over something low to the ground.

She had stepped on the tail of the orange cat with the missing piece from its ear, which was lying against the building, sunning itself. The cat took a retaliatory swipe at her ankle, Abby wasn’t quick enough to avoid it, and three long claw marks appeared on her shin below the cut from yesterday.

“Hey!” she snapped, hopping on one leg as the orange cat rolled over and sauntered away. “You little creep... ow...”

She limped to the front door of Fish 'N Beans, now in a worse mood than ever. Trying not to drip blood on the floor—the scratches were just oozing little droplets, not much—she found her way through the maze of shelves at the front of the store and emerged into the cafe area, which was virtually empty. Three men in work boots and denim shirts were hunched over cups of coffee and ketchup-stained plates at a table in the corner. They didn't even look up when Abby came in, they were so deep in their conversation.

At another table, however, sat Mr. Attwater. He had an empty plate and a newspaper in front of him; he was filling out the crossword with a pencil. He looked up, and when he spotted Abby, he smiled at her. "Good morning," he said cheerily. "Your aunt's on a call." He pointed at the telephone mounted on the wall, the receiver of which was missing. The curly red cord wrapped behind the counter, inside a door with a sign that read OFFICE.

"Thanks," she replied. She grimaced as she sat down at a table and put her foot on another chair, trying to examine the cat scratch, which was stinging.

"What do you have there?" Mr. Attwater frowned, getting up and coming close.

"I'm fine." Abby pulled a paper napkin out of the dispenser on the table. "One of those alley cats scratched me."

Mr. Attwater made a face. "Hang on. Don used to keep a first aid kit back here."

He went behind the counter and rummaged around on some low shelves Abby couldn't see, knocking against cutlery and glasses by the sound of it. He emerged a second later with a small white box with FIRST AID printed on the front, and came to sit down in a chair near Abby. He leaned forward, reaching for her foot, and she flinched.

“I won’t hurt you,” he told her, in a tone of mild surprise. “I patch things like this up for my daughter all the time. No big deal.”

Relenting, Abby lifted her foot and let Mr. Attwater position it on his thigh as he faced her.

“So you don’t like cats?” he asked after a few moments of silence. He adjusted his glasses and squinted at a few of the small packets in the first aid box.

“I do,” said Abby.

“What’d you do to this one?”

“I didn’t do anything—I tripped over her on accident.” Abby watched as Mr. Attwater selected a little packet and tore it open.

He unfolded the square of cotton soaked in alcohol. “Ouch.”

Abby watched him gently apply antibiotic ointment to her scratches, as well as the little cut on her shin from yesterday.

After a moment, he glanced at her over his glasses. “Heard you had quite the day yesterday.”

Abby stared at him. “What?”

“Eve said it took hours to get through things at Town Hall.” Mr. Attwater shook his head. “That must have been boring for you.”

“I guess.”

Mr. Attwater pulled open a large adhesive bandage and paused, eyeing her. “Y’know, your Aunt Eve—”

“I call her Nan,” Abby corrected him.

The three fishermen burst into sudden laughter, and Mr. Attwater hesitated. “There. Good as new.” He lifted Abby’s foot off his lap and lowered it to the floor. Then he closed up the first aid kit and put it back behind the counter.

“Wait,” Abby said as he passed her table again, “what were you going to say?”

Mr. Attwater opened his mouth, shut it, and then smiled. “I was just going to tell you how glad she is to have you here with her. You must be a big help.” He crossed to his table, picked up his newspaper, and gave her a wave. “Have a good day, fellas,” he said to the three men in work boots as he left the cafe.

She was still trying to riddle this out this strange moment when Nan appeared from nowhere and set a glass of orange juice and a huge plate of scrambled eggs beside a stack of peanut butter toast on the table in front of her. Abby blinked up at her.

“I figured you could try the oyster omelet tomorrow,” she said with a grin.

“Who was on the phone?” Abby asked.

“Town Hall,” said Nan, sliding into a seat at the table. “They have paperwork for me to sign.”

“That was quick,” said Abby.

“Well, it’s not everything. But I can at least get things moving for Don’s memorial,” Nan sighed. She pointed at Abby’s plate. “Eat up.”

Abby’s stomach rumbled—she was starving, and she ate everything so quickly, Nan brought her a second stack of toast. “Thanks,” she said, wiping peanut butter from her mouth with a napkin as Nan took her plates away.

“Ten bucks. Cash or card?”

Abby frowned.

“Hey, we own this place now, we’ve got to make a living,” said Nan. But she smiled jokingly, and walked away. Picking up her last slice of toast, Abby followed her to the counter and watched as she carried the plates into the kitchen, disappearing behind the swinging door. Nan’s remark had just made Abby’s stomach squirm uncomfortably; what was Nan going to do now that she owned Fish ’N Beans? How would they be able to go back to California if they had to manage it? Would Nan sell it?

Abby looked around the little restaurant and saw some of things she hadn’t noticed yesterday—the hand-painted menus and decorations on the walls, for instance, were done in Nan’s handwriting. She could tell because Nan drew the exact same flowers, and made her capital letters the exact same way on Abby’s birthday cards every year. Abby could just picture Nan, paintbrushes stuck in her hair, working on the rainbow-patterned seashells that lined the doorway to the office, while Uncle Don worked in the kitchen. The idea of selling a place Nan had clearly once loved so much made Abby feel strangely and unexpectedly sad. Still gazing at the hand-painted fishes and flowers that covered the walls, Abby followed a pattern of blue and white clamshells that lined the baseboard, walking along the wall towards the front window. She passed the table of fishermen, one of whom was speaking animatedly, his hands waving as he told a story.

“I’m tellin’ ya, I’ve never seen anything like it! A real whirlpool, right next to Drop Island!” he was telling his friends, who were sharing a smirk. “Must’ve been forty feet across! I almost capsized trying to avoid it! Haven’t dared to go near the island since!”

“This like that Great White Shark you almost caught last summer in Maine?” said one of the fishermen, and the other laughed.

Abby looked toward the front windows, where she could see the sidewalk and the park beyond illuminated in the brilliant sunshine. On the other side of the glass, a woman with long hair and sunglasses had stopped on her bike to stare at the menu taped to the inside of the window. A moment later, she turned and pedaled away. The park was even busier than it had been yesterday. The teams of cleanup volunteers in SHTC vests were back, and in greater numbers. A knot of people stood close together outside Fish 'N Beans, looking down at a map one of them held as she gave instructions.

“Ready?” said Nan’s voice from behind her. Abby turned, and they faced each other. After a moment, Nan gave her a small smile. “We’re starting over, right?”

Abby hesitated. “Right,” she said at last.

It only took them a few minutes to get from the town center, back under the wrought-iron arch that read SILENT HARBOR, and out into the surrounding streets and neighborhoods again. Maybe Abby was imagining it, but she thought that Nan seemed nervous. She was double-checking her mirrors every time they stopped or made a turn, and she wasn’t talking. She didn’t even have the radio on, which for Nan was downright bizarre.

“Are you okay?” Abby asked, as Nan took a right turn onto Heliotrope Lane a little too fast.

“What? Oh—I’m fine, sorry...” She sounded faraway and distracted. “I’m just thinking about Wednesday.”

“Wednesday?”

“That’s when Al—Mr. Attwater—wants to have your uncle’s service,” said Nan. “We’re going to go to the cemetery and have a reception.”

Abby nodded, even though she spotted a problem. “How are we going to have people over to the apartment? It’s too small.”

“Well, Al says things at the house—our house—didn’t look too bad,” said Nan, steering along a curve that was taking them past rows of similar-looking houses. They were small—most of them only a single story—and their clapboard exteriors were painted various shades of gray, white, and beige, though occasionally one might be yellow or blue. “It’s only ten minutes from the cemetery, so if it’s in good shape, we’ll have the reception there.”

The car slowed as it reached the dead end of the street shaped in a wide circle that was ringed by houses. It was the highest point of Heliotrope Lane; Abby could tell by the slope of the street behind them. Nan brought the car to a stop in the middle of the road, adjusting her grip on the steering wheel.

“What is it?” Abby asked. All the houses she could see that ringed the cul-de-sac looked unhurt by the storm—though the sides of the road were clogged with leaves and dirt. “Nan?”

Nan shook her head and blinked. “It’s just been a long time since either of us were here,” she said, with a small smile.

Abby flushed, though she didn’t know why. Without another word, Nan drove straight ahead, at the house that stood far back from the road on a wide square of lawn, and she pulled the car into a long gravel driveway, coming to a stop beside a big, rust-spotted blue truck. They got out of the car, their feet crunching on the gravel. This house was noticeably larger than the ones around it, two stories tall and topped by a steeply peaked roof. It had a gable with a single window in it that overlooked the street, and Abby saw a screened-in porch sticking out of one side.

Unlike the exterior of Fish 'N Beans, the exterior of this house was in pristine condition. The sunny yellow of the walls and the sky-blue shutters was fresh—had Uncle Don had it painted recently? The only thing that marred its appearance was a tree that had fallen in the yard and broken a window, which was taped up with a plastic bag. As she climbed the steps of the front porch, Abby saw a bench swing hanging beside the door. That made her pause; she had never pictured Uncle Don as the type of person to have a bench swing.

As if she read Abby's mind, Nan tapped her shoulder and pointed at the swing. "My father—your great-grandfather—hung that swing. Somewhere there's a picture of me and your grandmother on it in matching dresses."

Abby looked up at her. "This is your house?"

Nan nodded. "I grew up here. My parents left it to us, but your grandmother and grandfather had a place in Boston, and Uncle Don and I moved in here," She was fishing through her bag and withdrew a small yellow envelope, from which she shook out a set of keys.

"So... my dad lived here?" Abby asked.

"After your grandparents died," said Nan. She fit a key into the lock and turned it, pushing the door open. "Come on, sweet pea."

Abby went inside first. It was dark in the entryway. To the left of the front door was a closet door, and beside that a flight of stairs that scaled the side of the house and disappeared to an upper floor. Along the wall facing the door was a white swinging door, and a small bench with a mud-crust pair of work boots lying underneath it. On the wall above it were a line of flannels and jackets hanging on pegs. To Abby's right, she could see through a connecting archway to a living room with a couch and a fireplace. The house was still and quiet, and though it couldn't have been more than

ten days or so since Uncle Don had been here, it felt abandoned and empty. Without knowing exactly why, Abby pressed her mouth shut; she thought if she spoke, her voice would surely echo.

She jumped when Nan shut the front door and turned around at once. Nan was looking around the entryway, her eyes landing on the work boots and flannels, and then flicking up to the ceiling light. She reached for a light switch on the wall like one Abby had never seen—two buttons, and when Nan pushed one, the other popped out from the wall and the light flicked on.

“Old-fashioned,” Nan grinned, when she saw Abby frowning at the switch. “Well, come on—I’ll give you a tour—”

A ringing started coming from the room beyond the swinging door, which Abby imagined was the kitchen. Nan grimaced. “I told Helen we were here. She was checking something for me. Just—sit tight for a minute, okay?”

“Okay,” said Abby, but Nan had already disappeared through the door. She felt an unexpected leap of—excitement, maybe, but it was mixed with apprehension, too.

Looking around, Abby moved towards the opening to the room with the fireplace. It only took her a moment to find another push-button light switch, which illuminated the walls full of framed pictures that lined them nearly floor-to-ceiling. Abby saw photographs and paintings in dusty, mismatched frames of many sizes—Nan had done similar things to their walls in Solstice Springs with Abby’s homemade art projects. The living room itself was bigger than Abby had realized. It had wooden floors, a high ceiling, and a large, oriental rug. The walls had a pale, striped wallpaper on them that was stained and peeling away in one corner. Two armchairs stood on either side of the couch; every large piece of furniture in the room was covered by dust cloths, including what looked like an upright piano against one wall. On either side of the fireplace were shelves full of books of all

ages and sizes, as well as framed and unframed photographs, little ornaments, and—a small collection of geodes, placed here and there on the shelves. She reached for a geode, only to yank her hand back when she realized the shelf was strung with cobwebs. She wiped her hand frantically on her shorts. Everything in this room, including the brick hearth of the fireplace and the mantelpiece, was exceedingly dusty. Not just dusty, she saw as she examined the sills of the windows that looked out on the front yard, but layered with years upon years of dust. Abby looked around, wondering when the last time was that Uncle Don had even been in this room, let alone cleaned it. Along one wall was a set of double doors that led to another room. She opened one, and could just make out a small, darkened dining room, full of shapeless lumps under large white sheets.

A little flash of movement on the table caught her eye, and Abby jumped back as a large spider skittered into view. She slammed the door shut again and retreated to the living room. Almost at once, a photograph on the nearest shelf caught her eye. It was not in a frame, but propped up on a framed picture. In the photograph were three barefooted, wet-haired teenagers in bathing suits—one boy and two girls. One of the girls, Sasha was tall and beautiful, and looked exactly like Nan, with wild curls and enormous, kind eyes. She was probably fourteen or fifteen in this picture. Her long arm was draped around the neck of a shorter, broad-chested teenage boy with a mass of wild dark hair, square tortoiseshell glasses, and braces on his teeth, visible only as silver flares as he beamed into the camera. The boy could be no one but Matthew, Abby's father, which Abby realized with a jolt in her stomach like she'd missed a step going upstairs. On Sasha's other side, her arms coiled around Sasha's waist in an affectionate hug, was a long-haired girl Abby couldn't identify. She was laughing, her eyes squeezed shut and her image slightly blurred as it looked like she was about to topple all three of them over into the sand they stood on.

Abby flipped over the photograph and saw Nan's handwriting in faded ballpoint: EM, SK, MB - beach day, Matthew's 16th birthday. She looked up at the framed picture that had been behind this one; it had been taken the same day; the three teenagers were sitting cross-legged on a beach blanket, with a noticeably younger Nan and Uncle Don behind them, holding each other. They were all beaming.

Abby looked again at the photo in her hand and touched the initials Nan had scribbled there. EM. A feeling of recognition, like *déjà vu*, surfaced in Abby's mind, and she had a sudden sense that she was missing something important. She flipped it over and studied it again, bringing it to within an inch of her nose.

"All right! That's taken care of," Nan called from the kitchen. Abby stuffed the photo in her back pocket and whirled around to see Nan looking for her in the entryway. When she saw Abby in the living room, she came in, her hands on her hips, and looked around the dusty room. "Your uncle wasn't a huge fan of these rooms down here," she said, nodding at the dust cloths. "He said they made him feel like he was pretending to be fancier than he was."

"This is a lot fancier than our house," said Abby. She couldn't imagine what it would have been like to grow up in a house like this, but she thought that there would have been a lot of fancy clothing and dinner parties. Nan didn't seem to fit that image, standing on the Oriental rug in her old sneakers and worn jeans—and yet, Abby thought she still managed look very much at home.

Nan sighed, gesturing to the broken window. "Al put the plastic up. We'll have to see if anybody can fix that before Wednesday. Come on, I'll show you the rest of the house."

They ascended the stairs; as they went, Nan switched on more lights and Abby saw more mounted pictures, and more evidence of what she thought of as Nan's distinctive style. They

emerged on the upstairs landing in a short, narrow hallway, which had two doors on each side and one at the far end. The walls were all painted different colors—some had three or four—and featured little patterns and paintings in the gaps between the photographs and framed sketches that lined them. The photographs themselves were interesting to look at, too, some black and white and so faded with age that the subjects could barely be seen. Abby saw more relatives than she'd ever known she had just climbing the staircase, but the stars of most of the pictures were Sasha and Matthew. The sight of these pictures added to the hollow feeling somewhere near Abby's stomach, which she'd had since entering the house.

“Hopefully the bathroom downstairs is in good shape, because the one up here has always been tricky,” Nan was saying, as she walked up the hallway. The doors of the two rooms that faced the top of the staircase landing stood open; one looked like a bedroom, and the other a bathroom. The other three doors off the hallway were all shut; one was too narrow to be anything except a closet. As Nan moved to one of the doors, Abby paused for a moment at a framed drawing that looked like one of Nan's, of a little boy and girl holding hands as they walked away along a beach.

“This was your dad's room.”

Abby tore her gaze away from the drawing and saw that Nan had opened the door of the first room on the left, beside the closet, and was walking inside. Following, Abby found Nan standing in a bedroom with peeling, yellowed glow-in-the-dark constellation stickers dotted all over the ceiling. The room was pretty spare—a bed, a desk, a chair, and a shelf full of comic books, model planes, and action figures.

“He and your mom had a place in town, when they got married,” said Nan quietly, as Abby went and touched the dusty wing of a model plane. Nan turned and left the room, and Abby followed her.

“That was our room,” said Nan, pointing back to the open door at the top of the stairs. From here, Abby could see a large, unmade bed. “Ah—now this looks more like your uncle.”

Nan had opened the door all the way at the end of the hall, and was going inside. It was a dim, cramped room with a large TV set, a big, comfortable-looking chair, a paper-laden desk with a rolling chair, and shelves upon shelves of books, which were crammed into every available space. And even more books covered every available surface—glancing at the titles stacked a foot high on the nearest table, it seemed that Uncle Don had really liked cheesy murder mysteries about somebody called Laura Lillibridge. This thought gave Abby a pang in her stomach.

There was a sudden noise, like a sharp intake of breath. Nan had sat down in Uncle Don’s chair with her back to Abby, and was looking at the room with her hands over her mouth. Slowly, Abby walked around the chair to face her. Nan’s cheeks were damp again, but she sniffled and smiled at Abby, and then held out her arms.

CHAPTER SIX

It took them the better part of the next four days to get the lower floor of Uncle Don's house—Abby was still having a hard time thinking of it as Nan's—clean enough for guests to arrive on Saturday after the burial. There were several reasons for this: for one, Nan seemed to be obsessed with achieving perfection for this event in a way Abby had never seen her before—so every task Abby was set, from vacuuming the curtains to polishing the floor, had to be redone at least twice. For another, the entire population of Silent Harbor seemed to have heard that Don Knitt's former wife and niece were in town for his burial, and so every morning when they arrived at the house on Heliotrope Lane, Abby and Nan had to wade through a sea of sympathy cards, flowers, and food—casseroles, lasagnas, and desserts—in plastic containers that had been delivered by well-meaning neighbors in the night. It seemed that as the only casualty of this freak tornado, Uncle Don had earned a kind of unpleasant celebrity. And for another, as they cleaned, Nan kept finding pictures of Uncle Don that she wanted display at the memorial—so far, the collection she had amassed took up most of the available surfaces in the living room.

Even though it wasn't fun work, and she probably would have had a better time reading Uncle Don's collection of murder mysteries, Abby couldn't help but feel a sense of accomplishment when she collapsed into bed at night after a shower and quick dinner at Fish 'N Beans. She was even sleeping better—she hadn't had a nightmare that she could remember since the night after they had arrived in Silent Harbor. It was also interesting learning about Uncle Don, whom Abby had long ago assumed wanted nothing to do with her. But in the course of cleaning the kitchen, Abby and Nan found a display of Abby's baby pictures taped up inside the pantry cupboard.

“Did you put these here?” Abby asked.

“I didn’t even know he had them,” said Nan quietly, touching one and shaking her head.

Before this week, Abby had thought that Nan saying, “it’s complicated,” as a response to a difficult question was just an adult way of telling her she was too young to understand. Now she was starting to think that “complicated” might be an understatement. Abby had very rarely seen Nan cry before Uncle Don’s death, and had only a vague impression that she hadn’t much liked being married to him. Now, she was walking around his house with the same wistful expression she wore in Fish ’N Beans, multiplied by ten.

Even more stunning, Abby found that Nan had softened so much on the subject of Uncle Don, she was actually willing to answer questions as their work in readying the house unveiled more strange bits of his life.

“So, you let him live here after you got divorced?” Abby asked, holding a cardboard file box on her knees as Nan sifted through papers on Uncle Don’s desk.

Nan nodded. “He rented it from me.”

“He did?”

“That’s how I paid our rent to Mrs. Stone.” Nan frowned at a piece of paper she held and put it on the throw-out pile.

“You talked to each other?” Abby asked, startled. “I didn’t know that.”

Nan shrugged, flipping through a notebook full of handwritten numbers and charts. “Only once a year or so,” she said, laying the notebook in Abby’s box and giving her a humorless smile. “We had a hard time communicating, after everything.”

“You mean with my parents?” Abby asked. She glanced sideways; another framed photograph of the little girl who looked so much like Nan sat on Uncle Don’s desk. “With Sasha?” Nan nodded.

Abby thought for a moment, trying to weigh the likelihood that Nan would answer her next question. “What exactly happened—”

“That’ll do it. Will you put that box in the car for me?” Nan didn’t seem to have heard her. She dropped the papers she held into the box, then stood up, stretching. “I’m getting hungry, how about you? Let’s see if there’s something good in that basket the neighbors left.”

By Friday evening, Nan pronounced the house ready for guests, and she and Abby returned to the tiny apartment in town laden with the sympathy meals that had been waiting for them on the porch that morning—the collection had grown too large to fit in the refrigerator at the house.

Abby was the one who took the multiple trips up and down the rickety wooden stairs to unload the car. On her last time down the stairs, she saw the orange cat perched on the mailbox partway down the block. Thinking Nan wouldn’t mind if she went only that far, she changed direction to say hello. The cat didn’t seem to be carrying a grudge for having her tail stepped on the other day, and allowed Abby to stroke the top of her head.

“Hi, Tangelo,” she said, grinning. She’d decided to name this cat after Nan’s favorite fruit, the name of which had always amused her. She’d named the gray one Cinder, who was nowhere in sight at the moment. Abby smiled wider as Tangelo pushed her head against Abby’s fingers and yawned.

“How are you?”

“She’s a sweet girl, isn’t she?”

Abby looked around. A small woman with a pleasant round face and short, graying hair stood in front of the flower shop next to Fish ’N Beans, holding some of the flower pots she had been taking in from her outdoor display. She smiled at Abby. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“That’s okay,” Abby replied, though she still felt a little embarrassed at being caught talking to the cat.

“I’m your neighbor,” said the woman, gesturing at her shopfront. “My name’s Mara. What’s yours?”

“Abby.”

“Nice to meet you, Abby. I knew your grandfather,” she added, after a moment. “Don was a wonderful neighbor. He always helped out when we needed something. I’m so sorry for your loss.”

“Oh—thank you,” Abby said slowly. “He was my uncle, though. My great-uncle.”

“Oh,” said Mara, looking surprised. “My mistake. I just assumed—well, he only mentioned you to me the one time, but he sounded like a proud grandparent.” Mara smiled, and Abby stared at her.

“You tell your—is she your aunt, then?”

Abby nodded.

“Well, you tell her if she needs anything for the memorial tomorrow, I’ve got her covered.”

Abby nodded again, trying to return the smile. When the woman had taken her display inside, Abby turned back to Tangelo, her gaze unfocused as she considered this piece of information. Not only had Uncle Don saved a bunch of baby pictures of Abby and displayed them—albeit in a not-very-visible place in his house—but he had mentioned Abby casually to his neighbor, and he had “sounded like a proud grandparent.” Abby stroked Tangelo, who was going back to sleep on top of the mailbox.

“Abby?”

Nan's frantic voice broke her train of thought, and Abby realized with a start that she had been gone too long. Not wanting Nan to think she was trying to sneak off again, she hurried back to the open car door. She could see Nan standing at the top of the stairs by the apartment door.

"Coming!" she called, lifting the last casserole dish out of the backseat. She bumped the door closed with her back and hurried to join Nan.

"Were you talking to someone?" Nan asked immediately, as Abby reached the top of the stairs.

"No," Abby lied, "I was just catching my breath. I climbed the steps, like, six times in two minutes."

Nan frowned disbelievingly; if Abby hadn't been lying, she would have been offended, but as it was, she kept her mouth shut. Her gaze swept behind Abby, as if she were checking the immediate vicinity for the strangers she was apparently so worried about. Abby followed Nan's line of sight, seeing only a tall, skinny teenager rolling past Fish 'N Beans on his skateboard, the little old man Abby had seen the other day crossing the road into the Emerald Oval with his massive Great Dane, and a woman with a long ponytail seated on a nearby bus bench with her back to their side of the street, reading a magazine.

"Come on," said Nan, nudging Abby inside. "Let's get some dinner going."

They had the heated-up leftovers of their sympathy meals—most of which seemed to be tuna casserole.

"I didn't think people really ate this kind of thing," Abby said, wrinkling her nose at yet another plastic container full of the cheesy, fishy mixture.

"Me neither. I guess it's just one of those things everyone thinks they're supposed to do when somebody passes away," said Nan, prying the lid off another dish and peering inside. "A-ha! Mac

and cheese.” She reached for a spoon in the pile of cutlery she’d brought upstairs from Fish ’N Beans and started scooping it out. “We’ll have to figure out what we’re going to do with this stuff when we leave,” she muttered, apparently to herself.

Abby didn’t say anything, though she experienced a funny feeling at these words that was almost like surprise. Somehow, she’d forgotten that after Uncle Don’s service tomorrow, their two weeks in Silent Harbor would be coming swiftly to a close.

They ate off of paper plates in the living room and went to bed early. Nan said they needed to be at the funeral home early in the morning to meet the people who would be bringing them and Uncle Don’s body to the cemetery. Abby was nervous; she’d never been to a funeral before. The only person she had ever known who’d died was her PE teacher, when she was in the third grade. Though many students and their parents had gone to the funeral, Abby had come down with the flu and missed it. Would people cry a lot? Would Nan cry? Would anybody expect her or Nan to say something? What would she say if they did? Abby felt like she barely knew Uncle Don, and the little things she had learned about him this week were only making her more confused as to how she felt about his death.

Nan went through Abby’s clothes while Abby showered and washed her hair, and by the time she had changed into her pajamas, Nan had selected the only dress Abby had brought with her on the trip—a blue cotton one with white flowers embroidered on the hem—and laid it out on the coffee table in the living room so it would lose some of its wrinkles.

“Isn’t it kind of bright?” Abby asked. “Aren’t you supposed to wear black to funerals?”

“Some people do,” Nan said thoughtfully. She gently worked out a tangle in Abby’s hair with her fingers, then picked up the brush again and added, “I think a funeral should reflect the person whose life is being celebrated. And I know that Uncle Don’s favorite color was blue.”

After Nan had said good night, Abby lay awake for a long time, staring up at the shadows on her ceiling. Eventually, she rolled over and reached for her backpack underneath the bed, switching on the lamp. She pulled out her gingerbread cookie tin, smoothing the blanket down in front of her. When she lifted the lid of her collection, she saw the photograph she’d taken from Uncle Don’s house, of her father’s sixteenth birthday on the beach with Sasha. It hadn’t taken very long for Abby to realize who the third person in this picture was. After that first day in Uncle Don’s house, she had taken the photo out of her pocket to hide in her box of treasures, and the moment Abby saw it again, the girl’s identity had been immediately obvious, as if the back of her mind had puzzled over it all day and finally come up with an answer, but waited politely until she was ready to hear it. It wasn’t all that surprising, in the end, but from the way Nan had talked about them, Abby had always gotten the impression that her parents had met as grown-ups—not teenagers, just a few years older than her.

Now, she slid a fingertip over her mother’s long, dark hair, and the barely-visible spray of freckles on her forehead, which was just like Abby’s. Then, setting the picture aside, Abby pulled out a notebook, small enough to fit in a pocket. She had found this among the supplies in Uncle Don’s office, still with the packaging on, and had smuggled it out of the house, too.

She flipped it open to the right page, found the pen she’d borrowed from the counter in Fish ’N Beans, and added a new question to the list she was compiling. She intended to ask Nan every single

one on her list the moment they were on the road leaving Silent Harbor, when it would be hardest for her to avoid answering.

- 1. What happened to my parents? How did they meet each other? Did you know my mom well? How did they die? (the FULL story!)*
- 2. Why did you take me away from Silent Harbor? (fight with Uncle Don????)*
- 3. Why were you so upset that day at the library?
Beneath these, Abby added a fourth line.*
- 4. Did Uncle Don want us to stay in Silent Harbor? Did he miss us????*

This last question was the one that had bothered Abby the most in the last few days, as they had done their cleaning. In spite of the dust from disuse and the small amount of damage from the storm, Abby could tell that Uncle Don had taken very good care of Nan's house in the twelve years they'd spent apart. And she couldn't think of a reason for him to do that—or even to stay in Nan's house for so long—if he hadn't missed her. Even when she and Nan had been there together, with Nan's portable radio playing music that could be heard throughout the house as they worked, it had just felt to Abby like a lonely place.

Absentmindedly, Abby reached into the gingerbread tin and pulled out her tiger-stripe stone, rolling it around in her hand as she lay back on the quilt, considering her questions one by one inside her head. She hadn't sorted her collection once since they had come to Silent Harbor—probably because she still felt so unsettled about being here—but holding her favorite stone in her hand now gave her a sense of calm that she hadn't felt since before all this had happened. And with the comforting thought that after tomorrow, she and Nan would be back on the road to their regular lives, Abby fell asleep.

For the first time in nearly a week, she dreamed about the woods and the voice that whispered her name.

Abby...

She ignores the voice, moving along the forest path, determined to reach the end... or is the voice calling to her from up ahead?

But now there are flashes of light ahead, like lightning. A sudden jangling, like the ring of an alarm bell, sounds from nowhere but pulls her to a halt. She stops, hesitates—the voice becomes louder, hissing at her to keep going—but she turns and tries to run away...

And then she isn't running anymore; she is in her bedroom in the little blue house on Mountaintop Avenue. Her notebook and her parents' photograph lie on the bed with her collection. The rocks and shells and odds and ends are spread out like a fan across the quilt, and she knows that this is not accidental. But she doesn't remember arranging them that way...

Then a sound catches her attention from somewhere beyond the open door of her bedroom. A voice—not the one from the woods, but a familiar one, low and quiet.

"...won't matter after tomorrow. I'll deal with it after we leave."

She hesitates... should she answer?

"Then I expect you to tell her not to come."

She opens her mouth to say something, but her familiar bedroom disappears in a whirl of color, and now she sits in the heart of the Emerald Oval, her collection spread out in front of her, at the base of the Founders' Statue. The air is warm and comfortable, sunlight filtering through green leaves overhead... She is waiting for someone to arrive; they will be here soon, she knows that much, and she is looking forward to it. For now, something is strange about her collection. The pieces have never done this before, but when she touches each one in turn, they glow with a white-gold light that flickers like a drop of sun on the surface of water. A feeling of peace washes over her... she lifts her face, feeling the warm air on her skin... she opens her eyes... and the blank-eyed face of Abigail

Mallory's bronze statue is staring back at her. As one, all the heads of the women in the Founders' Statue turn and stare, too, and she feels a jolt of fear—

And now she is running and it's night again, so dark she can barely see her way between trees and over slippery, wet leaves—the sound of the ocean is roaring in her ears—and another sound, a voice, this one screaming for her—

When Abby woke up again, the sun was streaming through the bedroom window and Nan was flying around the apartment like a whirlwind; the bedroom door was still swinging from when she'd flung it open and told Abby to get up. Realizing she'd actually fallen asleep with her photograph, notebook, and collection scattered around her on the bed, she hastily scrambled to scoop them all back into the gingerbread tin. Luckily enough, Nan didn't seem to have noticed anything out of the ordinary—she was too preoccupied.

“We o’ershlept!” Nan called from the bathroom, where she was brushing her teeth, half-dressed. “‘Er gonnabe late, c’mon!”

Feeling tired, worn, and heavy, she dressed, braided her hair, and trudged from the apartment after Nan, who had the car's engine started before Abby even made it down the stairs. As Nan drove away from Fish 'N Beans, Abby saw a large handmade sign in the front window that said CLOSED FOR FUNERAL. She shut her eyes and leaned her head back, feeling vaguely sick from lack of sleep.

Time moved strangely as they drove—or perhaps it was just that Abby kept tuning in and out of attention, like a radio with a bad signal. In what seemed like seconds, they arrived at the Bariquit & Toomes Funeral Home, and Nan told her to wait in the car while she checked that everything was in order. Then just as quickly, they were back on the road, following a long, black car up a winding

street that wove up the side of Port Hill. Eventually, they rounded a corner, and Abby saw a cemetery dotted with headstones. Nan parked at the end of the path that cut through the cemetery, where the people from the funeral home were removing Uncle Don's casket from the long, black car.

Nan and Abby watched from the car for a few moments as six men in dark suits started down a narrower path to the burial site with the casket supported between them. When they got out of the car to follow the men, Nan took Abby's hand and squeezed it. A large crowd of people dressed in black awaited their arrival at the burial site—some were watching the men carrying the casket, while others were looking at Nan and Abby with expressions of warm sympathy. Abby saw a few of Uncle Don's employees from Fish 'N Beans, Mr. Attwater, the woman from the flower shop, who was busily chatting to a woman with long hair and sunglasses, and Mrs. Conroy from the library, but she didn't have a hope of recognizing any of the dozens of others who had gathered to say goodbye to Uncle Don.

Abby glanced up at Nan, who gripped her hand tightly as they approached the crowd. "Nan?"

Nan nodded. "I'm okay," she said, without a trace of a smile—though she didn't look like she was close to tears again, either. If anything, Abby thought she seemed on edge.

The service was very short. Once Nan had said hello to some of the people who had gathered, she took Abby's hand again and they all turned to face the casket, which had a flower arrangement on its lid. Someone from the funeral home—or at least, he had been in the car with the men from the funeral home—stepped forward, welcomed everyone and thanked them for being there. He spoke a little bit about Uncle Don—about how he would be remembered as a friend and a neighbor, and an important member of the community in Silent Harbor. Then, he held a hand out to Nan.

"And now, Don's wife Evangeline has some words to share, on behalf of herself and Don's niece."

Nan dropped Abby's hand and stepped forward, reaching into her bag and producing a book that Abby recognized as one she had taken from Uncle Don's house while they were cleaning.

Nan opened the book and cleared her throat. "If you knew Don—you know he wasn't really a fan of long speeches. Or talking, in general."

There was a rumble of polite laughter from the group of people standing around Abby.

Nan's features relaxed slightly, and she almost smiled. "He did, however, love poetry. He used to read this poem to our daughter and—it was one of her favorites." She cleared her throat again and read,

*"Life, believe, is not a dream
So dark as sages say;
Oft a little morning rain
Foretells a pleasant day.*

*Sometimes there are clouds of gloom,
But these are transient all;
If the shower will make the roses bloom,
O why lament its fall?"*

Nan stopped, closed the book, and came back to Abby, whom she pulled close to her side in a hug. Abby, however, had just noticed something. Another headstone was set close to the grave into which Uncle Don's casket was being lowered. Even from ten feet away, Abby could read the name: Sasha Evangeline Knitt. Nan and Uncle Don's daughter—the girl who had been like Matthew Bell's sister, who grinned with him in the photograph of his sixteenth birthday.

As the group of mourners began to disperse, some stopping to speak to Nan, Abby moved towards Sasha's marker. Someone had lain a small bouquet of fresh yellow flowers beside it—probably someone who had come for Uncle Don's service, she thought. The headstone was very simple, light gray and polished, with little threads in the granite that glittered in the sunshine. Above

Sasha's name, there was a kind of symbol that Abby didn't recognize—it was like a five-pointed star, but with very thin points that almost looked like the blades of swords, and the point at which they met in the center was a much smaller, upside-down star with five points. It almost looked to Abby like the limbs of a starfish. Just as she was about to bend down and study the symbol more closely, she became aware of someone coming up behind her. She looked back at Nan, who was smiling slightly at the flowers on Sasha's marker.

They stood side by side for a moment. Nan wrapped her arm around Abby's shoulders, and Abby hugged Nan's waist. After a moment, Nan said, "She would've loved knowing you. She was crazy about you from the minute she knew you were coming."

Abby couldn't hold back her question anymore. "Are... are my parents here?"

Nan tensed up, but patted Abby's back. "Of course," she managed to say. "Do you want to see them?"

Abby thought about this question for a moment, gazing down at the yellow flowers. Finally, she nodded.

Still keeping an arm around her, Nan gently steered Abby wordlessly along the row away from the burial site, checking the headstones as they went. In the next row over from Uncle Don and Sasha's graves, Nan stopped before two markers identical to Sasha's, set close to each other. They were newer than the ones immediately surrounding them. Disengaging herself from Nan, Abby took a few steps towards them and read:

Matthew Gilmore Bell

Elisabeth Quinn Mallory Bell

She felt like her heart had taken a leap and lodged itself in her throat, which was now aching terribly. She tried to swallow, but couldn't. It was as if her brain couldn't process what she was

seeing. Of course, she'd known her parents must have been buried in Silent Harbor—or she had always assumed so. But seeing their graves like this... it made her mother and father real in a way that Abby hadn't expected. She slowly sat down cross-legged on the grass, gazing at their names intently. That was when she noticed that both her mother's and father's headstones had the same star symbol as Sasha's had.

"What does that mark mean?" Abby asked, pointing at the one above her mother's name.

Nan didn't answer. Abby looked back at her, but Nan was staring at something on the ground: a small bouquet of fresh yellow flowers, nestled between the two markers. "Did you put these here?"

Abby asked.

"No," said Nan. She blinked, frowning. "Maybe..."

"Huh?"

Nan seemed to shake herself. "Nothing. It must have been Carolyn. She probably guessed we'd be coming to see them."

Abby turned back to the headstones. Their date of death was the same as Sasha's had been—almost exactly twelve years ago. In the distance, she heard car engines starting and the sound of people driving away from the cemetery. Nan didn't say anything until Abby finally got up and came to hug her, letting out one, huge sob. Nan rubbed her back quietly, waiting until Abby calmed down to lead her away.

They didn't talk in the car. Abby's feeling of queasiness had returned, and by the time they arrived at the house on Heliotrope Lane, a number of strange cars lined the street. "I asked Carolyn to open the house up," Nan said, as she pulled into the driveway beside the rusty blue pickup truck. She parked and faced Abby. "You don't look good, kiddo. You want something to eat?"

Abby shook her head.

“Lie down?”

She shook her head again—and then changed her mind. At the moment, facing a house full of strangers who would ask her questions about how old she was and what subjects she liked in school seemed totally impossible. “Yeah. Can I?”

Nan nodded. “Of course. Use your dad’s room. People won’t be here very long, and then we can go back to the apartment and pack.”

Abby blinked, confused. “Pack for what?”

“So we can get on the road home,” Nan told her. She wasn’t looking at Abby anymore, but fishing in the backseat for her handbag. “I’ll be able to finish things up here from California.”

“You can?”

“Yep.” Nan got out of the car and waved at her to come along. Abby did, frowning curiously. She was surprised that Nan was so ready to leave—she experienced a fresh wave of the feeling she’d had last night, of somehow not wanting their time in Silent Harbor to end yet.

Nan let them in through the entryway; in the living room, Abby heard the clink of cups and plates and a low hum of voices, and as she started up the stairs, she heard Mrs. Conroy say, “Eve! There you are—but where’s Abby?”

Abby put on speed and skipped up the last few stairs to the second floor; she definitely wasn’t in the mood for small talk. Stopping in the small bathroom to check her reflection, she saw that her eyes were still red and puffy from crying. She washed her hands and went to dry them—but she and Nan hadn’t left any towels on the bar in the tiny bathroom. Not wanting to mess up her dress in

case Nan wanted her to come back downstairs after all, Abby left the bathroom and crossed to the linen closet, the door that stood next to her father's bedroom.

But when she opened it, she froze. The tall, narrow door did not open onto a linen closet at all. It led to a narrow flight of wooden stairs that went up to a third story, hidden behind a green-painted door.

For a moment, Abby was completely disoriented, and had to rack her brains for the moment Nan had told her that this door was a linen closet, or even whether she had seen Nan pulling towels or sheets from it. She realized that Nan hadn't told her anything about it—in fact, she had not so much as opened the door in the week they had been cleaning. Then another realization crashed down on Abby. She hurried to double-check—Uncle Don's office, bathroom, her father's bedroom, and Uncle Don's bedroom were the only rooms on this floor, and there were no bedrooms downstairs, which meant that the green door at the top of the stairs could only be one thing: Sasha's bedroom.

With a sudden sense of mounting excitement she couldn't quite explain, Abby climbed the stairs, being careful not to make too much noise. At the top, she hesitated. Would Nan be angry if she went into Sasha's room? She had clearly avoided it for over a week—but there were many possible explanations for that. It may have been that Sasha was already living away from home when she'd died, so her things were no longer there and Uncle Don had started using her room as attic space—it was even more likely that it was just too painful for Nan to look at or think about.

Deciding that Nan would never have to know she was there, Abby reached out and turned the knob, and the green door swung open with a soft creak. Sasha's bedroom was enormous—it ran the length and width of the whole house, though it had sloped ceilings that matched the pitched roof. It was hot and stuffy up here, and Abby wrinkled her nose at the smell of years of dust.

Clearly, the attic had been specially converted for Sasha to live in: the furniture in the room was all covered with sheets, just like in the rooms downstairs. Around the sides of the room, the upright walls were unnaturally short and lined with bookshelves. If Abby stood against one, she would have had to lower her head to avoid the roof. The center of the room, however, was high above her head. Sunlight filtered in through four windowed gables, and little dust motes swirled in the beams. The bookshelves were jam-packed with records, tapes, a stereo, and more books than Abby had ever seen outside of a library—Sasha’s collection put Uncle Don’s office to shame. And this wasn’t all—evidence that Sasha had inherited Nan’s artistic ability was everywhere, from the taped-up pencil sketches on yellowed paper of people, objects, and buildings, to a huge oil painting of what seemed to be the Emerald Oval that stood propped in a corner, half-covered by a sheet.

Abby took a few steps forward, the floorboards creaking beneath her as she gazed directly upward in amazement. Sasha had painted the ceiling of her room like the sky—not a single, solid blue, but a range of blues that swirled like clouds from one shade to the next, everything from almost white to a deep navy—and like Abby’s father, she had decorated it with stars. But instead of peeling glow-in-the-dark stickers, these were little jewel-bright flecks of shiny gold paint that looked like real constellations in the night sky.

“Wow,” Abby whispered to herself, sitting down on a dusty braided rug, transfixed. Sasha had included a border around the edges of her work in the same gold paint as the constellations, a repeating pattern of stars, suns, and crescent moons, all around the edge of the room. Abby frowned, thinking for a moment that the five-pointed stars looked remarkably like the symbol she’d seen in the cemetery, and remembering that Nan had not answered when she’d asked what it meant. She had the sudden, brilliant idea that she should find a pen and draw the symbol on something, so she

would remember to put it in her notebook of questions when they got back to the apartment... but it was so hot and stuffy up here, she didn't want to get up just yet...

Quite suddenly, Abby was awake again, with no memory at all of falling asleep. She shook herself, unable to remember the last time she'd slept so soundly. She was a little surprised to find herself curled up on the braided rug in Sasha's attic bedroom. Then she noticed how different the sunlight was as it streamed in through the windows and felt a thrill of panic—if Nan hadn't already started looking for her, she definitely would be soon. Abby got up and slipped out of the room, shutting the green door behind her and dusting herself off as she descended the stairs; for now, she thought it was probably better that Nan wasn't aware she'd found Sasha's room. Judging by how quiet it sounded from the second-floor landing, things had settled down among the guests downstairs, if there were even any left. She started down to the first floor, but stopped when she heard voices in the entryway.

"...didn't mean to be rude," Nan was saying. "I just—"

"I understand completely," said another, unfamiliar voice belonging to a woman. Abby couldn't see her from her current vantage point. Neither she nor Nan seemed to have realized she was on the stairs.

"You have to understand—I haven't—told her about you." Nan's voice was brittle. Abby's ears pricked up at once. Was Nan talking about her?

"I haven't given you any reason to," said the strange woman. "Listen, Evangeline, I know how Beth felt about me when she was younger, but before she died—"

"Sasha always defended you," Nan interrupted stiffly. "She'd—she'd tell Beth you weren't so bad. And... I know you tried to make things right before..."

The stranger gave a warm, fond laugh. Abby's heart jumped into her throat—Nan was talking about her mother and Sasha with this person. Who was she? Abby crept a few stairs farther down, and saw that Nan was actually standing on the front porch, talking to a woman whose face Abby couldn't see. The front door was wide open, and their voices carried clearly through the screen door. Abby could only see the lower half of the stranger's body; she wore a long skirt that brushed her ankles.

"I don't want anything but a chance to talk to Abby," the woman said, her voice becoming low and pleading.

"I don't know if that's a good idea right now."

"But she's coming up on her thirteenth birthday," the woman insisted, startling Abby even more. How did this woman know that, and why on earth did she want to talk to her about it? "She must have questions about what's happening."

"She doesn't know anything about any of it," said Nan sharply. "And she won't until after her birthday, because I'm taking her back to California."

"Evangeline," said the woman, sounding shocked. "What are you going to do if she turns thirteen and—"

"Please keep your voice down." Abby was leaned so far over the stairs, trying not to miss a single word, that she was practically on the point of tumbling down the stairs. Nan was still talking. "It was my understanding that there's only a fifty percent chance—or less—that it will happen. So that means there's a fifty percent chance or greater that it won't, and if it doesn't, then that's that. She's not training, she's not learning anything, she's done—she's going to grow up as a normal kid from a normal place and have a real life!"

“But if it does happen—”

“Then she still isn’t training! I’ve seen what happens, what you all do to each other, and I will never forget it.” The sudden bite in Nan’s voice was shocking—Abby had never heard Nan speak this way to anyone.

“You know that isn’t an option, you must remember what Beth was like at that age—”

“Vividly,” Nan’s voice was like ice.

The stranger took a nervous step back. “I understand your reservations. I do. It’s why I waited until after everyone had left to speak to you.”

Nan made a sound in her throat. “I thought I saw you at the cemetery.”

“I only came to pay my respects,” the woman insisted. “Please—at least let me speak to Abby. Let me tell her who I am myself, before you leave. I know it’s my fault I never got in contact, but—I just couldn’t bring myself to face Don and ask him how to reach you.” There was a pause. “I don’t blame you in the least for not mentioning me to her. The library the other day—”

“I am sorry about that.” Nan’s voice had lost its edge. “I didn’t expect Carolyn to tell me you were there.”

The stranger seemed to hesitate. “Well, I wasn’t really expecting to see you, either. She didn’t see me?”

Abby saw Nan shake her head through the carved glass of the windows next to the door. Then, she gave a short sigh. “Maybe we can find some time...but I’ll need to talk to her first. She’s had a rough couple of weeks, I’m not sure—”

It was as if someone had just electrified Abby—without a second thought, she clattered down the stairs and stood in the open doorway, looking out onto the porch where Nan stood. Both she and the stranger turned around, startled.

The stranger was a tall, pretty, middle-aged woman with long auburn hair. She wore a white shirt and a long skirt that made Abby think of flowers and hippie music, and the moment Abby saw her, she felt a peculiar sensation of familiarity—as if they had met before. In the afternoon sunlight that filled the porch, Abby could see a large white scar that came from under the woman's collar, up her neck, along the edge of her jaw and onto her left cheek.

Under her breath, Nan muttered a swearword which, if Abby had said it, would've gotten her grounded for a week.

Abby barely heard it, because her thoughts seemed to be rocketing along a train track faster than she could think them. The feeling of *déjà vu* she was having was getting stronger, and she began to see more familiar features in the woman's face, her body, the way she held herself—

But just as an outlandish idea took root, Abby realized it couldn't be possible, because she had seen Elisabeth Bell's grave for herself that very morning.

The woman on the porch seemed just as stunned as Abby felt, her dark eyes wide and her mouth agape. Then, she managed to say, "Oh. You're Abby."

It wasn't a question.

"Yes." Abby swallowed quickly, trying to get rid of the nervous crack in her voice. She took a step towards the screen door, not breaking eye contact. "How do you know—?"

"Oh, I've known you for a long, long time," the woman said warmly, a smile lighting her face. "Since before you were born. Abby, my name is Elinor."

The way she said this made it seem like a great, important announcement. Abby didn't respond, and Elinor's eager expression faltered. She shot Nan a worried glance, and the scarred half of her face made the hurt in her eyes stand out even more.

Nan finally raised her head to look Abby in the eye, and came a few steps forward to open the screen door. "Come on, sweet pea," she said. She took Abby's arm, drawing her out of the house and moving her to stand directly between herself and Elinor. "Abigail... This is Elinor Mallory. She's your mother's sister."