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Capers Island, A Novel

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Capers Island, A Novel

Thesis submitted to
The Graduate College of
Marshall University

In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
English

By
Jennifer J. Cavender

Prof. John Van Kirk, Committee Chair
Prof. Art Stringer
and Dr. Katharine Rodier

Marshall University
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ABSTRACT

Capers Island, A Novel

By Jennifer J. Cavender

Capers Island is a creative thesis about a woman named Delaney who has been having problems sleepwalking ever since her grandparents passed away. She decides to spend the summer on Capers Island, visiting an old college friend. While there, she visits a hypnotist to uncover repressed memories from her childhood. She begins the novel alone in West Virginia, and in the end, winds up on Capers Island in a tightly knit community. The novel contains elements of magical realism, the supernatural, and the psychological.

For Mom
who taught me that there is nothing better than
a good book,
a pair of flip flops and the beach.

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

A few summers ago, my reading list consisted of books from Oprah's list. I began with Janet Finch's *White Oleander*, which is a beautiful book filled with wonderful imagery. I love how Finch creates a character out of the wind. Next I read Jane Hamilton's *A Map of the World*. I like Hamilton for her dialogue. It is three-dimensional. Every time I find myself writing stilted dialogue, I pick up one of Hamilton's books for inspiration. I also read Joyce Carol Oates' *We Were the Mulvaney's*, among others. While each book was beautifully written, they were all dark and emotionally draining. It seems today that for literature to be considered good, it must be dark. I disagree. I don't believe that literature has to be depressing to have depth. That's when I decided to write *Capers Island*, a lighthearted, humorous book that contains themes of death, loss, love, friendship and family.

As I began writing, I looked to Barbara Kingsolver's *The Bean Trees*. The book is filled with humor, while at the same time dealing with poverty, abuse, and the plight of the Native Americans. I believe that characterization is the most important aspect of the book, and I love quirky characters that are also very real. *The Bean Tree's* main character, Taylor, is as quirky as they come. She grows up in Kentucky, with the main goal of graduating from high school without getting pregnant. She achieves her goal, purchases an old Volkswagen bug, and leaves Kentucky, deciding to drive until the car breaks down. On the way, she is handed a Native American baby, and thus, Taylor becomes a mother while at the same time achieving her goal of not getting pregnant.

When I first started writing *Capers Island*, I made lists of character traits. For Olivia to be quirky, she must believe in reincarnation. When Delaney, due to her sleepwalking, wakes up on

the beach, Olivia drags her to a hypnotist, deciding that her problem began in a past life. This scene evolved into a major story line in the novel: Delaney's excavation of her own childhood through hypnosis to uncover repressed memories.

Uncovering repressed memories posed a problem. What could have happened in Delaney's life that was so bad she repressed it? The very first thing that the readers today would think is incest. As I write, I try to ask myself what the reader would expect, and then write the opposite. I made a list of all the horrible things that could have happened to her, including kidnapping and death. Finally, I decided that loving someone so much could force a person to forget. Delaney loved her Uncle Greg so much, that when he left, she forgot him. It was easier for her to forget than to remember the pain of his leaving.

As I've written the novel, I tried to keep the reader guessing. Are there really ghosts on Capers or is Delaney delusional? Does Gram really visit her in dreams? Are her hypnosis sessions real? Can Chestnut predict the future, or is it all a coincidence? In this way, *Capers Island* is a light-hearted version of *The Turn of the Screw*, by Henry James. Like the James' governess, Delaney is the only one who can see Walt, and she never discusses him with anyone else. The future event that sparked Chestnut's hair loss, Charlie's death, occurs at the end of the novel. We never know if Chestnut's hair grows back in the end, which would provide evidence for her ability to predict the future.

Capers Island is also the psychological search for Delaney to become whole again. In this way, my novel resembles the contemporary, psychological novels like Pat Conroy's *The Prince of Tides*. Conroy's main character visits a psychologist to discuss a horrible tragedy from his childhood. Only when he deals with his feelings concerning the rape, does he become psychologically well. While Conroy's main character visits a psychologist, Delaney visits a new-

age hypnotist. Many psychologists today are hypnotists, but it is important to remember that Zoe is not a licensed psychologist. She is a fortune teller and a past-life hypnotist.

Finally, as I read back through my novel, I think I have captured a thread of what life would be like on an island in terms of prejudices. Sasha, an African American, is very accepted. Veronica, who is homosexual, was not accepted as a teenager, but is accepted by the islanders today. The real dichotomy on the island occurs between the locals and the tourists. The locals have a love/hate relationship with the tourists. Locals depend on tourists for money, yet they consider tourists to be outsiders. Delaney serves as a bridge in the book. She is a West Virginia resident, living on Capers Island, so in a way, she serves as a bridge between the locals and the tourists. She is also a liminal figure between life and death. She talks to ghosts, and can go into trances to see the past. She is also the bridge that brings Chaz and his father together.

Prologue

Holly Springs, West Virginia

“When I first started sleepwalking, I thought I imagined it.”

Delaney touched the butcher paper beneath her as she spoke. It felt smooth, and it crinkled as she twisted it. She wanted to do anything, touch anything, see anything but the doctor’s head beneath her as he stitched up her leg. Every so often, she would glance down at the doctor’s graceful hands as he pulled black thread through her skin, like stitching up the hem of a ragged skirt.

“The first time, I woke up on the screened-in porch,” she said, remembering the feel of the vinyl chaise with the green ivy pattern. The chaise conformed to her body, like a dentist’s chair. “I thought I fell asleep out there and forgot to go to bed. I thought it was odd that I locked myself out of the house, but I figured I was tired.”

“Uh-huh.”

Delaney didn’t know whether or not he listened. She didn’t care. She liked talking about it, for once.

“I climbed up the trellis to my bedroom. I always leave the window open because I love the sound of crickets.”

She took a deep breath as she recounted her story, trying to remember all of her nocturnal wanderings. In the pause, the doctor looked up, taking a break before pulling the thread through. She could see a circle of scalp where his hair had receded, and when he looked up at her with his

brown eyes, she detected compassion. Rare in the emergency room. In her experience, they stitched you up, gave you a tetanus shot, and sent you on your way.

“The next time?” he said.

“The next time, I woke up in the basement staring at the furnace.” She left out the part about the pilot light that was inexplicably relit in the morning.

“How many times total?” he asked.

“A few.”

It had been a while since Delaney visited Saint Frances’s ER. When Gram was sick, she used to visit the hospital often. She remembered standing beside the narrow bed, holding onto Gram’s hand, as the doctors ran test after test. Sound still traveled through the white screens -- patients’ moans, ringing telephones, and beeping machines.

“I woke up at the kitchen table a couple of times.” She didn’t mention the apple pies she had baked during the night. In her sleep, Gram recited recipes. She told her how to measure sugar. Fill the bowl until Gram told her to stop. That’s how Gram cooked. Couldn’t write down recipes because she didn’t know the exact measurements. She cooked by sight and feel. When Delaney woke up, she could still taste cinnamon on her lips. She had finished a slice of pie and half a cup of coffee in her sleep. She even did the dishes. As she inspected them the next morning, she noticed a plastic bowl with black writing on the sides, instructing her how much flour, sugar and butter. Awake, she baked another pie, and even though she followed the directions, she couldn’t quite get it right.

“How about nightmares?”

The doctor passed the tools to the nurse, and patted Delaney’s leg with an alcohol swab. She couldn’t feel it.

“Nightmares?” she asked.

The doctor stood up. She found it harder to divulge secrets. As she stared into his eyes, she wondered if he was judging her. Would he send her up to the psychiatric ward next?

“Do you have nightmares, too?”

Delaney looked down at her leg. Twelve stitches total. Stitched up, her leg resembled the barbed wire fence she walked into. She wanted to yank them out, so he would have to restitch them, and she could talk to his bald spot.

“I can’t remember.”

“Do you drink? Smoke? Do drugs?”

“What does that have to do with anything?” she asked, as annoyance prickled her skin. It felt like a healing scab that itches, when it feels better to tear the scab away.

“Sleepwalking in adults is most often drug or alcohol induced.”

He opened another alcohol swab, and the medicinal smell became stronger. Delaney wished he would swab away all of her fears and annoyances with the germs.

“I don’t do drugs.”

The doctor rubbed the swab on her upper arm. It felt cold.

“Occasionally, I drink, but I’ve been sleepwalking for a year. I drink socially. It’s not a problem.”

“Anything stressful happen a year ago?”

As he said the words, she felt the jab of the needle and a slight sting as the doctor injected the tetanus shot into her muscle.

“My grandparents died.”

“Were you close?”

He pulled the needle out. Delaney's arm felt heavy, like it was suspended on her body with twine.

"They raised me. I still live in their house."

"Alone?"

Delaney nodded her head yes.

The doctor signaled the nurse to leave, then pulled a stool over to sit on. Once again, he was lower than Delaney, and she felt infinitely better.

"Is this the only time anything like this ever happen?"

He glanced at her leg, and the terror of the episode came back. She had walked out of the house, over the suspended bridge that connected her yard to the neighbor's. In her sleep, she had held onto the railings as the bridge jostled with each step. One wrong step and she would have fallen ten feet down to the creek. It was late May, and the water was low. She would have fallen, and landed on the rocks. Instead, she walked across the neighbor's yard to the field, right into the barbed wire fence. The prong of one barb had embedded into her thigh, and the pain woke her up. The pain was nothing compared to the terror of waking up outside alone.

"The only time I ever hurt myself."

"I'm recommending counseling."

"For what? Because my grandparents died? I don't need a shrink to tell me that."

"I can't force you to go, but you should think about it." He stood up, and flipped open her medical chart. Delaney wondered what he was writing. "Do you have anyone you can stay with at least?"

Delaney shook her head yes, wondering whom she could call. If she had fallen off the bridge and hit her head on the rocks, no one would have noticed. The water would have washed away her blood.

Day 1

Capers Island, North Carolina

Sunbeams sliced through the mini blinds, casting blades of yellow across Chaz's face. Damn. He'd forgotten to close them the night before. He glanced at the clock. Only seven and the air in his one-bedroom apartment felt like hot liquid against his skin. If only he could sleep with noise, he would turn on the window unit air conditioner and fill his tiny room with Arctic air, but the slightest sound yanked him from sleep. Once he was up, he was up.

Ever since he turned up the clock in April for daylight savings time, he had averaged less and less sleep. That damn sun. Now that summer tiptoed nearer, he imagined spending the coming months in a stupor as hazy as the humid air.

He rolled onto his side in hopes of blocking out the sun and fooling his body. The motion jostled the bed, and Chestnut, who had snuggled up against his pillow, leaped from the bed with a peeved mew. He reached his hand out to stop her, but the end of her tail, only half a tail, grazed his palm on her way to the kitchen. He knew she was headed toward the counter, a place she claimed as her own the day she adopted him. That first day, she scooted past him through the door and sat on his kitchen counter in all of her orange and white glory. Even though he wasn't a cat person, he felt an Egyptian royalty emanating from this stray, as if she possessed some strange kind of wisdom. He had soon learned how much wisdom she possessed.

When he won ten thousand dollars in the lottery, enabling him to become part owner of the Bass Cleft Tavern, Chestnut's hair had fallen out. At the beginning of the month when he found bits of fur all over the furniture and carpet, he didn't worry. He chalked it up to spring and

the warm weather. When there were more bald patches than hair, and Chaz could count every black spot on her skin, he called the vet.

“It could be stress,” said Dr. Johnson, after a barrage of tests.

On the way home, Chaz stopped at the Circle K and bought an instant scratch-off. He matched three hearts and won the cash. The next day, Chestnut’s hair grew back. When she lost her hair again, his dad had a heart attack.

He slammed his palm down on the sheet, and felt a clump of fur.

“No.” The words tore from his throat, thick with mucus. “No. No. No.”

He glanced at his palm.

“Shit.” He tried to rub the fur off, but only spread it to his other hand.

The beach house sat on the corner of Sage and Fennel, on what used to be the second row of houses. Hurricane Floyd had wiped out many of the beachfront properties in 1999, so that now the blue-gray house on stilts had an unobstructed view of the ocean. Delaney could see it from the driveway.

She looked up at the house, and saw Olivia running down the stairs. The last time Delaney had seen her, Olivia was pregnant. Now, she looked deflated, like a balloon leaking helium.

“I’ve missed you,” said Olivia, as she bent down to hug her. Delaney felt the angles of Olivia’s shoulder blades.

“Me too.”

Never much for affection, Olivia broke the hug first. She stepped back and looked Delaney over.

“You look exactly the same,” said Olivia.

Delaney scrutinized each new wrinkle on Olivia’s face, wondering if she were telling the truth. Did Delaney’s skin look like it belonged on a different body, as if it were a suit that needed to be taken in a half size, or was that something that happened only after pregnancy?

“Come on,” said Olivia. “We can unload your bags later.”

Delaney followed Olivia up the steps, many of which were cracked and peeling.

“Here it is.” Olivia’s voice carried the faint scent of apology, as she held open the screen door.

The door opened into the kitchen. Updated stainless steel appliances and marbled floor tiles marked Olivia’s influence, but the wallpaper still had the unmistakable décor from the fifties: pink flowers on a background of sea foam green stems and leaves, overlaid with shimmery, silver lines.

“Mark wouldn’t let me get rid of the wallpaper,” she said. “It’s hard to live like this when you have a degree in interior design. I keep thinking what will people say, but you have to be careful when it comes to redecorating. Everything reminds him of his dad.”

“I know how he feels,” said Delaney, thinking of what she had left behind in West Virginia. “Ever since Gram and Pap died, I haven’t been able to change anything. I even left their clothes hanging in the closet.”

“Well, you miss them. You loved them.”

From anyone else, these words would have sounded normal, almost comforting, but to Delaney, it sounded as if Olivia was telling her how to feel, as if she wasn't capable of naming her own emotions.

"So show me the place already," said Delaney, trying to remember the affection she had felt for Olivia while driving over the bridge.

Delaney followed Olivia through the house onto the back porch facing the ocean.

"I'm going to redo this." Olivia rubbed her hand across the wooden banister that separated the waist high wall from the window openings. "Knock down these walls and install floor to ceiling windows. Ivory Berber carpet, with large sitting pillows. My meditation room. I can completely enjoy the ocean from here."

Delaney glanced around what used to be the screened-in porch. The wood was painted the same gray as the house, the color of old pigeons. Olivia had ripped out the screens so that the windows were blank. They looked eaten. Shards of wire collected on the floor.

"I added on the walkway and gazebo last week." Olivia waved her arm in the direction of the ocean. "Mark hasn't seen it yet. He'll get the bill from the carpenters and wonder what I'm doing out here. He told me not to mess with the inside. Never said anything about the outside."

"But this is sacred."

"It's just a house."

Delaney didn't know how to explain it. How a house isn't just a house. It's an extension of everyone who ever lived in it. Even when it ceased to be a person's home, he still left his fingerprints, soul prints, on it. She wondered if changing it would anger Mark's dad, and as she glanced at the gazebo attached to the long wooden walkway, she felt as though the house was sticking its tongue out. The thought caused her to shiver, and at that moment, wind blew in from

the ocean and across the porch, causing an empty rocking chair to sway. A faint wisp of silver floated upwards, like smoke, and Delaney caught the slight scent of cigar.

“Cold?” asked Olivia. “Tidal winds, but normally not until evening.”

Delaney rubbed her hands up and down over her arms, more of an attempt to comfort herself than for warmth. She hadn’t traveled five hundred miles to live with more ghosts, but they followed her everywhere she went.

The phone rang. Olivia’s daughter DJ. While Olivia chatted, Delaney unpacked her bags, placing her clothes in the guest room dresser. She pulled out Pap’s old cardigan with the frayed edges around the collar and slipped it on even though it was 80 degrees. The sweater smelled like home -- like detergent, Old Spice and pipe tobacco. When she returned to West Virginia, she would bring the smell of another man’s cigars and the salt of the beach.

Surely, Olivia would be off the phone by now. Delaney walked over to the sliding glass door, and slid it open a fraction of an inch. She wanted to see if Mark’s dad’s ghost was on the porch. She heard the sound of the chair rocking, and the soft drone of Olivia talking on the telephone.

“What are you and Grandma doing tomorrow?” said Olivia.

A long pause, and then Olivia talking again. “Wow. The zoo, huh? Are you going to see the gorillas?”

Delaney wondered how long she should stand there, eavesdropping.

“Sweetie. I gotta go. I love you,” said Olivia.

The words had the same effect on Delaney as a popsicle on a cavity. They made her insides feel like electrified tin. Standing in the doorway listening to Olivia talk to her daughter

felt lonelier than any night she stayed by herself in West Virginia. This was the first time she had ever gone anywhere and had no one to call. No one left to worry about her.

She stepped out onto the porch.

“Ready to go?” asked Olivia. The rocking chair groaned when she stood, like an old dog settling down for the night.

Delaney nodded, not trusting herself to speak. She didn’t want to cry in front of Olivia.

“I didn’t think I’d make it, Gator,” said Veronica as she breezed into the Bass Cleft Tavern, carrying two black cases. “Sasha’s parking the car.”

Chaz detected the scent of coconut oil, and noticed an oily gleam on her skin. He knew Veronica so well, he could recite her day: orange juice for breakfast, followed by two hours at the beach, and then a hurried outside shower in her bikini before donning clothes in the public restroom and heading to the bar.

“That’s another gator,” said Chaz, using the expression they’d concocted in junior high. The phrase had multiple connotations: Hello; I’m sorry you didn’t get the job; How’s the weather?; I think I’m in love with you; I have cataracts.

Veronica seemed more hyper today than usual, giving Chaz a cursory look, and mumbling the comeback, ‘Right, Right,’ too quickly, refusing to observe the customary two-second pause in between the words or to nod her head up and down.

She dropped the cases by the stage near the front of the bar.

“I don’t think we’ve had enough practice. I mean, I don’t think I even remember the music to ‘Pennsylvania 6-500.’ What kind of a swing band musician am I? Especially with these old farts. They’re not here yet are they? Hiding in a back booth with their martinis? I love to watch them dance. Like they step on eggshells. Don’t make a single noise with their feet. They glide. What if they don’t like us? I’m so nervous. If they were younger...I don’t know. Maybe they wouldn’t care so much about the authenticity of the music.”

Watching Veronica speak was like watching a performance. Her hand movements seemed choreographed, and her body seemed to take up more space than she possibly needed for her five-foot frame. Chaz thought Veronica belonged in a six-foot body. When she asked a question, referring to herself as “I” (“What kind of musician am I”), she touched her sternum with her right hand, with all five fingers, rubbing her shirt up and down as she spoke. She’d occasionally point to the tables and wave her right hand.

“Hold it, Ronnie,” said Chaz, calling her by a nickname she didn’t like to hear. He hoped she would fixate on the name so that her nervousness would rise up to the ceiling fans, and waft out the door when Sasha arrived. Again, she only glanced at him before launching into a diatribe about the acoustical problems they were sure to encounter.

“What if they can’t hear us? Do you think we should turn the amps up? Play louder? How many of them have hearing aids? Should we put up a sign? Turn your hearing aids up ‘cause we’re not playing loud?”

Chaz stepped behind the bar, deciding a shot of Galliano would calm her down. Veronica loved black licorice. He slipped a cordial glass from the grooves above the bar, poured the pale yellow liquid to the three-finger mark, and dropped one coffee bean into the glass before handing it to her. The smell of licorice was pungent.

“Thanks,” she said. He watched her slide the glass across the copper bar with her left hand, a small callused nub where her middle finger had been. In the eighth grade, a bee stung Veronica as she was latching her life vest before water skiing. Weird things happened to Veronica, so instead of merely causing a slight, prickling pain, a little swelling, or a small red bump where the stinger pierced the skin, her finger swelled up to the size of a jumbo-sized hot dog from the Trolley Stop Hot Dog Stand. Two days later, the doctors had to amputate. They’d never seen anything like it, they said. Only one out of a million, if they had to venture a guess, would need amputation. Veronica wasn’t allergic to bees.

“Maybe some kind of poison. You’re sure it was a bee? Not a spider?” came the questions from the doctors.

No, she’d extracted the stinger. No, she didn’t keep it. Why would she? Her mom was a nurse at the hospital, and had convinced the doctors to let them keep Veronica’s finger. They held a small funeral, inviting only Chaz. As they buried her finger, wrapped in tissue paper in a shoe box, Veronica played Taps, slowly adjusting to the lightness of her left hand. At the end of the song, she pulled the spit valve of the trumpet with her left-hand pinkie, letting her saliva coat the dirt.

“Where is everybody else?”

“Late. Mac had to work, so he’s taking a long lunch and will be here at the last minute.”

Veronica took a sip of her drink.

“God, I love this stuff.” She surveyed him, focusing on his head and then scanning the rest of his body. “You going on like that? What’re all the old folks going to say when they see your eyebrow ring? And your hair—all spiked up. At least you have on long sleeves so they can’t see your tattoo.”

Chaz ran his hand over his short, black hair. Spiked up was an overstatement. He preferred to think of it as controlled messiness.

“I like my look. You have ballerina hair.”

Veronica’s long, curly hair was fastened in a bun, a deliberate deviation from the way she normally looked. She still looked exotic, though. Her grandmother had immigrated to the States from Mexico, and Veronica inherited her dark-brown almost black eyes and full, wide lips.

The cowbell that Burt, Chaz’s partner, insisted on hanging over the door jingled as Sasha entered the room. Unlike Veronica, Sasha was tall and carried a quiet, peaceful presence.

“What I wouldn’t give for an Atlantic coast El Niño,” she said, wiping her forehead with an orange and red scarf. “It’s so humid, it’s like the air doesn’t want to let go of the water.”

“She says that ‘cause she doesn’t need to tan,” said Veronica. “Look at that beautiful skin. Almost as black as that piano,” she said, pointing to the baby grand on the stage, a gift from Chaz’s mom’s inheritance. “I could lay out everyday, and only be the color of this bar.” She pointed to the copper bar for emphasis.

“It’s not in your genes, honey.” Sasha stepped up to the stage, opened her instrument case, and began putting her clarinet together.

Chaz opened his mouth to compliment Veronica. “How can you compete with a black girl in terms of skin color?” he said instead.

“I know. I know.” She held her right arm in front of her, examining it. “I’m jealous is all. My look takes a lot of maintenance. Sasha can put on a pair of white shorts with no thought at all. She doesn’t have to shave all the time either. Her black hairs blend in with her body. You’d never really know unless you looked real close or ran your hand over her leg.”

The sounds of scales, sweet and slow, filled the room.

“Guess I’d better put my mouth to something useful,” said Veronica, as she walked over to join Sasha on the stage. Soon her brassy trumpet mingled with Sasha’s woodsy clarinet.

“You can get anywhere on Capers on a bike.” Olivia pedaled her rusted, banana seat bike with the metal basket on the front. Delaney rode an identical one.

Droplets of sweat slid down her face. Though she needed comforting, she sincerely regretted wearing Pap’s old cardigan. Capers was too hot and humid.

“We’re almost there,” said Olivia.

The bike path paralleled Tarragon Way, the main road at Capers, and bisected residential streets. They passed Cayenne Lane, Thyme Road, Mustard Street, Garlic Court, and Paprika Road. The buzz of grasshoppers lent a vibration to the oleander trees and pampass grass that lined the path.

Olivia skidded to a halt.

“There.” She pointed to a small wooden building with umbrella-topped tables on the patio. “Dandelion Delight.”

They crossed the street, and locked their bikes together around a palmetto tree and went inside.

“You’ll love this place,” said Olivia. She said hello to the gray-haired lady behind the cash register and sat at a table for two by the window. “They have the best tea.”

Olivia handed her a menu. The café was drenched in yellow: lemon yellow curtains, plastic yellow dandelions on the table, and yellow-striped wallpaper.

“Is food a mandatory theme on the island?” said Delaney. “If you really think about it, your name is a food too. Olive.”

“I hate my name.”

Delaney swallowed a packet of guilt that expanded in her stomach.

“I should have remembered.”

Names had been the topic of countless conversations in college. Olivia didn't like her name, but she wouldn't change it. Olivia May. She considered it her martyrdom in life. Her mom's middle name was April, so when she had DJ, she carried on the tradition. Delaney June. She insisted everyone call her DJ, though. Sometimes Delaney forgot that wasn't DJ's given name. In this instance, she remembered, and the guilt ballooned even further in her belly.

Marjorie appeared at their table, and the heaviness of the moment dissipated. Olivia ordered two glasses of iced dandelion tea, two bowls of vichyssoise and a bowl of strawberries with fresh whipped cream.

Delaney had forgotten that too—Olivia's penchant for all things cold no matter what the weather.

“I've missed you.” Olivia reached across the table and patted Delaney's hand, a forgiving gesture.

“Life isn't the same after you graduate.”

Though they hadn't seen each other in six years, time melted away. Delaney felt like they were sitting in Mario's Fish Bowl and drinking Bud Lite out of heavy glass goblets, when life was easy conversation over food and drink.

“Tell me about your sleepwalking.”

Delaney thought about how to answer the question, her nocturnal wanderings devouring the silence.

Marjorie placed two perspiring yellow plastic cups on the table. Delaney took a gulp of the weed-infused beverage.

“Tastes like honey.” She pictured the Bearenstein Bears from her childhood books hanging their tongues beneath a honeycomb.

Olivia smiled, and shifted into the moment. They talked about the island, thrift shops, family and school. Finally, after they ate the last strawberry, Delaney confessed.

“I think my grandmother wants me out of the house.”

Chaz’s favorite couple, Oreda and Ernie Richardson, arrived at exactly twelve o’clock, unlike the other senior citizens who filtered in the bar as early as Chaz would open the door. Chaz didn’t set the spaghetti buffet out until one. While they waited, the older gentlemen ordered their liquor on the rocks and sat a table chatting up health problems, annoying tourists, and that damned mayor.

The women gathered to discuss whoever had yet to arrive. Oreda and Ernie were always the topic of conversation. As Chaz poured drink after drink, waiting for the bartender to arrive, he slowly pieced together snippets of the Richardsons’ lives. Their oldest, Barbara, was going through what one lady called “a painful divorce.”

“Barbara’s drinking again—vodka morning, noon and night,” she said, taking a sip of her Vodka Martini, the olive a deep green in the bottom of her triangular glass.

“How’s my favorite musician?” asked Oreda as soon as she entered. The bar was uncommonly quiet, as the women frantically searched for a new topic of conversation.

“Barbara’s doing fine. Don’t listen to these old coots.”

Chaz reached for the bottle of Dewar’s. He splashed the toffee-colored liquor over a handful of ice, and breathed in the smoky smell.

“I got a new trumpet player,” he said, placing the drink on a white napkin, and motioning toward Veronica. She and Sasha were engrossed in a conversation. Their instruments lay in their open cases. “She’s a local. Veronica Huegelet.”

“Veronica.” Oreda’s voice let out a little gasp as the shock of recognition filtered across her face. “Why she hasn’t lived on Capers since…”

Chaz had hoped people would forget, but they always remembered the scandals.

After the mixer, the senior citizens filtered out of the bar in twos and threes as Chaz, Veronica and Sasha sat on barstools, sipping a mixture of cranberry juice and club soda. Chaz insisted they replenish their bodies with nutrients. He actually used those words “replenish our bodies with nutrients.” Mac the sax player had left. Bob couldn’t make it during the day, so the old folks had to suffer through songs without a trombone player. The music sounded shallow.

Oreda and Ernie, the last to leave, stopped to hug the trio good-bye on their way out the door.

“I sure am glad you came back to Capers,” said Oreda as she patted Veronica on the shoulder. “Never let anyone run you off again. Love is love. Don’t matter who.”

Veronica sat up straighter, her body seeming to relax.

“Thanks,” she said.

“See you next Friday.” Oreda waved good-bye as she walked out the door.

Sasha, a relatively newcomer to the island, looked at Veronica with a puzzled expression on her face. Veronica saw her, and slumped down against the bar, grabbing her glass and moving it around in little circles.

“Love is love. Don’t matter who?” asked Sasha.

Chaz patted his foot up and down, producing the only noise in the entire place.

“Go ahead. Tell her,” said Chaz, after he couldn’t bear the silence a moment longer.

“Chaz and I went to school together. Did you know that?” she said, looking at Sasha. She didn’t wait for an answer before launching into the rest of her story. “Anyway, when we were in high school we used to visit this psychic’s house to get our futures read. Tarot. Stuff like that.”

She took a deep breath and slumped down on the bar again, leaning her head on her crossed arms.

For fortification, Chaz poured her another Galliano. She downed the shot in one gulp, and sucked on the coffee bean. Chaz was eager for the rest of Veronica’s confession. He’d never heard her speak of the incident. Usually dynamic, she seemed small, as if she really did fit into her five-foot body.

After a pause, she continued. “Her name was Madame Zoe. Her name for tourists anyway. Most people called her Zoe. I called her Tabitha. Her mom named her after Tabitha on ‘Bewitched.’ I guess hoping she would become a witch. Move things around with the twinkle of her nose. Change the past. I don’t know. Zoe was what?” She put her hands on the bar and counted her fingers. “I guess thirty-two at the time. I was sixteen.”

Veronica stood up, and shifted from foot to foot. Chaz knew she needed space to tell her story. She needed room to move her arms around. She took another deep breath.

“She said Chaz would become a doctor. He had an analytical quality to him. No, not analytical. She called it healing. He had a healing quality.”

He remembered Madame Zoe. She had bright red hair, and she always wore purple dresses. For days after the reading, he looked for animals to help. He brought popcorn to Lake Stanley on the mainland for the ducks, bread for the seagulls, and rescued a cat from the side of the road. He even scooped up a stranded jellyfish and let the gooey mass go in the ocean. No luck. It was dead. He dreamed of the day when a whale would wash up on shore, and he could rescue it from suicide. That never happened, and eventually he forgot all about his healing qualities.

“She said you were artistic,” he said to Veronica. She smiled at the thought.

“Artistic. I should be an actress. Paint pictures of poppies for museums. Play an instrument. She said it seeped from me—all this creative talent. I needed an outlet or I would perish. She said perish. I didn’t know the word perish, and I made Chaz dig out his old dictionary so I could look it up. He does that. Knows what things mean, but won’t tell me. Perish meant I would die, and I remember being so afraid of death. Petrified. That word was a few pages over. I started doing everything artistic I could think of. Painting. Drawing. Even building sand sculptures: a sea turtle, a mermaid. I won first place in the Capers Island Sand Sculpture contest for my dolphin. Dolphins always win.”

Chaz wished she would make her point, but she had to circle it, like a snail’s shell, spiraling in until she found the animal inside.

“I started going to Zoe’s place every week, then every day.” She stopped talking and looked at Chaz again. “Do you remember where she lived? On Paprika. A little wooden sign

hung outside with the words 'Fortune Inside.' I liked that. She didn't say what kind. Good. Bad. Just fortune. I still don't know."

The clock on the wall read 4:32. Burt, his partner, would be there any moment and he knew Veronica would stop talking.

"They had a fling," he said.

Sasha didn't look surprised. In fact, he thought she looked almost pleased, the edges of her mouth scooped up in a small smile.

"Jump right into it why don't you?" said Veronica. Her tone was mean and forced, but he detected a sort of happiness in it. "Yeah. But it was more than a fling. Man, was I in love. Haven't felt like that with anyone since. We got caught in a compromising position, and word spread across the whole island. In small towns like this, it doesn't take very long. I think Mom and Dad were more peeved about her being a psychic than my being gay. Like if I had a relationship with a doctor, it wouldn't be that bad. They sent me to boarding school. Can you believe it? They found out I was a lesbian and sent me to an all-girl Catholic boarding school."

Chaz grabbed his keys from the little basket under the cash register.

"I want to go for a swim before things get busy. Ladies' night." He also wanted to check on Chestnut. Veronica's confession was big, but he didn't think it would spark Chestnut's hair growing streak. He could only hope.

Delaney and Olivia sat on the sand, and sipped frozen margaritas out of plastic cups as the water lapped at their calves. The sunset tinted the water an opalescent green.

“I’m glad you’re here,” said Olivia. “It gives me an excuse to stay on the island and leave Mark at home.”

“Glad to be of service.” Delaney tried to keep her voice light-hearted. She didn’t want it to betray the hurt over Olivia’s words.

“I don’t love him anymore.”

Delaney didn’t know what to say. Mark and Olivia had been married for seven years. The whole reason Olivia went to college was to find a suitable mate. Love never seemed to factor into the equation. As an orthopedic surgeon, Mark possessed two traits Olivia wanted in a man: money and a career that kept him at the office most of the time.

“Every time I see him, I picture feet.”

Olivia stretched back onto the sand, and gazed up at the sky. So did Delaney. A sliver of moon peeked through the sunset.

“He specializes in feet. Do you know how many bones are in the feet? They get crushed and he has to go in with pins and little rods and piece them back together.”

“What do feet have to do with love?”

Delaney had driven all night to get to Capers, and she was tired. She didn’t know if it was a combination of exhaustion and alcohol, but she couldn’t quite follow Olivia’s reasoning.

“Every time he touches me, I picture all those feet.” Olivia shivered, and even though a cool breeze blew in from the water, Delaney knew it was a shiver of disgust and not of cold. “He repulses me. We haven’t made love in almost a year.”

Olivia never discussed sex. Even in college when they drank lemon drop shots and stumbled home dead drunk, Olivia would pick up the phone, call her boyfriend, and wait for him.

To watch movies, she said. The next day, Olivia could never remember anything about the movie.

“Maybe if you talked to him about it.” Delaney didn’t know how to finish the sentence.

Olivia stood up and held her arms out. She spun around and around. Delaney was surprised she didn’t throw up. She was dizzy watching her.

“I’m going swimming,” said Delaney.

Fully clothed, she stepped over the waves. Olivia joined her. The current pulled them out farther as the sand sunk beneath their feet.

“Nothing lasts,” said Olivia.

Delaney nodded. She floated on her back with the waves.

“Can you hear the whales?” Olivia said, cooing.

Delaney could hear them. They swam beneath the surface, singing for those who listened.

Day 2

From the sky, Capers looked like a fried egg someone stuck the tine of a fork into. Lucky Guppies Outfitters sat on a small wedge of land by the runny yolk. The land was a gift from Shawn's wife's father. That's how Chaz's brother Shawn fell into his profession – the pie-shaped property provided the perfect launching pad for kayaks, and the animal life, the perfect scenery.

Saturday morning, Chaz stood holding hands with strangers in a circle. He was tired and achy after a late night at the bar filling in for the bass player and trying his hand at low country fiddle music. Every Friday night, Weekend Grits graced the Bass Cleft Tavern, filling the bar with an eclectic cross between Appalachian and Cajun string music. Their repertoire included the classics, 'Rocky Top' and 'The Devil Came Down to Georgia,' and Beatles covers with a twangy twist. Chaz's first love was swing music, but his role was the same regardless. He was still the heartbeat of the band. The fiddlers were a beer crowd, and he sold case after case of Michelob until they ran out and switched to Budweiser.

So Saturday morning, after no sleep, Chaz watched the pink sky turn blue as the yellow sun winked like a daisy spreading white petals over the water, or at least that's what the minister called the sunrise in his morning prayer. Chaz half heard as he silently cursed his brother for dragging him into this again. One of Shawn's guides had called in sick, and Shawn already had this 28-person tour group scheduled. A church group from Florence on a weekend retreat. At 20 bucks a head with the group discount, Shawn needed the revenue.

To top it all off, Chaz had to bow his head and pretend like the Almighty Lord would save them from sharks, hurricanes (not even hurricane season), and drowning. Obviously, the

minister had never been kayaking before or he would pray for deliverance from mosquitoes, sand bars and sun poisoning.

Seconds after the Amen, Chaz dropped his hands, which were sweaty and sticky from the woman on his right. She smelled like the cosmetics department at a department store. He sought out Shawn. They didn't have much in common physically. Shawn's skin was dark brown that would in a few years turn leathery like their dad's. He was shorter and denser than Chaz, and wore a horrid Lucky Guppies orange hat with fins. Shawn's eyes didn't hold a drop of apology in them, and Chaz felt a tremor of annoyance. He turned to the group.

Sunrise on Saturday. He was in God's country, whatever that meant, and he breathed in a whiff of dead fish. Mmm.

"Okay guys," he said to his group. "Gather round me. Y'all watch out for the ants."

A cluster of orange boats with the Lucky Guppies Outfitters logo painted on the side were perched by the water. No waves beat against the shore; only a rising and lowering of water levels distinguished high tide from low tide. Because of this, the sand formed a haven for fire ants. The unfortunate person who stepped in a nest would be in for a real treat. The ants received their names from their bites, which made the unlucky person's skin feel like fire. He stepped on so many fire ant piles when he was little that he had finally learned how to pay attention to where he was walking. He supposed that's why they were here, to make you pay attention.

He stepped back into the cool water safe from the ants, and demonstrated the paddle motion: dip the right arm, then left in a windmill pattern. How to stop: rock the paddle back and forth, but don't row. How to turn: press your foot on the pedal.

Chaz motioned to a cluster of athletic looking girls to climb into the boats. One at a time, they entered, only their torsos and triangular slices of skinny thighs visible when they were situated. One by one, Chaz handed them paddles and nudged their boats into the water.

“Wait by the sign.” He pointed to a peeling white wooden sign with ‘No Wake’ painted in the middle.

They paddled backwards, leaving a pattern of wavy lines painted on the surface. After he’d gotten all eight boats in the water, including two tandem ones, he set out.

Chaz’s job consisted of pointing out all the birds, fish, mollusks, and plant life that lived in and near the creek as he kept the group firmly within sight, preventing them from toppling overboard or stranding themselves on a sand bar.

They paddled downstream, out with the tide. Low tide meant less water and more fish. Blissfully unaware, the fish stayed in their shrinking underwater worlds. The bottle-nosed dolphins, with their smart noggins, took advantage of the less intellectually evolved fish by swimming salmon-like against the current, picking out fish-sized morsels from the shallow water. Chaz explained this to his group in his booming tour-guide voice.

“Keep on the lookout for dolphins.”

He pointed out a fat-bodied osprey. A brown pelican dove into the greenish water (healthy, he explained, because of the plankton), and gulped a mouthful of fish. Still no dolphins.

Chaz paddled faster in order to maneuver to the front of the pack, and glided beside a submerged metal cage with a metal pole and blue plastic ribbons tied around it. He caught a whiff of something old, faraway and imaginary: the faint scent of fried food and baby powder. He pulled up the cage. Heavy at first, but then light as green water fell from the sides. The metal was warm and slimy, and the real smell of dead fish clung to his hands.

“Y’all pull up alongside me.” He explained the contents of the cage. Blue crabs. The females sported red-tipped legs like fingernails. “We have permission from Sorry Charlie’s Fish Shack.” His stomach gave a slight jump when he said the name.

“Nothing better than steamed blue crabs with Old Bay seasoning. Or even better get them when they’re molting. Soft shell crabs, they’re called. Fry them in flour with a little butter. You eat the shell and everything. Right now, the crabs are all wearing their armor,” he said, wishing he was wearing his. “Charlie pulls up his catch at noon. Stop by his place on Tarragon.”

The advertisement learned from memory, not culinary delight. He hated reciting it. Not because he was a vegetarian, but because he hated the weight of the words, the faint metallic taste of them, like mercury.

Six. Seven. Finally, the eighth boat, a mom and child, passed. The kid whined to pet one. Take one home. Wanted to play with it before he ate it.

Chaz released the cage, and the imaginary smell of fried food and baby powder dissipated.

An hour into the tour, they finally spotted the dolphins. They swam upstream, jumping out of the water, chasing the mullets. There were of course, the oohs and ahs from the crowd. Chaz had seen dolphins lots of times. Grew up surrounded by them. Today he looked at them differently, noticing again how gracefully they moved, how silently they splashed down into the water.

The ascent was quick, the group catching quick flickers of jumping gray bodies before they plunged back down into the green water. The high point of the trip over, the rest was just a nature lesson.

Chaz gave a quick lesson on sea turtles.

“Illegal to have lights on at night. The mama turtles make their way to shore. Lay their eggs. The babies hatch in June and follow the full moon back to the water.”

He said it quickly, leaving out the sad statistics. Only one in ten thousand maybe survive. Seagulls and dogs pick off the little ones before they even make it to the water. After that, the fish have a free for all. Funny. Everybody wanted to be a turtle to live to a hundred.

His lecture on oysters was even quicker. He left out the pearl part. Too prosaic, and everyone knew what happened to the sand.

“Twenty years to mature. The FDA tells us when we can harvest. Bacteria levels.”

He pulled out a glob of oysters to explain how they glommed onto each other. Lived their whole lives in one spot. He wasn't careful, and cut his palm on the shells.

Afterwards, when they docked, Chaz pulled the boats ashore, leaving a smudge of blood on each one.

“Come out to the house Monday for dinner,” said Shawn, handing him a stack of bills. Tips. That was all Chaz worked for, but as held the wrinkly wad of fives, almost a hundred dollars, he knew Shawn had thrown in extra. No way were these holy rollers such good tipppers.

“Family dinner?” he asked.

“Of course.”

“Then I'm not invited.”

“Wake up.”

Delaney opened her eyes and saw Olivia standing over her, shaking her by the shoulders. The motion jostled her stomach and she felt like she would vomit. She reached her hand out and grasped sand.

“Where am I?” Delaney’s voice came out in a hoarse whisper.

“Outside. You fell asleep on the couch last night. This morning, you were gone.”

Delaney’s skin felt hot, her eyes swollen and heavy. She looked out at the water. The rising sun glowed yellow over the water. She could hear little kids laughing in the distance, and she wondered how long she had lain in the sand.

“I dreamt I was walking down stairs.” She tried to grab the thread of her dream. “I wanted to go swimming.”

“You were sleepwalking.”

Delaney stifled a gag. She didn’t want to throw up in front of Olivia.

“There were sharks in the water. They said I was an appetizer.”

Olivia grabbed her by the hand, and yanked her to her feet. The beach spun and Delaney tried to sit back down, but Olivia wouldn’t let her.

“This is dangerous.” Olivia spoke in her chiding mother voice, and Delaney envisioned her scolding DJ. “Christ. You almost went in the ocean.”

“But I didn’t.”

“You could have drowned.”

Delaney threw up in the sand. Olivia reached out, and held her hair away from her face.

“You’re dehydrated. Let’s go inside.”

They walked into the kitchen and Olivia handed her water in a tangerine clay coffee mug. The mug felt cold, and the water felt gritty, like she still had sand in her mouth.

“I don’t think you should stay here alone ever. I’ll tell Mark that you need me. When I think about what could have happened...”

Olivia’s voice trailed off, allowing Delaney to fill in the blanks. She pictured sharks munching on her arms and legs.

“I’m sure I was sleepwalking because I was so drunk.”

Delaney sat on the brown bar stool and leaned her head on the counter. Her whole body shook, and she didn’t know how to stop it.

“I have a regression therapy appointment today,” Olivia said. “Maybe Zoe can help you.”

“I don’t think my problem is a past life.”

“If you don’t come with me, you can’t stay here anymore.”

Delaney took another drink of water. It sloshed around her empty stomach, and she ran to the bathroom. Before she vomited, she tied a rubber band around her hair. She didn’t need Olivia.

When Chaz arrived home, he saw Veronica sitting at the top of her stairs by his kitchen door. He walked up the stairs, his thighs shaky from pressing against the sides of the kayak to hold it steady.

As soon as Veronica saw him she stood up.

“I didn’t think you’d ever get home.” Veronica whined. She was always fidgety and hyper, but never whiny. Something was up. “Come on. I have to go see Zoe. Got to. Talking about her the other day. I’ve been back for how many weeks now? And I haven’t even seen her.

But you have to come. I'm afraid she won't want to see me. She can't throw me out if you're there. If I wait one more day, I don't think I'll have the gumption."

"No one says gumption anymore," he said, finally arriving at the top of the stairs. "You won't have the nerve to see her. Or self-confidence maybe. Gumption sounds too much like gumbo. You won't have the gumbo to go see her."

Lack of sleep had made him a little loopy, and he was on the verge of saying how neat it would be if they made up a new phrase. Neat. The gumbo to go see her. It would fit the theme of the island. That's for sure. Why hadn't anyone ever thought of that before?

"Focus," she said, tapping her temple with her left index finger. The rest of her fingers curled under, but the tip of her middle nub poked up as if waving to him. "What the hell does it matter what word I use? I won't have the fork to go see her. Doesn't make any difference. I'm still nervous as all get out and you're not making it any easier. You high or something?"

Chaz laughed, a sort of guffaw, deep throated belly laugh.

"Dear God you are. You got any more?"

"Ronnie." He inserted the key into the slot and opened the door. A waft of hot air hit him, the apartment more humid and stuffy than outside. "I'm not high. Just tired."

She walked past him, through the kitchen, and into the living room where she switched on the air conditioner. At once, a mechanical drone filled the room. Chestnut, who had been sleeping on the couch, opened one eye as if opening both required too much effort.

"You should buy this cat some Rogaine." Veronica reached out to pet Chestnut, but changed her mind.

Much to Chaz's dismay, Chestnut had shed even more. She looked mangy. Smooth, hairless circles dotted her body. He didn't know if it was from lack of sleep, too much sun, or

anxiety, but a wave of dizziness hit him. The room, bright with yellow walls and a red couch, swam out of focus and turned a fuzzy gray. Chaz sat down, closing his eyes and bringing his head between his knees.

“You okay?” Veronica’s nervousness seemed to dissipate and her voice sounded smooth and creamy, like chocolate milk. She touched the back of his head lightly, petting his hair. The touch sent shivers down his neck. “Hey. What did you do to your hand? Let me bandage it for you.”

Chaz looked down at his hand. The cut from the oysters had crusted with dried blood.

“I’m fine.” He sat up. “Need a shower. That’s all.”

He stood up, afraid the room would turn fuzzy again, but this time it retained all of its vividness. The yellow walls revived him.

Veronica looked calmer now. Less focused on herself when confronted with Chaz’s problems. Still, he thought it best to douse her with sedatives.

“There’s Chardonnay in the ‘fridge,” he said. “Have a glass while you wait.”

Chaz switched the faucets on, stripped, and stepped into the shower. He was pulling the curtain closed when Veronica opened the bathroom door and walked in.

“Don’t mind me,” she said. “Have to pee.”

“I’m showering here.”

“Not like you haven’t seen me before.” She hovered over the toilet, shorts and panties around her ankles. That always annoyed him. No matter where she went, even at home, she hovered. People talked about men splashing on the seat, but at least he raised the seat. She splashed on it, and after her visits, he would have to scrub away faint yellow dots. He could see

her through the clear shower curtain, white steam swirling around her, but the steady splash of water drowned out the sound of her pee. “Remember that one time I visited you in college and we were both hung over?”

He didn’t think many sex stories started out as, when we were hung over. With Veronica everything was different. She was like the white crayon. It didn’t work on your regular, run of the mill, white paper. You could only use it on the colored kind.

“Doesn’t count,” he said, slathering shaving cream on his face. The smell of outdoors, piney and woody, tickled his nose. “We never did it. Plus, you’re a lesbo.”

“That makes it even sexier,” she said, shaking her bottom to remove the last of the pee from her pubic hair. She could splash pee all over the seat, but god forbid she get her dainty fingers wet. “Don’t you know all guys want to make it with lesbians? You could sell your story to Penthouse, in the letters section. They pay, you know? You could make some moolah. Guys could beat off to your story.”

In between scrapes of the razor blade, down the cheek with the grain, he glanced at her. She tore off squares of toilet paper, precise, rolling one square, folding the next one as it spooled off the tube, until she had a perfect square of four sheets, and wiped. Dropped the paper in the toilet. Stood. Pulled up her panties, then shorts, button-fly denim, biting her lower lip as she fastened each button. Flushed.

Veronica was so flighty that this precise, toilet etiquette confounded him. Speechless. The sound of running water, his shower, her hand washing. He had moved to the right slightly, enough to watch her lathering green soap, and the stream of water ran down his cheek and washed away his shaving cream. She turned and faced him, shaking her hands in front of her to

dislodge all the water droplets before drying them off on a towel. His towel, which was hanging on a white hook on the back of the door.

“You remember,” she said, staring at his penis through the clear curtain. “Good enough for Penthouse. The memory of it makes you hard.”

Embarrassed. He couldn't turn to the side. Better for her to see him from the front.

“Veronica.” His tone didn't hold the faintest touch of exasperation, but the formality of the pronunciation, the utterance of her given name acted like a warning signal, like a mother yelling out first, middle and last to her kids.

“All right. All right,” she said, opening the bathroom door. A gust of cold wind, the living room air conditioner running on 65 degrees, snuck past her, through the small opening between the curtain and the wall, and nuzzled his legs. “Hurry up. Don't bother shaving. You look sexy with a little stubble.”

What a tease. Still, he didn't want her. Didn't think he could actually have intercourse with her. Before, the time in college, they had both woken up hung over and shaky. He had crawled into the shower, and she had followed him. In the space of the tub, she reached out and held him.

“I want to touch,” she had said.

She did. She coiled her fingers around his penis. Then squirted a drop of Suave into her palm, rubbed her hands together, and jerked him off. He'd been so surprised at the suddenness of it that he hadn't stopped to marvel at her knowledge. The way she carefully avoided the tip. Not a molecule of shampoo had edged its way inside.

Afterwards, he tried to repay the favor, but she shook her head no.

“I can do it faster.” He watched her stroke herself. The only woman he’d ever seen masturbate.

Delaney sat in the passenger seat as reluctant as a small child on the way to a tetanus shot. Olivia drove with the windows down, claiming the fresh air and clean sunshine was better for the body than air conditioning. Well, the air smelled like exhaust and even though the sunshine felt hot against her arms and sweat slid down the small of her back, Delaney felt chilled and shaky.

“Here we are,” said Olivia, shifting into park.

Delaney unfastened her seat belt and opened the door. Olivia parked right outside a shop called Perceptions, and Delaney wondered why the parking spaces in front were empty. True, it was early afternoon and everyone was probably at the beach, but she couldn’t help feel a little worried.

They walked inside and at once the scent, a semi floral, woody aroma welcomed her. Delaney recognized Zoe immediately. Her auburn hair was streaked with gray and, like Olivia described, Zoe wore a signature lavender dress. Olivia hadn’t mentioned Zoe’s eyes, a slate color.

“You must be Delaney,” said Zoe, reaching out her pale, thin fingers. The touch was brief, a sort of finger shake instead of hand shake, but Delaney felt magic. There was no other way to describe it short of plunging her hand deep within the indigo glow of a propane flame.

“I don’t really believe this stuff.” At once, Delaney regretted her words.

Zoe didn't seem to take offense. Olivia did. She gave Delaney the look, both lips pressed together in a grimace.

"Delaney, you are the most closed-minded..."

"Now Olivia. No judgments here." Zoe walked behind the cash register and sifted through a variety of pamphlets. "Many of the most highly respected hypnotists in the field didn't believe in reincarnation either. Working with patients in therapy, they uncovered past lives. Some people have seen names and dates during hypnosis, and later verified them by finding their own graves."

Delaney shrugged her shoulders, telling herself to believe. We're all energy, she reasoned. Does it evaporate after we're gone? She didn't think so, but she knew her logical mind would take over, refuse to believe, and she would get nothing out of this experience. Worse, she'd be out fifty bucks.

Zoe led the two through a beaded glass curtain into a small, cozy room. "Olivia can wait outside if you'd like."

"No. I want her to stay."

Zoe motioned for Delaney to sit in an oversized armchair. "Most people think when you're hypnotized, you don't know what you're doing."

Delaney felt a thread of fear. When she had her wisdom teeth removed, she woke up crying for Gram. After her appendicitis, she screamed at all of the doctors and nurses, using words she almost never used in her conscious life. What if she divulged secrets? She would tell them about the kids in seventh grade calling her names like Prissy Ass Bitch as the school bus pulled away, the time she stole a hundred dollars from Pap's wallet, or worse, all the times she refused to visit Olivia and DJ because babies made her nervous.

“When you’re under hypnosis, you’re deeply relaxed but aware of your surroundings,” said Zoe. “You have complete control at all times.”

Delaney felt the thick knot of tension in her shoulders evaporate. Zoe explained the process, which she likened to watching a movie. Images would flash through her mind and whether or not Delaney believed them, she should let her logical mind take a vacation and explore the images.

Zoe told Delaney to remove her shoes and relax in the chair. Delaney closed her eyes. The room was so quiet that she could hear Olivia swallow.

Zoe played some new age music, lots of triangles and harps.

“Close your eyes and focus on your breath,” said Zoe.

After focusing on her breath, she had to imagine a light radiating from her groin, down her legs to her toes and out through her fingertips. The light grew brighter as she inhaled, softening as she exhaled. Even though her conscious mind said ‘this isn’t working,’ Delaney felt herself expand as a protective circle of energy shielded her body from the outside.

“Picture yourself at the top of a beautiful staircase.” Zoe’s voice filtered through like smoke.

Delaney imagined a mahogany staircase, the steps covered in thick, ruby carpeting. She descended them one by one until, at zero, she stepped off onto the marble floor. An expansive hallway with curved ceilings loomed in front of her filled with doors marked with numbers corresponding to her different ages. As she walked, her footsteps, like crushed China, echoed down the corridor. She passed her twenties, her teens, and finally, her younger years. Doorway number two glowed a golden yellow and she stopped before it, pressing her hand against the wood. It felt warm.

“Open it,” said Zoe. “Before we go to your previous life, we need to stop here.”

In her mind, Delaney flung open the door in one giant burst of bravado. She saw herself, a toddler with peanut-butter smeared fingers sitting in a high chair. Around her, there were voices, but she couldn't see faces. She realized she was no longer staring at the scene, but inhabiting her two-year-old body. Her sticky fingers felt pudgy and uncoordinated. She tried to grab her yellow sippy cup, an overwhelming desire for milk, but she couldn't place her right hand around it and the cup fell to the floor. She began to cry, and as if hearing a whisper from a ghost, Zoe's voice permeated her memory.

“Float above it,” she said.

Delaney broke free from her two-year-old body and soared above the scene. Her grandparents, both younger than she ever remembered them, were arguing with a man. He had dark brown hair, a protruding belly, and grease-soaked jeans. His fingers were stained black from oil, and for the first time, she found herself staring at her father. They had the same eyes, a bright blue everyone mistook for contacts. She could see the words pouring from his mouth, deep red and tinged with yellow. Small tears perched on his eyelids and slid down his cheeks.

“She's my daughter,” he said. “I'm not giving her up.”

Delaney didn't know her father's name. She tried to slip into his body, but it was hard and cold. So were her grandparents'. The only pliable body was her own, and as she slipped back into her two-year-old self, she felt her tongue glued to the roof of her mouth with peanut butter.

“Contest it if you want.” Her adult ears listened through her younger ones, comprehending what at the time she could not. “It's all legal, and you'll never get Delaney.”

For the first time, Delaney realized her father didn't abandon her.

She wanted to stay, but the image in front of her flickered and turned gray. She felt herself detach and move back into the hallway.

Again Zoe's voice. "Do you need to visit any other age before we leave this life?"

As instructed, Delaney raised her left index finger, signaling no.

"There is an unmarked door at the end of the hallway," said Zoe. "Do you see it?"

She peered straight ahead. White light filtered through an open archway, and Delaney knew she had to step through it. Her heart beat faster, and she had to take great gulps of air to breathe.

Zoe must have sensed Delaney's discomfort because she told her to slow down and rest a moment.

"Picture yourself sitting on a bench in a beautiful garden," she said.

Azaleas, snapdragons and sweet peas bloomed in beds her grandmother planted around the house. She imagined Gram in a straw hat pruning the roses, and felt both peace and sadness. Her heartbeat slowed to normal and her breathing became regular again.

"Now walk through the door into your past life."

Delaney stepped through the archway into a blast of white light as bright as sunshine on freshly fallen snow. The air was warm and she felt as though she were floating. Her feet didn't touch the ground. She saw no ground. No sky. No anything.

"Look down at your feet and tell me what you see." Zoe's voice seemed farther away, like she spoke through a tin can tied to a string.

Delaney looked at her feet. She saw nothing. She felt weightless, without form.

"There is nothing," she said. Her tongue felt heavy, the words cumbersome. "Only light."

Zoe instructed her to move her fingers and her toes. Delaney walked back into the hallway and tried again. Every time she stepped through the archway, she had no body. There was only light.

One last time she stepped back through the hallway. She walked past the doors that marked her present life and up the staircase. At ten, she opened her eyes, and found herself back in Zoe's little room.

“Light.” Olivia's voice sounded hoarse, and she had to clear her throat before continuing. “Did she go back to the very beginning when life first formed?”

Zoe shook her head no. “It's rare,” she said, writing on a notepad. “Sometimes a person experiences a tragedy so horrific she doesn't want to return to this plane for a very long time. There are other planes besides Earth. Delaney's Earth soul is new. Olivia, I think you crossed her path to teach her.”

Olivia placed her hands on Delaney's knee and squeezed.

Veronica's philosophy in life was akin to plunging into a pool. All at once to get it over with. No dipping the big toe in. More of a belly flop from the high dive. So, as they stood outside of Perceptions, Veronica took a deep breath and walked in. Chaz stood there watching her. He could see the back of her head through the white lettering.

When she realized he hadn't followed, she turned, opened the door, grabbed his arm, and yanked him inside. Her nails left little half-moon indentations on his skin.

As the island expanded, so had Zoe's business. Books shelved under headings like reincarnation, ancient runes, and the art of fortune telling lined the walls. A glass case underneath the register held crystals on leather strings. Handmade soaps and candles lent the shop its sandalwood and eucalyptus fragrance.

The store was empty. Veronica looked around the room, and finally at Chaz.

"Where is she?" she whispered.

A jingle of beads sounded, amber and topaz threaded on gold strings, as Zoe, in her purple dress, parted the curtain and walked out into the store.

The air felt dense and still. His tongue, whether from exhaustion or sheer stress at the situation, seemed to expand, a thick, dry immovable glob in his mouth.

"Tabby." At the sound of Zoe's nickname, Chaz could breathe again. The oxygen was light and sweet.

Veronica stood on tiptoe, and planted noisy wet kisses on both sides of Zoe's face.

"Veronica," said Zoe.

They had only uttered each other's names, and he didn't know how he knew, something in their eyes perhaps, but all was right with the world again. He didn't know what had happened between the two, and knew he never would. Fidgety, flighty Veronica kept the secret, and he loved her for it.

"Chaz needs his fortune read," said Veronica, reverting back to her normal self. "He needs to know why his cat's hair keeps falling out. It's the strangest thing really. Not a hairless cat. A cat with no hair. There's a difference, you know. The hairless on purpose. The other. Well, that's completely arbitrary like..."

“I’m married,” said Zoe. She said it matter of factly, but quietly in a way that carried no apology, but at the same time concern for the listener.

“I know,” said Veronica.

“It’s easier,” said Zoe. “Life’s easier this way.”

This statement conveyed more of Zoe’s life. Veronica had escaped to New York where she could become herself, hide in the orchestral pit on Broadway. No apologies. Zoe had stayed on Capers.

“He’s nice,” said Zoe. “You’d like him.” Then looked at Chaz. “Let’s find out about your cat.”

She led him and Veronica through the beads into the small room. An overstuffed large chair, two wicker chairs facing each other, a small table, and a bookshelf made up the only furnishings.

“It’s a little different from my house,” said Zoe. “Not as intimate, but when you work with tourists.”

“It’s nice,” said Chaz, eyeing the collection of gods on the bookshelf: Buddha, Jesus, Ganesh.

He sat in the comfortable chair as Veronica and Zoe settled into the wicker ones.

“Do you have a picture?” she said. “I know I used to do palms, but this is better. The Native Americans believe that the camera captures part of your soul.”

He pulled out his wallet and handed her his driver’s license. She took it, placed her hands over his picture, and closed her eyes. He did too, while he waited. Five minutes of resting his eyes while she dredged up his future. The room was cool and silent, the chair comfortable. He woke up four hours later to an empty room, a thin line of drool hanging from his mouth.

“Where are we going?” asked Delaney as Olivia drove over the bridge to the mainland.

“We haven’t celebrated Christmas together in over seven years. We should have a party in July. There’s never a shortage of decorations at the beach.”

This past Christmas hadn’t been very festive for Delaney -- her first one alone without Gram and Pap. Starting new traditions and memories sounded like a fantastic idea.

They rode the 45 minutes to the flea market in a comfortable silence. Delaney felt contented and happy. Maybe the summer would turn out to be the beginning of a new life, instead of an escape from her present one.

The market was held in an old drive-in movie theater. The big screen still stood, though it was pocked with holes, like Swiss cheese. Old speakers lined the booths like parking meters. Delaney imagined they’d have to pay 25 cents to look at their wares.

They walked up the first row. Delaney stopped to leaf through some old postcards in a box, and when she looked up Olivia was gone. Delaney walked down the second aisle and found her, picking through a pile of wreaths. Delaney walked up to her, placed her arm around Olivia’s shoulder, and sang ‘Blue Christmas’ in her best Elvis impersonation.

“People are watching,” said Olivia, throwing Delaney’s arm off her shoulder. “What do you think?” She lifted a brown wreath with gold pinecones and cranberry seeds.

Delaney felt reprimanded.

“It’s fine,” she mumbled. She looked down at the ground. There was a black scuff on the edge of Olivia’s shoe. She took satisfaction in that. Olivia’s perfect shoe had a scuff mark that looked like oil.

“Maybe we should buy our own decorations and meet at the lemonade stand in an hour,” said Olivia. “Surprise each other.”

“Whatever.”

Olivia walked off.

It wouldn't matter what Delaney bought. Olivia would decorate the party exactly how she wanted. Delaney walked down the fourth aisle and spotted a dresser. It was stained cherry, and had five drawers with half-dollar sized knobs. There was something familiar about it. She walked over, and placed her hand on the top, trying to remember where she had seen one like it. There was a room full of furniture in her basement at home. Maybe there, she thought.

“Fancy anything today?” said an old man, wearing a brown shirt and red suspenders. He smelled like sweat, mold, and fried bacon.

“Just looking.”

The man moved her aside, and opened the top drawer.

“Sturdy,” he said, showing her the inside. It was covered in faded, yellow contact paper.

“Needs refinished, but the wood's still nice. They don't make them like this anymore.”

“How much?”

“Thirty-five.”

Delaney pulled some bills from her pocket. She didn't even haggle over the price.

“Do you care if I leave it here until we're ready to go?”

He opened a metal lock box and deposited the money. There were big scratches and dents all over it.

“I close at five,” he said.

Delaney threaded her way over to the lemonade stand, and bought a glass. It was sweet and gritty. Instant. Not fresh like advertised. What did she expect for a dollar twelve? She looked down at her watch. She was early. She found an empty picnic table and sat down to wait for Olivia. Black flies flew around her head.

Finally, Olivia showed up, carrying a plethora of plastic shopping bags.

“Wait until you see what I got?” she said. “A nativity scene. Ornaments. A wreath. Even Christmas lights. We’re all set. What did you get?”

Olivia picked up Delaney’s drink and took a sip.

“A dresser.”

“A what?”

“Thought I could refinish it this summer,” said Delaney. “I need a project. Hopefully it will fit in the back of the car.”

“Cadillac SUV,” said Olivia. “Big as a bus. No problem.”

From the angle the light, Chaz figured it was close to four. Sunbathers would be gathering up their paraphernalia and heading back to the cottages. Time for sprucing up before dinner and going out. Quiet hovered over the store, and he felt out of kilter because of it.

He stood and stretched, listening to the popping of his arm. He cracked his back, neck, and laced his fingers together to pop his knuckles, a sound like the bursting plastic bubbles wrapped around fragile glassware.

He felt more rested than he had in days, yet his neck ached from sleeping in the chair, and his mouth tasted old tea. He longed for a tic tac or gum, but his pockets were empty. His wallet was on the table. He opened it, and saw his driver's license securely placed behind the plastic window. Maybe it was better not to know the future.

He walked out into the store. The beads caressed his back as they settled into place. He felt empowered. Let Chestnut lose all her hair. He could face anything.

No Zoe. No Veronica. No employees. Only an empty store. He walked out into the sun. People began to trickle onto the plaza. The door closed behind him as he scanned the lot for his car. Then realized he didn't drive. Remembered leaving his keys in Veronica's glove compartment. He tried the door, but it had locked behind him. He didn't have a key to his apartment, and Burt wouldn't be at the bar for another hour. Damn Veronica. She could have left a note.

He did the only thing he could do. He stepped one scuffed tennis shoe in front of the other down the bike path. Grasshoppers buzzed, mocking him. He didn't know where he was going. His stomach grumbled. He'd eaten a cereal bar that morning before kayaking. That felt like a lifetime ago.

He walked, finding himself in front of Sorry Charlie's Fish Shack. The sign, a painted picture of a dolphin fish with a hook in its mouth, had slowly shed paint strips over the years. He breathed in the smell of fresh seafood, and his hunger vanished.

Charlie gutted flounder behind the counter. Chaz recognized the flat bodies and vacant eyes of the fish. Charlie looked up, his knife midway down the flounder's belly. There were intestines and organs in a heap on the white butcher paper.

“Look what the cat dragged in.” Charlie’s voice was gruff. It took him a while to get started, like a lawn mower. “You here because you need something or want to visit?”

“Had some time to kill.” Chaz plopped down in a rocking chair. He rocked back and forth, and for a while, only the sound of creaking floorboards and Charlie’s fast work with the knife filled the room.

Finally, Charlie spoke. “Don’t see your car. Need me to carry you somewhere?”

Chaz felt a knot of annoyance in the pit of his stomach. As he formulated phrases in his mind, the annoyance melted and spread through his veins until he didn’t know what to say. Nothing sounded right to him. Hadn’t seen his dad in a while. He’d thought sitting in the chair would be enough. But, no. There was always talking, and talking caused problems.

“Killing time before I go to work.” He said it nonchalantly, hoping the generic word would ease the weight of the statement, but it slid through the air with the grace of Charlie’s knife, with a gutting and ripping sound.

“Saw you built a deck on out back,” said Charlie. “Every time I think you’re going to get out of that mess. Do something useful. Something to help people, you build it up. Don’t understand you Chaz.”

Chaz had nothing to say to this man who felt the only useful things in life involved food. He tolerated Shawn’s business for the sole reason it brought people to the shop, educated them about the creatures he killed. Chaz had tried to explain that he sold food at his bar, fried cheese sticks, spaghetti, and sandwiches. To Charlie, the alcohol canceled out the food.

“Helped Shawn out today,” said Chaz, trying to change the subject. “A church group from Florence. Any of them stop by here yet?”

Finished with the flounder, Charlie proceeded to weigh them. He wrapped one-pound bundles of filets in butcher paper, marked the date in black ink, and stuffed them in the refrigerator. After years of work, Charlie sped through the process quickly and easily, but his speed didn't detract from his care.

“Why don't you go back to school? Study something useful. Not that philosophy crap. Get out of that bar business.”

“Dad, the bar gives me a place to play my music.” He had hoped the word Dad would lend the familiar statement more sympathy, some new word for Charlie to hook onto. But the word Dad floated on the surface of his words like an unsuccessful bobber.

“After what happened to your mother, I can't believe you'd sell that stuff to anybody.”

He watched Charlie wad up the fish guts and butcher paper, throw them away, and brush an old rag soaked in bleach water across the table. Chaz could have told them about their designated driver policy. Anyone who looked unable to drive was driven home in the bar's van. Sometimes they had to make five or six trips, but that didn't matter to his dad.

“It's not my fault Mom died.”

Finished with his chores, Charlie looked uncertain, as if he didn't know what to do with his hands. He scratched his chin, opened the cash register and closed it. Then relief spread across his face at the sound of footsteps on the porch.

“Looks like I've got customers,” he said. “You'd better skedaddle so I got room to work.”

Chaz didn't bother saying good-bye. He scooted past the group of customers. His father's voice had changed from gruff to oily as he recited his favorite recipe for fried flounder.

Delaney fell asleep on the way back from the flea market. She dreamt about a bunch of people sitting around Gram's picnic table, taking turns churning the metal crank on the old ice cream maker. It was fall, and the neighbor's turkeys had gotten loose and chased Delaney around the yard. To get away, she jumped into a pile of leaves.

Olivia pulled into the driveway as her cell phone rang. The noise woke Delaney up. She wiped drool from her mouth with the back of her hand, and opened the passenger door. She walked up the stairs, and sat on the porch, waiting for Olivia. She was still thinking about the leaves. They broke cleanly, along the vein, but the memory of them left her ragged.

"I forgot about a dinner," said Olivia, when she stepped onto the porch. "Some fancy shindig at Mark's partner's house. Want to go?"

"Do you mind if I stay here? I'm beat."

"Sure thing. I'll be back tonight. Try to stay in one place until then."

After Olivia left, Delaney pedaled back to Perceptions. She needed to find out about the leaves.

She got there as Zoe was hugging someone good-bye. Delaney locked the bike to the bike rack, and glanced at her watch. Four-thirty. Perceptions was open until seven. She hoped Zoe didn't have any appointments.

Zoe saw her, and waved. Delaney walked over.

"I'd like another session," she said. Zoe glanced at her silver bangle watch. "Plenty of time. I don't have any appointments for an hour."

Delaney followed her back to the side room. The amber beads on the curtain caught the light that streamed through the windows. Delaney felt like she had stepped back into her past before she ever went under hypnosis.

This time, her staircase was constructed of dirt and wooden planks, the kind you'd find in a park leading down to a trail. How odd that her staircase would change, but the ornate, formal one from before wouldn't lead her to the leaves. In her mind, Delaney stepped down, wearing tennis shoes. A black snake snoozed on a rock by the seventh stair, and Delaney skipped that one in a hurry, stepping down to the sixth before Zoe said the word. Silly to be nervous, she thought. Black snakes didn't bother people. If it awoke, it would slither away. Yet the appearance of it on the steps scared her. Was it there to prevent her from descending or to make her move faster?

She descended more quickly, and stood at the bottom of the stairs before Zoe counted off the last step. Delaney realized this time, she was more deeply committed to the hypnosis. Easier to spill over into that fuzzy world, which was more real this time. The contours of the stairs were crisper, the lines more detailed.

She walked jauntily down the trail, swinging her arms. She passed trail markers with white numbers. She skipped through her twenties and teens. The number on trail marker five was pink, a soft pink. She touched it. It felt chalky, like Valentine candy hearts.

"I need to stop here," she said. Her tongue forced the words out. They felt like Jell-O, cold and wiggly.

"Whenever you're ready, step through the door," said Zoe, in her quiet, smoky, penetrating voice.

Delaney didn't tell her about the trails. She was afraid if she did, they would dissolve.

"Tell me what you see," said Zoe. Again, her voice sounded far away, like a ghost. Delaney ignored it. Nothing to describe. Only more trail. She walked by a boulder. The trail spilled over the hill, leading her to the faint, yellow light. Delaney hiked down the mountain. It

was steep and she had to hold onto tree limbs to keep from falling. Finally, she reached the bottom of the hill. The light was brighter now. She rounded the corner, and saw her five-year-old self running and jumping into a pile of leaves.

“Law it’s hot today,” Pap said. He wiped the sweat off his forehead with his forearm, while he leaned against a rake. “I don’t know how the heat doesn’t bother you.”

“I’m used to it. I’ve tuned it out,” said a voice.

Delaney was no longer standing on the trail. She was inhabiting her five-year-old self. The leaves felt crisp and dry. She giggled and threw them over her head like confetti. The leaves crackled, and the turkeys across the street gobbled. She knew Pap was talking, but she wasn’t listening. He wasn’t talking to her. He was out here to watch her play. Then rake up the leaves. They would burn them later when she was done.

Delaney held a maple leaf against her palm, trying to make it fit. She wanted to look at the man with the voice. It was familiar. She tried to lift her head to look, but her body wouldn’t let her. Her five-year-old self was too mesmerized by the leaf. It was red, and had five fingers. She held it against her chest where she thought her heart was.

She must have uttered a groan of frustration because Zoe’s voice filtered through the crackling leaves.

“Float above it,” said Zoe.

Delaney left her body holding the leaf over her chest, and floated in the air.

The voice belonged to a man. There was something familiar about his stance, the way he stood holding a rake. He had dark brown hair, with a cowlick in the front. He was looking at Delaney’s child-self in the pile of leaves. She tried to enter his body, but was repulsed. She tried

Pap's, but couldn't enter his either. No use slipping back into her childhood self, which was holding a mock wedding ceremony for two copper leaves.

She walked back up the trail, pulling herself up by tree roots so she wouldn't slide back down. When she reached the top, the glow at the bottom changed from faint yellow to dancing orange. She smelled smoke.

"I'm ready to leave now," she said.

Zoe walked her back, counting off the years of Delaney's life. She passed the white-numbered trail markers, and ascended the dirt stairs. The snake had slipped away. Nothing threatening about her ascension to consciousness.

She opened her eyes, and found herself back in Zoe's room. She had to find that man.

Day 3

Delaney woke up on the sun porch in front of Mark's dad's old recliner. She couldn't remember the particulars of her dream, but she remembered the smell of cigar smoke. It clung to her like velvet. She'd been conversing with Mark's dad in her sleep. Walt. His name came to her in a red fog. They'd been discussing Olivia and Mark's wedding. She remembered stealing an extra piece of wedding cake for him.

She had to get out of the house. Hoping not to wake Olivia, she snuck out the door and down the walkway to the ocean. She sat on the sand and watched the waves break.

When the first signs of life trickled onto the beach, Delaney got up and walked inside. Olivia was in the kitchen slicing bananas and strawberries.

"You go for a run?" asked Olivia, looking up from the fruit.

"No."

Delaney loved the smell of bacon frying and maple syrup, but Olivia's breakfast was as devoid of smells as her life was of passion. She didn't even perk coffee. She stirred spoonfuls of instant coffee into hot water, then poured it over ice.

"Sleepwalking again?"

"I went for a walk."

Delaney had dressed in her sleep, khaki shorts, shirt, and tennis shoes. Nothing to detract from her lie.

"Where to?" Olivia drank a huge swallow of coffee. The ice clinked in the glass. Delaney imagined it tasted like paste. She wanted a real cup of black coffee and something greasy and fried that would remind her of home.

“Around. Want to go out for breakfast?”

“Can’t. I’m watching my weight.” Olivia opened a container of vanilla yogurt. “Want some?”

Delaney wondered if Olivia had an eating disorder. She had always dieted, but now she was thinner than Delaney had ever remembered her. And her penchant for cold foods only helped to stifle her appetite.

“What do you want to do today?” said Delaney.

“Regression therapy appointment at eleven. Want to try again?”

“I don’t think hypnosis is for me.”

“I’m having a breakthrough.” Olivia spooned the yogurt into a bowl with the bananas and strawberries. “The reason Mark and I are having problems is because I killed him in a past life.”

She didn’t know how Olivia could base her problems on what she thought happened three or four lives again, on something that was a subconscious figment of her imagination.

“Don’t look at me like that.” Olivia took a drink of coffee before continuing. “I didn’t do it on purpose. We were brother and sister, twins really, which is why we don’t have to talk to each other to understand what we are saying. We lived on a farm. Mom told us to milk the cows. I didn’t like milking. It makes me sick to think about rolling my fingers down the udders. I didn’t go. I let my sister, Isabelle, do the work while I climbed up into the hayloft to take a nap. I was the boy. Some termites had torn up the wood, and it crashed down on Isabelle. We had to put the cow down. Isabelle didn’t make it either. You see. I’m lazy and a murderer. It explains why I’m afraid to get close to Mark and why he needs to stay away from me.”

“Is that why you’re afraid to get close to DJ too?”

“We’re close.”

Delaney sat on a barstool across the counter from Olivia.

“You’ve only mentioned her once since I got here, and that’s because she called you.”

Delaney didn’t understand Olivia’s relationship with her daughter. Most mothers talk about their children excessively, but it seemed the only children Olivia ever wanted to talk about were born in a past life.

“You can tell me how to raise my kid when you have one of your own,” said Olivia.

“Right now, you’re like my child. Lying to me. I saw you on the sun porch today, sleepwalking.”

“I’m sorry.” If Delaney could eat her words, she would fry them with bacon and eat them for breakfast.

“Forget it.” Olivia pushed her uneaten bowl of fruit and yogurt across the counter. “Why don’t you finish this? I’m not hungry.” She grabbed her purse and keys. “I’ll see you later tonight. I have errands to run.”

“I need to get of here,” Delaney mumbled to herself. A small breeze blew in through the sliding glass doors. She smelled pipe smoke, and she imagined the words, a whisper, “I’ll come with you.”

“It’s your father, you big fat gator boy. You never could tell that he loves you.” Veronica clipped the stems on a bouquet of flowers, releasing a woody aroma. “Now you got a vase I can put these in?”

Chaz knocked her aside with a bump of his hip, and opened the cabinet under the sink. He had tons of vases, imperfect ones from his Mom. He chose a blue one with a red-lined, not quite round, opening. When Mom died, his Dad hid all the vases in the garage. Chaz took them. He loved them for their imperfections. The bubbles in the paint. The awkward openings. When he held the vase, he could almost feel his mother's fingers. She looked young, but he could always tell her age by her hands. They were rough from working with clay.

“Gator boy, my hands are starting to prune up.”

He stood up and handed Veronica the vase. She filled it with water and dropped a penny in the bottom before inserting the flowers.

“No plans today?” he asked.

He didn't have to work until seven, and he desperately needed some time alone. Ever since Veronica moved back, his days were filled with endless chatter.

“Like I was saying.” Annoyance coated her words. “You should go fishing with your dad. He can't ignore you on his boat.” She paused, looking at him over the tops of the flowers. “And you can't run away.”

“You could stand to take a few etiquette classes, Ronnie. Leave a guy alone with no keys and no apology. Sum up his life, not knowing what the hell you're talking about.”

“I brought you flowers.”

In her mind it didn't matter how badly she treated him as long as she brought flowers. In all their years of friendship, he'd received more bouquets than he could count. He didn't care much for flowers. They reminded him of fighting with Veronica.

“So what are you doing today?” she asked, as she arranged the flowers, pulling out a pastel pink one and sticking it back in beside a red one.

“Swimming.”

“Already got my suit on,” she said, showing him the strap of her red bikini. “I love tourist season. Cracks me up to watch them sizzle, like they got to get all their sun in one week. They peel before they pay for their vacations.”

“At the Y.”

“Let’s go sailing.”

“No.”

“Jet skiing.”

“No.”

“Borrow your brother’s kayaks.”

“I’m sick of the ocean.”

“Miniature golf then?”

“Ronnie.”

“Well excuse me for wanting to spend some time with my best friend.” She wiped her hands on her shorts, leaving two wet handprints. “I’d thought you’d have missed me when I was in New York, but apparently not. The only reason you’re not running away from me now is because your kitchen’s so small, you can’t get past me to get to the door.”

Chestnut walked into the kitchen, like she wanted to rescue him. She jumped up on the counter, and rubbed against the vase, leaving patches of wet fur.

“Why don’t you skip swimming and take your cat to the vet?”

She left, slamming the door behind her.

Chaz took the two steps across the kitchen, and threw open the door. Veronica, halfway down the stairs, looked up at him with an expression that was a mix between anger and hopeful

expectation. Like he'd changed his mind, and decided to go to the beach. Without a word, he pulled the flowers out of the vase, tossed them over the banister, and walked back inside. He could hear her mutterings, but couldn't quite make out the words.

Five years ago, The Shops at Caraway opened, an eclectic assortment of shops and restaurants. Delaney felt the ghost of Walt sigh as she thought about the shopping center. It would be the demise of the island. There were no hotels now. The population a few years ago had been comprised mostly of locals, but the number that rented out their homes to the tourists seemed to double every year. Delaney didn't know any of this, but felt the knowledge seep into her brain with the smell of pipe tobacco. It would only be a few more years before Wings, a chain souvenir shop from Myrtle Beach, opened. This would be the true end of the island. After that, another hurricane would devastate a few more houses, and Holiday Inn would buy the land, put in a pool, and tourists would sit by the snake water slides sipping frozen drinks and talking about how great it was to see the ocean.

When Delaney's thoughts started to sound like an old man's, she stopped walking.

"Walt, you gotta get out of my head," she said. "There's only room in here for me."

She imagined him tipping his hat, a nod to the olden days of chivalry, and turning around. If there was one good thing about Walt, at least he listened.

Delaney usually rode the banana-seat bicycle around the island. When she left the house, she had felt Walt's presence beside her, and didn't think he could keep up. Now, she regretted her decision. Humidity left a gelled coating on the island. Delaney wanted to peel it off. Already ten, and the day would prove to be blistering. She walked down the bike path, the buzz of the

grasshoppers, or at least that's what she called them, all around her. Could have been crickets. Could have been the huge, black flying palmetto bugs. Whatever they were, the buzzing reminded her of home.

She wished Gram or Pap had the nerve of Walt, but they only came to her in dreams, and even there they weren't direct. They left little riddles for Delaney to figure out, or at least that's what Gram did. Pap didn't come back to visit.

She decided to circle the island, find out how long it would take. Had nothing better to do since Olivia was at Zoe's, and she had left her dresser in Olivia's car. Didn't know where she could work on it anyway. She felt in her pocket for money. No keys. If Olivia locked her out of the house, Walt would let her in.

She stayed on the bike path, choosing the shade of the live oaks. They grew in gnarled clumps, and stretched their hands out over the path dripping strands of Spanish moss. The gray moss lent the path a spooky feel, and Delaney almost asked Walt to come back and escort her around the island.

She passed Dandelion Delight and cottages with beach towels hanging from porch railings. She stopped at a hot dog stand, and bought one with chili and cheese. She ate as she walked, and spilled chili down her white shirt.

She passed a pottery shop. A sign in the window read "Help Wanted," and Delaney debated about going inside. If it was just a summer job, then she could apply. It would be nice to have a place to go every day so she and Olivia wouldn't drive each other crazy. She decided chili or no, she would go inside.

The shop smelled of paint and clay. Instantly, Delaney felt at peace. Could almost feel Gram patting her on the back.

A man was organizing tubes of paint. They lay scattered on the table. He wore a T-shirt, which was so old, the neck had started to fray. She felt at ease in her chili-stained shirt.

“Can I help you?” His hands had splotches of paint on them, and Delaney didn’t know if he refused to shake out of courtesy of the paint or if he refused to shake just because. She could tell a lot from a person’s handshake, and his refusal perplexed her. She didn’t know how she could tell his character.

“I’m here about the job.”

“You an artist?”

She thought if she said yes, she would be instantly forgiven for being such a nut. She could tell him about ghosts and past lives, and he would think she merely quirky, not insane. She never could lie. Had never been good at it. People always noticed.

“Nope.” She said. “I’m here for the summer, and need something to do.”

He placed the tubes of paint in a box, and walked to a little sink in the corner. She heard the sound of creaky pipes. He washed his hands and dried them with paper towels before coming back over to her and shaking her hand. His handshake was honest. The right amount of pressure. Not too long. Not too short.

“That’s good,” he said. “I get artists in here and all they want to do is paint their own stuff. When can you start?”

“Whenever.”

“Here’s the deal. I like to work for a few hours a day, but I can’t do good work if I’m constantly worried about customers walking in when I’m at the wheel. Other stuff yeah. But for the wheel, I have to be totally focused. What I want you to do is help the customers. I don’t get a whole lot of customers during the day, but every summer we’ve had more and more tourists so

you never know. I have carafes, plates, mugs. Whatever they want. The customer paints it. I fire it, and they can pick it up the next day. All you do is give them the paint, clean up, and take the money. Can you handle it?"

"A monkey could handle this job."

"Well, I'd hire one if I could, but you'll have to do."

Delaney didn't know if she'd done the right thing, but she could come in and pass out paint from 10 to 1. It was almost like gym class. Give the children balls and watch them go. She wondered if Walt would approve. Helping out the tourists. Probably not. He'd wake her up tonight and chastise her.

"I'll see you tomorrow," and as Delaney left, she realized she didn't know his name. This certainly wasn't the way to make friends on the island.

Chaz walked through the glass door of the Y on the mainland, and ran his membership card through the magnetic reader. The girl at the front desk didn't even look up from the newspaper. He liked that. Not having to talk, or smile even. He liked the YMCA. It was cool inside, and in the summer, quiet. He could swim laps and forget about Veronica. Forget about the way he would feel the taffy strings of guilt pull him under, no matter how warranted his outburst. She learned how to throw guilt from her mother. Like throwing a Frisbee. With a quick, graceful twist of her hand. Hard. Forceful. If he wasn't careful, it would smack him in the face.

A sign posted on the locker room door read "Pool closed for emergency repairs."

"Damn."

If his air conditioner ran quieter, he would go back to bed, and pretend today never happened. He had two choices. One, he could go shopping in some big, oversized, albeit air-conditioned, super store, or he could succumb to the day. Accept it. He decided if he was going to be miserable, he might as well be miserable on his own volition. Plus, he needed the exercise.

He drove back over the bridge to his apartment. One more run up his stairs to change clothes, and he headed out for a jog. He couldn't remember the last time he had gone jogging.

He stepped onto the bike path. Pine needles crunched under his feet. Soon his breathing drowned out the sounds of crickets. He could time his breathing when he swam. But when air was all around him, he didn't know how to time it. He tried timing it with arms. Pumping one, two, three, and then a breath, but on land his arms moved quicker. Running was so much harder.

He hesitated to look down at his watch. Fifteen minutes. Not bad for his first time out. He could feel it though. His calves hurt and his lungs burned. Plus, he had sweated so much, he looked like he just stepped out of the pool. He decided to walk. Walking was easier, and he found his mind trailing back to Veronica.

He felt bad about dumping her flowers over the banister. Now, he'd have to apologize. His apologies wouldn't help. She held on to things for a while, sinking her nails in them like a cat. She'd pretend to forgive him, but she'd bring it up, placing a heaping of flowers on her guilt Frisbee for the rest of the summer.

He came to a stop in the bike trail. He rarely walked on this part of the island. He looked across the street and saw The Pottery Shack. His mom used to bring him here sometimes. He sculpted horrible bowls and plates, splattering swirls of blue. He liked blue. His mom said he was better with his body. Dancing. Playing music. He'd forgotten that. The blue plates. After his

mom died, he broke them all against the side of the house. Throwing one after another until the outside yard matched his insides. Lots of blue pieces.

He stood there staring, feeling the blue pieces of grief collide inside his body. A man opened the door, stepped out onto the porch, and lit a cigarette. Jeff. Chaz hadn't seen him in years, but he looked the same. Still had that ponytail. Odd that he never ran into him. Didn't know how he could miss people on such a small island.

Jeff leaned his hand against the banister. Chaz waved. Jeff waved back, the unmistakable wave of a person who didn't recognize him. Chaz crossed the street.

“What's going on?”

“Chaz?” Jeff said his name with a question, as if he couldn't trust his eyes.

“Can't believe you're still operating this place,” he said, lying. “Business good?”

“Hired a part-time girl today. Gets pretty rough during tourist season.”

“Tell me about it.”

Jeff motioned for Chaz to sit down in one of the rockers. Seemed like an island ordinance. If you had a front porch, you had to have a rocking chair. Chaz liked them though. He settled into the chair with a sense of *deja vu*.

“Heard you opened a bar.” Jeff took another puff of his cigarette.

“The Bass Cleft Tavern. You should come by. I'll make you one of my signature banana daiquiris. Real bananas. Potassium prevents hangovers.”

“Gave up that stuff when your mom died.”

Chaz felt an undercurrent of blame in Jeff's words. He stood up to go.

“Where you going, Man?” said Jeff, flicking his cigarette on the ground and rubbing it out with his shoe. “Keep me company while I whip up some clay. I'm running out of carafes. For

some reason, tourists love carafes. Paint these god awful beach scenes on them. Could you imagine going to a dinner party where your host serves you cheap white zinfandel out of an elementary school looking carafe like something his kid made?”

“Pays the bills,” said Chaz, feeling content. If Jeff made carafes, he couldn’t blame Chaz for selling alcohol.

“Ain’t that the truth? Art don’t pay unless it’s commercial. That’s what I liked about your mom. She sculpted because she loved it. Good thing too, cause Lord help her, she wasn’t very good.”

Jeff opened the screen door, and motioned for Chaz to follow. Inside smelled like his childhood. Like paint and dirt.

“Heard you’re a pretty good musician.”

“Upright bass. We’ve got a swing band. The Krawl Daddies. Remember Veronica Huegelet? She’s my trumpet player.”

“Always liked Veronica. Thought you two’d get together ‘til I found out that wasn’t her thing. Want a coke? Got regular and diet.”

Chaz followed Jeff into the kitchen. Jeff handed him a can of Coke.

“We play on Friday afternoons for the senior citizens, and Wednesday night for everyone else.”

Chaz popped the metal top, listening to the hiss. It seemed to echo throughout the house. After they covered the basics, they had nothing left to say. He took a long drink, trying to quiet the gulp.

“Hired a new girl?” Chaz asked, trying to think of something to say. Couldn’t bring up Jeff’s family due to the recent divorce rumors.

“Some girl from West Virginia. She’s here for the summer.”

Quiet again.

“Come on,” said Jeff. “Keep my clay in the other room.”

Chaz followed him through the maze of the house, feeling the dip of the floors. Fitting that the house was as imperfect as his mom’s pottery. He brought Chaz back to the workroom. Tan coffee mugs lined the counter.

“Thought I could sell those at the co-op in Rayford, but look at those handles. Can’t get them even.”

Jeff picked up a mug and traced the handle with his finger. Looked fine to Chaz.

“Why Rayford?”

“Closest place. Someone should start a co-op here.”

Jeff was good. Even his cast-offs looked perfect to Chaz. The mugs had swirls of red and burnt umber.

“Can’t you sell stuff here?”

Jeff set the mug back down.

“Co-ops draw more business because of the variety. I can sell stuff here, but nobody wants to pay high prices when they can paint their own stuff.”

“How much for the mugs?”

“Not for sale.”

“Come on. I’m used to my mom’s stuff. These are great compared.”

“If those were your mom’s they wouldn’t sit flat.” Jeff laughed. “My name’s on the bottom.”

“Nobody looks at the bottom.”

Jeff wrapped the mugs in tissue paper and put them in a bag.

“No charge,” he said. “Make sure you come back and visit me though.”

Chaz left, carrying the bag all the way back to his place. He’d give one to Veronica, as his apology. That should be enough.

Delaney waited until 2:30 to visit Zoe. She wanted to make sure she wouldn’t run into Olivia. She wasn’t ready to talk about her sessions. She needed to figure them out for herself first.

Before Delaney walked through the amber beaded doorway to her past, she decided to confront Zoe about the cost. She’d never liked to haggle about money. She bought a Saturn for that fact alone, so she could walk into the dealership and lay down her money without feeling like she’d been ripped off.

Zoe motioned for her to step into the side room. Delaney took a deep breath, and blurted out the words, all at once with no pause for breath.

“Is there any way we could work out a deal for the price. It’s just that, at 50 dollars per session, I can’t afford to fully uncover my past. And I don’t want to muddle it up even more by unearthing a tiny piece.”

Delaney inhaled deeply. She looked at the floor while she waited for Zoe to respond. She’d never noticed the details in the carpet. What she thought was pure gray, was threaded with bits of purple and maroon.

Zoe walked behind the cash register, and withdrew a receipt book.

“I could do 10 sessions for 200 dollars,” she said, making a notation in the book. “I’d like to see what’s lurking in your past. I love mysteries.”

Delaney didn’t know how she felt about that statement. Her seemed to give turmoil gave Zoe pleasure, but she nodded anyway. Delaney would do anything to find out what she had forgotten.

Zoe took her hand, and led her into the side room. Holding Zoe’s hand, Delaney forgot her anxiety. She trusted Zoe completely.

Undergoing hypnosis was getting easier. Easier to walk down her stairs, which changed each time she went under, as if she needed different stairs to lead her to a different memory. As Zoe counted down to ten, Delaney found herself riding down an escalator. She hung onto the railing. The motion scared her. She was afraid her legs wouldn’t work, and she wouldn’t be able to step off the bottom. Her body would be sucked under the metal grate instead. When Zoe reached three, Delaney murmured like a dog having nightmares.

“Are you okay?” asked Zoe, in between three and two. Delaney raised her left index finger, signaling yes, and swallowed. Surely, she would be able to make it to the bottom of the escalator.

Zoe began counting again. Two, and before she reached one, the escalator magically stopped. Delaney stepped off. She faced a well-lit corridor, and smelled manila paper and crayons. Back at Bear Creek Elementary School. She trailed her fingers along the cinder block walls. Once again, she passed her twenties, then teens, and proceeded to doorway number five. The number looked the same as all of the others, but Delaney heard chattering on the other side, and saw shadows shaped like little shoes where children walked in front of the door.

“Tell me where you are,” said Zoe.

Delaney stood in front of the door, her feet immobile. She explained the setting, the wooden door. She knocked on it. She couldn't just walk in. That would be impolite. No one answered.

“Open the door,” said Zoe.

Her words caused Delaney's feet to move, and she opened the door, which was tall and heavy. Kindergarten. Delaney saw a group of children playing together in groups called stations. By now she had learned how this worked. She couldn't slip into her body until she saw it. She searched through the children around her. A group of boys sat in the playroom moving fire engines and police cars around, mimicking the siren. Two girls sat beside them, dressing dolls. One yanked a shirt over the doll's head. Her child-self wasn't here. She floated to the station with the crayons and art supplies. No Delaney. And then she remembered Mrs. Dawson's class. She remembered the feel of cold, wet finger paint, and found herself smearing fingerprint circles on a large piece of paper on the easel. As soon as she identified her body, her point of view shifted. Everything in the room seemed bigger and scarier. She smeared one hand into a blob of blue paint and smacked it on the paper. The paint splattered around her handprint, and she felt droplets covering her nose and cheeks.

“Tell me where you are,” said a voice that didn't belong in the room. Delaney squeezed her eyes to hear it, and finally remembered it was Zoe's. Her voice was lighter now, and sounded like it was strained through cheesecloth.

“Kindergarten.” The word sounded funny coming from her lips. She should have explained her surroundings, the child-proof scissors lying on the table, the block letters hanging on the walls, the mats in the corner for naptime, but found that it required too much energy. She couldn't describe anything. She didn't know the words. “Just looking around,” she mumbled.

She didn't know why she was here. She felt nothing tragic waiting in the wings, only a happy, hovering feeling that surrounded her like feathers.

Suddenly the door opened. Delaney recognized Mr. Burdette, the principal. He and Mrs. Dawson conversed in the corner. From where she was standing she couldn't hear them. But unlike the time in the leaves, Delaney's attention wasn't focused on the handprint on her paper, but on the couple conversing by the door. There was something threatening in their body language, and Delaney felt dread crawl up her spine. It had eight legs, like a spider. If she could see it, it would be black.

She tried to break free from her body, to float above it, but her five-year-old self clung tightly, as if she sensed her very presence and didn't want to be left alone. Abandonment. As soon as she thought of the word, Delaney knew someone else was gone. Don't leave me, her child-self seemed to plead. Yet at the same time, she felt her child-self turn away, turn back to the handprints on the paper. She knew that this didn't happen in real life. Her body seemed to be protecting her, but she didn't know how it knew.

Who could be gone this time? Not Gram. Not Pap. They had stayed with her until a year ago. Not her mom. She was already dead. Her dad? No. That didn't feel right. Plus, after that fateful day when she was two, he never came back. Delaney tried to break free from her body, but her body held tighter. She couldn't breathe. She gasped, trying to suck in air. She couldn't swallow any.

"Float above it," said Zoe.

Delaney faintly heard the words, but unlike before at the leaves, they had no weight. There was no command in the tone, and the effect made her child-self cling tighter.

Finally, a hand clap, the safety command. Her brain still knew how to recognize it. Back to reality. She found herself in Zoe's side room, covered in sweat. She swallowed a gulp of air, feeling her lungs inflate. She had never tasted anything better in her life. Not cold water after running. Not even Gram's homemade vanilla ice cream. This air tasted clean and cold, like freedom. Yet, she could hear a tiny voice in the back of her brain begging her to come back.

"Don't leave me," it said.

She wouldn't.

Delaney'd been here for three days, and had yet to try the local seafood, so when she passed Sorry Charlie's Fish Shack, she decided to pick up dinner.

She walked through the front door, and saw a weathered old man at a table constructed of a door sitting on two sawhorses.

"Caught me just in time," he said, pointing to a Dr. Pepper clock on the wall. "Just about to close up."

Delaney mumbled an apology.

"The customer is always right. Don't you know that gal?" He glanced at Delaney, as if sizing her up. "I'd bet a silver dollar you're a shrimp gal. Course the flounder's good, especially dipped in cornmeal and cayenne pepper. Fry it up in your skillet and serve it with tartar sauce, hushpuppies, and green beans. That's what I'm having for supper."

"For a southerner, you sure talk fast." Delaney had never spoken to anyone who had so much to say he had to spew it out all at once.

“Life’s too short to talk slow.” He grinned, a mouthful of teeth so white they had to be dentures. “Especially when you spend all your time on a boat.”

He looked like he was in his late sixties. All that time in the sun dried his face out. Leathery wrinkles dripped from his burnished copper skin.

“You fish and run the store?”

“Yep. Out on the ocean by five. Fish till I get a bucketful. Then man the shop till I run out of seafood. Cater mostly to tourist folk like yourself. Where you stayin’? Over by Rosemary is my bet. All those fancy guesthouses. Lots of single folk rent them out. You single? I know you are.” He held up his left hand, and wiggled his finger. “No ring. I got a nice son I could fix you up with if you’s to be around a while. Good lookin’. The sensitive type. Had a girlfriend once, but she wasn’t too smart. He needs someone to hold a conversation with.”

He stopped talking long enough to fix a long glance on her. “Course you might not be the one. You hadn’t said but two words since you walked in the door.”

In the pause that settled over the shop, Delaney’s mind started to catch up.

“I haven’t been able to get a word in edgewise,” she said.

“Okay. Shoot.” He gave her an expectant smile.

“The short version,” she said, trying to rise to all that pressure.

“I got loads of time.”

To prove his point, he got up, turned the open sign to closed, and sat back in a cane rocking chair. The floorboards creaked as he rocked.

“I’m staying on the corner of Sage and Fennel with a friend.”

“Walt’s old place?” He motioned for her to sit in the chair beside him.

“How’d you know?”

“Small island like this, when we lose one of our own, word gets around. Heard he left it to his son Mark. Though I ain’t seen much of him lately. Spotted his wife a couple of times. You’re from?”

“West Virginia.”

“Blue Ridge Mountains.” He hummed John Denver’s “Country Roads.”

“Won’t find those in West Virginia, and you’ll only see the tip of the Shenandoah River.”

“Might be smart enough for my boy yet. What do ya do in West Virginia?”

“I’m a gym teacher.”

“Got your summers off then. Good for you. Like a bird. Migrate down south for the summer. Think I’ll call you Sparrow. You single?”

She nodded. As nosey as he was, she felt like she could sit here all day divulging secrets. Something about his direct way of asking.

“Any reason why I should know about?”

She smiled. “Never met a man I could hold a serious conversation with.”

“Sparrow. Guess the only question left to ask is what’s your name?”

“Delaney McNeil,” she said, reaching out her hand to shake. He gripped her hand, and she felt his calluses.

“Charlie. My son named the shop when he was five. Liked Charlie the Tuna.”

The place certainly looked like it had aged over the years. An old Coca-Cola cooler sat beside a display of candy and nuts. Fishing poles rested in a wooden rack, and see-through coolers held white Styrofoam cups with worms. The place smelled of raw fish and worms. She couldn’t imagine a life like that. Part leisure. Part work. Lots of pressure trying to catch food for others so you could put food on your own table.

“So Sparrow?” he asked withdrawing a bucket of shrimp on ice. “You a shrimp gal?”

She nodded.

“Stay and chat. I’ll take the heads off for free.”

“The Pottery Shack on Mustard?” asked Olivia. They were sitting in the gazebo watching as high tide retreated to the other side other side of the world. They had iced peel-and-eat shrimp, chilled green beans, and potato salad for dinner with iced tea. “Jeff Richards the owner?”

“Didn’t ask his name,” she said, breathing in the smell of the Citronella candle. “Long hair. Ponytail. Wears old ratty clothes.”

“That’s him. I had the biggest crush on him when Mark and I started visiting the island. Of course I would never do anything about it. For one thing, he’s too messy for me. All that clay, but he has this attitude of self-confidence that’s so addictive. He and his ex-wife used to go out drinking with us. Pre-DJ.”

“You ever cheat on Mark?”

“God no. If I’m anything, I’m loyal. I think he cheated on me one time. I never asked him about it, of course. I was eight months pregnant. Big as a house. Hormones raging. He went to some conference and came back with a hickey on the side of his neck. He said it was a mosquito bite. I let it lie. He’s never cheated on me since.”

Delaney tried to piece together what she knew of Olivia’s marriage. She hadn’t seen Mark since she’d gotten to Capers, and she hadn’t seen them together since their wedding.

“I don’t have many friends down here,” said Olivia. “I’ve missed this. Our talks. I’ve missed you. I’m sorry about your sleepwalking, but I’m glad you came to visit. DJ’s godmother and you’ve never even seen her. How can that be?”

“You’re not Catholic, so I’m godmother in name only.”

“I had to find some way to tie you to my family since you wouldn’t marry my brother. Now you’ve missed your chance. He’s married with two kids in Philly.”

Delaney remembered Paul. Tall and thin like Olivia, but without her quirky personality. Olivia got all the spice in the family. Not marrying him was no big loss.

“I’m doing all right on my own,” she said. “And now, for three hours a day, I have this great new career.”

“You’ll be good,” and Olivia provided one of those rare moments of clarity and insight, followed by an unconscious insult. “You’re such a tactile person. You can’t have a job that requires too much thinking.”

Olivia reiterated all of the stereotypical comments people make about gym teachers. They were stupid. They didn’t understand all those papers in school when she had to write about how to teach a person to bounce a ball or jump rope. People don’t remember how hard it is to learn. Like riding a bike. After you learn, you forget the falls, scrapes and bruises. How hard it must have been to learn to walk.

When she looked at Olivia, into her green eyes, she saw only compassion and understanding. Delaney was a tactile person. Of all her senses, sight was her least favorite. She preferred to move through the world touching things, smelling them, and listening to them. Olivia didn’t insult her. She merely uncovered another facet of Delaney’s personality.

“Any new breakthroughs in your past lives?” Delaney asked.

Olivia took her time answering, and the sound of the waves breaking and the chair rocking back and forth on the new planks of wood consumed their attention. Finally, Olivia took a deep breath and confessed.

“I’ve been looking for you,” she said. “I’m trying to find you in my past lives. It’s impossible that we’ve never known each other before.”

“And you can’t?”

“Not yet. I’ve found DJ, Mark, my parents, even in a peripheral way Pottery Jeff, but you are as enigmatic as a cloud of smoke.”

“Want to go for a walk?” asked Olivia.

Walking was fast becoming their nightly ritual. Dinner, staring at the ocean, then a walk as the sun sank behind them. Delaney always walked by the water, letting the water lap at her ankles.

“By the way,” said Olivia, as she blew out the candle. “You’ve got to find a place to work on your dresser. Tomorrow.”

Chaz usually didn’t work Sundays, but Burt wanted to go to some festival in Alabama. Working Sundays out of season was no big deal. Slow, except on football days. Summer was a different story. With only two bars on the island, The Bass Cleft Tavern catered to tourists. Most of them walked or rode their bikes. That scared him. In June, there were no outside lights because of the turtles. He could imagine someone running into one of the palmetto trees, being jammed by one of the slivers of trunk.

Still, Sunday was good for tips. He was slammed behind the bar, churning pitcher after pitcher of banana daiquiris, and concocting more tropical drinks than he could count. Every so often, he would look up expecting to see Veronica's mess of curls. She never did show.

At 1:30, he started doing shots with a tourist. Megan somebody from Columbia. Dental assistant. She had pretty teeth. White. Straight. Wasn't crazy about her hair. Too short and too blonde. Liked her teeth, though, and her body.

He called last call at 2. He usually waited until 2:30, but the music was too loud, the smoke too thick, and the girl too hot. At 3:30, he took her to his apartment and to bed. He woke up at 5 to Veronica banging on his front door.

"What are you doing?" He asked, standing in his kitchen with a towel wrapped around his waist.

"She doesn't love me." Drunk Veronica stood in his doorway swaying back and forth, trying to keep her balance. She looked awful. Mascara pooled under her eyes from her tears.

"Nobody loves me."

He pulled her against him in a hug.

"I love you," he said, stroking her hair. She liked that. She said she felt safe when people stroked her hair.

"You don't love me like that."

"Like how?"

"I'm so tired," she said, hugging him tighter. "Can I sleep with you?"

"I sort of have a guest."

"Oh, God," she said, suddenly pushing him away. "You smell like sex."

"Veronica."

She turned around, trailing sobs with her. He tried to stop her, but she pushed him away and ran out the door. He heard her fall down the stairs.

Day 4

Chaz chauffeured Veronica to the emergency room. She sat in the back seat of Chaz's Cabriolet, with her leg sprawled on the seat beside her. Her right ankle had already swelled up to double its normal size, and all he'd done was carry her to the car, and wake up Megan. That had been a fun conversation, but it was nothing compared to the agonizing drive over to Spearmint. If Chestnut's hair didn't grow back tomorrow, he was in for a long summer.

He didn't understand why the emergency room chairs had armrests like partitions between the seats. He was so tired, and he was annoyed that he couldn't sprawl out. Instead, he slumped down in his chair and watched the early morning news. Two hours later, Veronica hobbled into the waiting room on crutches.

"Sprained," she said. "I'll be on these for a month. No swimming. No nothing."

"Might be good to slow you down."

"Whatever you do, don't tell me what I did last night."

"Couldn't even if I wanted to. You didn't show up on my doorstep 'til five, and then you..."

"Don't," she said, hitting him on the arm. "Can you take me home?"

Chaz drove the half hour back to the island with the top down on his car. The wind made it hard to talk. One of the only times he and Veronica had sat in the same place in silence.

When he pulled up to the driveway, she looked at him.

"The parents are out of town," she said. "Air-conditioning."

Chaz turned off the ignition and followed her inside. They slept for eight hours.

Delaney woke up on the gazebo. Her bare feet were covered in sand, she saw a line of damp footprints leading from the ocean. She must have gone walking. What if she walked out into the ocean, but she felt a presence, gooey and warm like roasted marshmallows wrap around her. She smelled pipe tobacco.

“I wouldn’t let anything happen to you,” said Walt.

She looked out as the sun rose over the ocean. The inside of a mango. Peachy orange.

Again, she had taken the time to dress in her sleep. The smell of soap and citrus lotion permeated her skin. Her hair was slightly damp. She touched her calf. Smooth, save for the dots of sand and salt. She realized she had shaved in her sleep.

“Walt, you pervert,” she said.

“I kept my eyes shut the whole time.”

What did it matter? He had no form.

Delaney found an old coffeepot and an unopened can of Maxwell House in the pantry. She put the coffee on to drip, and sautéed onions and potatoes, and scrambled eggs with bits of cheese. Soon the smells of morning permeated the house.

She plated up the food, sat at the table, and ate. She savored each bite, holding the food in her mouth until it was the same temperature as her body.

She was halfway through her potatoes when a seagull flew into the room. She looked up, and felt something hot and sticky fall on her arm. Though Gram always said it was good luck for a bird to shit on you, Delaney disagreed. She didn’t want any luck if he came by excrement.

“Get out of here,” she said, waving her arms over her head. She was trying to be quiet. She didn’t want to wake Olivia, but at the same time, she didn’t want the bird in the house.

The bird flew around the room spastically. Delaney thought it would knock itself out against the walls, but at the last moment, the bird dipped its wings and changed its course. She was surprised it didn’t fly out the same way it came in. The sliding glass door stood open all the way. Delaney thought she closed it. Amazing how alike she and the seagull were.

Delaney let the bird fly around the room while she washed her arm. Then she grabbed the broom out of the closet. She was tired of flying haphazardly through her life. It was time to get rid of the shit, and figure out what to do.

She swatted the air behind the bird, trying to usher it out the door. Finally, it flew outside, and she closed the door.

Her food was cold. She wrapped up the leftovers for Olivia, though she wouldn’t eat them, and left a note. “Went to work early.” On her way, she stopped at Dandelion Delight and bought a cappuccino.

The Pottery House was an old house whose floors had taken on the appearance of the ocean like an owner with his pet. The topography of the floors shifted and settled like the waves, and the linoleum was like the skin of water. Soft and thin.

“Right on time,” said Jeff. He was mixing up clay in a pot. “A friend sent this clay from a riverbed in Arizona. I’m anxious to get started.”

He left for the back room before Delaney could ask questions. Apparently there would be no training. Everything looked pretty self-explanatory. Handwritten sheets of paper with prices hung by the shelves. Thirty dollars for a carafe. Paint included.

Delaney walked around touching the pottery. Even through her untrained eyes, she could tell that these were his imperfect pieces. She picked up a pitcher. Its lip wasn't symmetrical, a little wider on the right side than the left. The handles of the mugs were slightly fatter on the bottoms, something no one else would notice if he didn't run his fingers over it.

She loved the farm tables with dribbles of paint forever splashed on them. The legs were round like ice cream cones. After she had touched everything, felt them with her fingers, the door opened.

Delaney's first customer. Olivia strolled through the door in her tailored shorts and her perfect pocketbook.

"How's your first day on the job?" she asked.

Delaney looked up at the plastic clock on the wall. Eleven o'clock. She had been here for one hour and the only thing she had done was read the store like Braille.

"So far so good. Like the breakfast I left for you?"

Olivia cleared off a spot of dirt and set her purse on the table.

"Told you I'm on a diet," she said. "What time did you get up today?"

"You know." Delaney looked toward the shelves of unpainted pottery. Then forced herself to look back at Olivia. "Excited about my first day."

"Stay in your bed last night?"

"Until I got up."

"Right," said Olivia. She walked over to a shelf and pulled down two coffee mugs. "Let's paint these."

"Can't," said Delaney, remembering Jeff's words. The way he didn't like artists working because they only wanted to paint their own things. "I'm supposed to help the customers."

Olivia extracted twenty-four dollars from her purse. Twelve dollars a mug. “I’m a customer, and you’re helping me.”

Delaney nodded, excited to try her hand at painting.

She wasn’t an artist. Her swirls of paint looked amateurish, like a little child had painted them. Olivia wasn’t much better.

Olivia left at twelve-thirty. Delaney didn’t know if she had come to see her or Jeff. When she handed Jeff the mugs, she wondered if she would have to carry them home or if Olivia would come to retrieve them.

This time, the stairs were covered in orange shag carpeting. Delaney didn’t walk down the stairs, but scooted down them on her bottom, as if they were a slide. She could feel her bottom collide with the stairs, bumping in sync with Zoe’s counting. Finally at zero, she found herself standing in the basement of a house. A black vinyl bar stood in the corner. It had buttons on the front for decoration. She glanced at it, and began walking down the hallway in front of her, stopping at doorway number five. There were no voices. No shadows walking by the door. No glowing numbers, but Delaney sensed this was where she needed to be. Two stick figures holding hands were drawn on the door in chalk. Delaney remembered them from her real-life childhood. She remembered the shadows in the room looked like elephants on the door, and the sight of the long, dark trunks frightened her. She had screamed and cried, but no one came to comfort her, and she fell asleep.

She hesitated at the door, not knowing whether she should enter. Why should she go inside? There was only empty space. A canopy bed with the hot pink bedspread with white polka dots, a blue stuffed rabbit in the corner. The danger passed, her childhood self would be sleeping,

maybe even dreaming. So why should she enter? And then the voice in the back of her head whispered, “don’t leave me.”

Delaney opened the door, and tiptoed inside. She was afraid to make any noise. She kept her eyes averted from the bed because she wanted to be a spectator of the memory, not part of it. A noise from the bed...a slight snuffle. Delaney glanced at her sleeping body for just a second, and was instantly inside.

Her eyes felt itchy, from crying and rubbing them, and she felt snot slide onto her lips. She licked them. She turned over, and kicked the covers off. It was hot. While her five-year-old body slept, Delaney stayed awake. She couldn’t see anything, only the blue and purple geometric shapes, like when she looked at a bright light and closed her eyes too tight. But she was conscious of her surroundings. She knew if she wanted to leave, break free from her body this time, she could. Her five-year-old self was asleep. But she didn’t want to. Couldn’t force herself to leave her child-self alone. So she waited. Snuggled in the bed, and wondered why her subconscious brought her here.

She could hear Zoe’s voice this time, a little louder than before, and felt comforted in knowing that she wasn’t alone. She could leave when she wanted.

“Describe the room,” said Zoe.

As Delaney described the sounds, the whirring of the fan in the window, the smell of fresh cut grass wafting inside, and the sound of approaching footsteps, she could hear Zoe’s pencil making faint, scratching noises.

She didn’t know who belonged to the footsteps, but didn’t feel threatened by them either. Gram, maybe. Or Pap. Maybe they had gone in to check on her after she had fallen asleep.

She felt a hand stroking the side of her face, and then lips kissing her forehead. She smelled tobacco. Not Pap's pipe or cigars, but cigarette smoke. Then the words, "Goodnight Delaney." A whisper, a man's whisper. Then footsteps and the sound of the door shutting.

She tried to follow, broke free from her body, and floated out the door. She found herself in the hallway again. Her ages marked on each of the doors. Frantically, she began opening doors, trying to find him. Each door, six, seven, even three and two, were dark gray. When she stepped inside, she felt cold, a hand turning her around and pushing her out the door.

"Got to find him. Got to find him," she said. The words a mantra. "Got to find him."

"Who are you looking for?" asked Zoe.

Only then did she realize she had been speaking the words aloud.

Day 5

Through the half-open slits of space between her eyelids, Delaney saw a slice of bookshelf. She tried to balance the bookshelf, reality, with her subconscious, hypnosis. Determined to be more in control this time. Would force her child-self to cooperate.

Zoe counted the number ten, and Delaney stepped onto the marble stairs. She felt the slippery smoothness of them through her red ballerina slippers, still stiff from the spray paint.

“Nine,” said Zoe, and as Delaney stepped down each step, she pointed her toes, a noiseless, graceful entry.

As Zoe counted zero, Delaney stepped her right foot down onto the stage, her left leg stretching behind her and torso arcing forward into an arabesque. She was wearing a red leotard, tutu and cape. She danced in the front row, with children on either side of her. Eight Little Red Riding Hoods in all.

Delaney raised her arms, tiptoed to the right, and noticed her dance teacher offstage, performing the steps. Delaney didn't need to watch. She knew this routine. A hop in the air, then a somersault. Under the cover of her cape, she moved soundlessly, her ballet shoes softening with the music.

Afterward, she ran backstage into Gram's waiting arms.

“You were wonderful. Like Ginger Rogers,” said Gram, pulling Delaney against her. If only she could stay in Gram's arms a little longer, smell her Rose Water perfume, but they had to go. Gram wiped the make-up off Delaney's face, the blue eye shadow and pink blush, with hard strokes. The washcloth felt rough against her skin and smelled of cold cream.

This had been her last dance recital. In the basement, there were boxes of costumes, a pirate, skunk, teddy bear and Raggedy Ann, all with tiny tutus. But, after this one, Little Red Riding Hood, she quit. Gram hugged her again, and Delaney felt love surround her like lollipops. She wondered why she had quit. She was good. Tip-toeing side to side and turning somersaults in time to the music, never once forgetting her steps.

Gram picked up Delaney's dance bag, a pink plastic box with a small compartment on the side for ballet shoes. Delaney wanted to stay in costume, and Gram consented to everything but the shoes, so Delaney sprawled on the hard floor, working her tennis shoes on without tying the laces. She didn't wear socks, and with her red tights, her feet easily slipped into the shoes.

She held tight to Gram's hand as they walked into the auditorium where Pap and the man from the leaves were waiting.

Afterward, they went to Pizza Hut. To celebrate. Gram didn't make Delaney drink out of a paper cup with a lid. She got to drink out of adult cups, and when Delaney spilled coke across the table and it washed over the man, he didn't complain.

Just winked at her and said, "I need a shower."

The waitress brought a towel over and began wiping the table as Delaney looked down, embarrassed by her lack of coordination, though her child-self didn't know the reason. Only knew her grandparents had treated her so grown up, and now she felt little again.

"Come on. Don't you have a kiss for your Uncle Greg?"

The phrase snapped her mind like a rubber band. Uncle Greg. Her mom's brother. That was the last time she'd ever seen him.

“I picked up a dresser the other day at the flea market,” said Delaney as she settled into the rocking chair. Visiting Charlie had become her favorite part of the day. She’d walk in the door, and he’d hand her a Dr. Pepper. “It needs refinished. Any ideas where I could work on it? I thought about asking Jeff, but he’s so weird about the help painting his pottery, I’d hate to bring a piece of furniture in the place.”

“Got a workshop in my backyard if you’re so inclined,” he said. “Be good to see someone else besides me get their hands dirty.”

Delaney watched as Charlie scooped earthworms out of a bucket and divided them up into Styrofoam cups.

“That’d be great.”

“How you finding island people?” he asked. “They kind to you? Sometimes I wonder. Much as we depend on tourists, seems to me locals can be quite uppity, like they don’t understand they’s tourists when they go places.”

“I don’t feel like a tourist.”

“Nah. You’re like Old Bay on shrimp. Don’t need it, but Man is it tasty.”

Delaney didn’t know how to respond. Didn’t matter. In walked a customer. She watched as Charlie collected a fishing pole, a cup of worms, and some extra hooks.

“Twenty-two bucks plus deposit,” said Charlie. “Make sure to have the pole back by two next Wednesday or I’ll sic Sparrow here on ya.”

Delaney smiled at the man, and took another sip of her Dr. Pepper. An hour later, she left with directions to Charlie’s house and a bucket of blue crabs to boil for dinner. The words “Old Bay on shrimp” kept repeating in her head.

Day 6

Delaney felt antsy. She didn't feel like working today. Not that she really had to work, but that was the point. During her first week, only two people had come in to paint. Jeff was spending more money paying her than he was getting out of her. She almost decided to quit, but she liked the regularity of getting up and going to work everyday.

She flipped through a decorating magazine. She wanted to work on her dresser. She'd told Olivia she would drive out to her house on the mainland for a dinner party tonight. The last place Delaney felt like going was to a dinner party with Mark's doctor friends, but Olivia wanted to show Delaney her "other life," as she called it.

She decided to walk in the back, and see how Jeff was doing. She walked back through the hallway, and saw him working at wheel. She was afraid to interrupt. She walked back out to the main part, and sat down. She got up again. Maybe she would try to paint something. Doodle some kind of design.

She looked at the clock. Only 11:30. She felt trapped. She looked out the window. Jeff's shop was right off the bike path, and the crickets seemed to taunt her. She wanted to go for a run. She wanted to paint. She wanted to do something.

The phone rang.

"Pottery Shack," said Delaney.

"Jeff working today?"

Delaney wondered how she could keep the voice on the phone. Give her something to do. Her mind was racing, trying to figure out a cryptic way to answer.

“Hello?” said the voice.

“Sorry,” said Delaney. “I was trying to figure out this crossword puzzle. Do you know a five-letter word for glass?”

“You doing the puzzle in the Islander?” the voice asked. “I’ve got it right here.”

“No,” she said quickly, hoping he wouldn’t catch her in the lie. “Who did you want to talk to again?”

“Jeff. He busy?”

“He’s working the wheel.”

Delaney picked up the magazine she’d been glancing through, trying to find some sort of puzzle. Decorating magazines rarely had puzzles.

“You’re the new girl, then?”

“That’s me.”

“You sound bored.”

“Not much business during the day.”

There was a silence on the phone. Then, “Tell Jeff to call Chaz at the Bass Cleft.”

Delaney scrawled the message on the cover of her magazine.

Chaz felt anger broiling his skin. He sat at the bar of the Bass Cleft, and read the Islander. The weekly paper usually contained nothing important with the exception of times of high and low tides. Today, however, the paper announced the summer oyster festival.

This year's festival was scheduled for July 2 through 4, a full month earlier than last year's. Every year Chaz held a jazz festival over Fourth of July that drew crowds from Rayford, Myrtle, and all the little islands surrounding Capers. He'd already booked The Wing Dings, and put down a \$500 deposit. They had a clarinetist from Finland.

The fact that the festival coincided with his was one thing. The fact that he had dissent in his midst really angered him. He read through the article again.

"Make sure to stop by the Bass Cleft Tavern on Saturday of the festival for our raw bar and to hear our swinging music," said Veronica Huguelet, trumpeter for the Capers Island Krawl Daddies. "We've even booked a lady from the mainland to teach the Jitterbug."

Book your calendars now for the festival. A complete program is forthcoming.

He thought again about picking up the phone, and ripping her ear out. He called Burt, his partner, instead.

"Man, I'm off today," said Burt. "What do you need?"

"Have you seen the Islander today?"

"Wait a sec."

Chaz heard Burt walk across the room, and open the door.

"Got it. What page?" asked Burt.

"The front."

He waited while Burt scanned the article.

"Man, they changed the date on us, and we've already booked The Wing Dings."

"Keep reading."

Chaz drummed his fingers on the top of the bar. The clicking sound calmed him somewhat.

“We know any dance instructors on the mainland?” asked Burt.

“No, but Veronica better.”

“I don’t know why you put up with her.”

Chaz hung up the phone, wondering why himself.

“Feeling all right today?” asked Zoe as she sat in the wicker chair. Her lilac dress was made out of wrinkled linen. Delaney wanted to smooth out the wrinkles, feel of the crumples of them against her skin, but she merely nodded and scrunched back in the oversized chair. It was beginning to feel like home to her. She felt the dots of upholstery beckoning her back to the past, and before Zoe gave her instructions, she closed her eyes.

She wanted to fall asleep. Didn’t know if she was up to digging through her past today, but she wanted to find her mother. She couldn’t believe that in all of her subconscious wanderings, she hadn’t run into her. Only her lost uncle. Memories of her mother had to be somewhere deep inside her brain.

“Picture your staircase,” said Zoe, still unaware that Delaney changed her staircase each time to suit her memories. Unless Zoe could read minds. Delaney wanted to reach into Zoe’s brain and pull out the licorice whips of memory. The cherry-flavored ones of youth. The fennel-flavored ones of old age.

“Today before you descend, I want you to focus on one thing in this room,” said Zoe, whose voice was clear and articulate. Delaney was used to listening to it through cheesecloth or

water, but today, Zoe's voice had the clarity of freshly cleaned glass. Delaney heard it clearly, but the sound of Zoe's words propelled her into the next memory.

Delaney focused on the bronze Buddha statue on Zoe's bookshelf. It was old and tarnished. She stared at his belly.

When she closed her eyes, she pictured the ladder that descended the tree house Pap had built in their front yard. The ladder was made out of two tree limbs. Delaney descended them backwards, feeling the splinters of wood against her palms. On her way down, she spied holes in the trunk made from woodpeckers searching for insects. She didn't mind bugs, but she felt the urge to check for ticks in her hair.

Zoe said "one," as Delaney stepped onto the ground.

She glanced at her seashell pink fingernails, and wondered why her subconscious led her to age 13. She stood beside her best friend Miranda. A year later, they would fight over a crossword puzzle and never speak to each other again. Today, they were best friends. They walked barefoot down the rhododendron lined path that led to the old marble factory. The road to the factory had been blocked off years ago. The thick branches and leaves of the rhododendrons choked out all the undergrowth. Delaney breathed in a scent so strong, she was certain Zoe could smell it too.

"Where are you?" asked Zoe in her Swiss cheese voice.

"At the marble factory," said Delaney annoyed that Zoe would pull her from this memory. "I'm thirteen."

As a 13-year old, Delaney had been rebellious. She lied to her grandparents, camped out on the screened-in porch so she and Miranda could sneak out. They never went anywhere except the woods. Sometimes to throw pebbles in the creek. Sometimes to pet the rabbits in the outside

cages at the Robinson's. Most often, they sat in Delaney's old tree house. They just talked, but somehow being outside made her feel older and independent.

As Miranda stepped onto the old abandoned lot at the marble factory, Delaney's adult-self started to scream, to pull Miranda back, but her teenage self wouldn't let her.

Delaney must have whimpered because Zoe's voice pierced the trees in bursts. Delaney could only make out some of the words. "Okay. Float. Stop." She tried to catch them in a butterfly net.

"You're in my body," said her teenage-self. "You do what I want," and with an icy coolness, her teenage self stopped and let Miranda run onto the abandoned lot. Barefoot. Miranda stepped on pieces of shattered glass, which led to a gash in her instep that would bleed the whole way home, and require a tetanus shot, and three stitches.

Delaney didn't know why she was here in this memory that hadn't slid into the creek with the others. Her teenage self said, "Wait, you'll see." And as Delaney stepped onto the lot to help Miranda with her foot, the lot turned from abandoned to populated. There were plants, gardens, circles of glass, and people. As Delaney reached into the terra cotta pot for a purple and orange marble, she felt her life shatter. This is where it had all happened. This is when her life became a kaleidoscope. Delaney didn't know if she could ever put all of the broken pieces into a tube again. She might just fall apart.

At three o'clock, only two people sat at the bar, drinking a pitcher of Icehouse.

"Can you handle the place alone for an hour?" asked Chaz. "I have a waitress coming in at four."

“Sure,” said the bartender. He didn’t even turn his head from the golf game on TV.

Chaz drove to his apartment to check on Chestnut. She’d acted sluggish this morning. She usually followed him around the apartment. She sat beside him on the couch as he drank his coffee, slept on the bath mat as he showered, and leaped up on the kitchen counter as he walked out the door. Today, she didn’t get out of bed, and he’d noticed more patches of skin where her fur had fallen out.

He was slightly relieved when he opened the door and saw her sleeping on the counter. At least she’d summoned up enough energy to do that. When she saw him, she raised her head and meowed softly.

He picked her up, and she jumped out of his hands. Fur sailed through the air like pollen. She always let him pick her up, so now he was really worried. He gathered her in the carrier, and took her to the vet.

Dr. Johnson felt Chestnut’s stomach, listened to her heartbeat, and drew a vial of blood.

“Do you leave your air conditioner on during the day,” she asked. “Chestnut could be allergic to heat. That might explain the severe hair loss.”

Chaz felt so guilty he could vomit. He’d have to start leaving the air conditioner on during the day no matter how noisy it was. On the drive over the bridge, he remembered Chestnut’s second bout with hair loss. It had been December, the month Capers suffered the worst ice storm in over a decade.

The marble was small, flat and elongated with swirls of bright orange and violet. A little filament of silver was embedded in the marble. Delaney held it against her palm. It felt smooth,

like the rocks at the bottom of the creek. Delaney was five. She watched people fill plastic bags with marbles. The place was like a garden. Contained. Confined. There were plots of azaleas and ferns, a babbling fishpond with goldfish the size of her forearm.

She leaned over the pond, and stuck her finger in the water. An orange fish swam to the surface, nibbled the top of her finger. It felt like a little suction cup. The fish didn't have teeth, but the motion propelled her back into the man. She felt the denim of his jeans as she bumped into him. She started to fall, but he reached his hands under her armpits, and pulled her up to sit on his shoulders. His arms felt strong and the thumbs pinched the hollow part of her pit. She looked around the garden. She felt like she was ten feet tall, aware of everything, but this vantage point also shook her. She felt like she was sitting on ground that would collapse beneath her. He walked, and the motion caused her to jiggle up and down, her teeth to knock against each other in a syncopated rhythm. The fish looked smaller. She saw them through the clear water nibbling on marbles.

“Who is this man?” Delaney said the words aloud. They formed into butterflies that soared around her head.

This man smelled oily, and like Listerine and sweat.

“Tell me what he looks like,” said Zoe.

Delaney tried to break free from her body, felt the string of her adult-self rise up like a cobra with a snake charmer. Her child-self sunk her ragged fingernails into Delaney's arms and chest. When she came to, she knew there would be scratches on her chest. How would she explain them?

“You wanted to come back and learn,” said her child-self. “Now you have to pay the consequences.”

Delaney wanted to ask how her child-self knew such language, but then again, Pap was always talking about consequences. If she didn't clean her room, she couldn't watch television. Those were the consequences. Never take rides from strangers. The consequences could be too great, so Delaney knew that even then, from an early age, there were always consequences. How could she have forgotten?

"Delaney, tell me about the man," said Zoe. Her voice took on an urgency, like red hots. "Describe him." Underneath the counselor-style voice, Delaney detected panic. She knew Zoe was afraid of losing her. Any moment, Zoe would grab onto the strawberry licorice and pull her through Buddha's belly.

Delaney needed to stick around. She started to voice this, but in the back of her mind, she heard her child-self in a singsong voice, "Yeah, Delaney. Describe the man. I double dare you."

Delaney took the dare. She started by describing his smell.

"He smells like oil, cigarette smoke, and Listerine," she said.

"What does he look like?" asked Zoe. Delaney could hear Zoe's pencil scraping across the page. She felt the breeze from the vent above her, and smelled the sandalwood incense Zoe burned.

Delaney realized she was losing hold of her subconscious memory. She squeezed her eyes shut, and concentrated on the smell of the afternoon. The smell of fire from blowing glass, the Earthy scent of ferns and trees.

"Need a little help?" asked her child-self. "Want me to let you go?"

She felt her child-self's fingers loosen from the knot at her chest, felt herself float up like a balloon.

She peered down at her child-self sitting on the shoulders of the man. He held onto her bare shins with his hands, and Delaney noticed his fingernails. They were stained black from grease and yellow from nicotine. His face was unshaven. His beard sprouted salt and pepper shaker hairs over his chin. His eyes were hidden behind mirrored sunglasses, and in them, Delaney saw her adult-self, saw her bright blue eyes.

Her dad maybe? She hadn't seen him since she was two. What happened here that had propelled her back in time, twice? First to her teenage years. Then now.

“Do you really want to know?” asked her child-self. “Follow me.”

Delaney felt her adult-self dissolve back into her child-self. Felt the knot of reality unravel and wrap itself around her child-self.

The man's hands felt scratchy, the callused hands of a worker, and they walked inside the factory. Inside was hot. Glass blowers blew swirls of melted glass into balls, reaching into orange flames with their metal pipes. The workers blew round glass balls, one after another, and detached the marbles onto metal concave trays. They threw the tainted ones into the garden, in the fishpond, where people would buy plastic bags of them for fifty cents.

“Daddy, I'm hot.” Her words poured forth in smoke-colored wisps. They tasted like charcoal.

“Okay. I'll take you home in a minute,” he said. “Don't you want to see Mommy first? Take her some marbles.”

That's when Delaney's body burst. She stood in the garden with her dad, the dad she hadn't seen since she was two, on her way to see her mom, the mom who had died when Delaney was two. She wanted Gram. She wanted Pap. She wanted to lose herself in Olivia's

shallow chatter. Above else, she wanted to pick up the pieces and melt them down, and blow them into a new thing.

But Delaney's child-self whispered, "No. You've already done that once. Just find a bowl to hold them in."

After hypnosis, Delaney stopped for a hot dog with cheese at the Trolley Stop Hot Dog Stand. She sat at the picnic table, and gulped it down. The sand dunes and sea oats obstructed the view of the beach. Delaney looked up and saw two kites flying. She could see the kite string from where she was sitting, and followed it with her eyes as it hit the top of the dunes. Delaney hadn't flown a kite in a while. Maybe she'd buy one for DJ. It would be a nice way to break the ice when she finally did meet her.

"Good idea," said Walt. "DJ loves kites, especially red ones."

Delaney hadn't felt Walt's presence beside her. He'd been doing that more often, showing up unannounced and placing thoughts in her head.

She glanced at her watch. Almost one o'clock. If she was going to make it to the dinner party, she'd better get a move on. She threw her hot dog wrapper away and jumped on the bike. Walt stayed behind at the picnic table.

She biked over to Charlie's place. He left the key to the workshop under a flowerpot. She unlocked the door. The workshop smelled of wood and paint. She liked the smell. It made her feel productive.

Charlie had laid out paintbrushes, steel wool and turpentine for her. She felt special. Charlie was fast becoming her favorite person on the island. Pap had been taciturn, content to sit

on the screened-in porch and smoke his pipe. Charlie, on the other hand, talked more than anyone she'd ever met, but the comfort of knowing Charlie reminded her of Pap. Words or not, Delaney felt a deep connection to the two men. They both took care of her in their own way.

Delaney worked for hours, scouring paint with the steel wool and turpentine. She dug through layers of green, blue and white, until finally she cleared away the gummy residue of paint and found the natural wood beneath. The dresser was covered in scratches; small ones marked the drawers, and a long, deep scratch spanned the dresser's top. She felt disheartened. All that work to find the wood underneath for nothing. No matter how much she sanded, she'd never get rid of the scratch on the top.

She was capping the bottle of turpentine when Charlie opened the door.

"Hey, Sparrow." He whistled. "That's a mighty fine specimen you got there. Seen a few mishaps in its time. How's the workshop treating you? Finding everything okay?" She nodded. Charlie smelled like fish. He held up a packet wrapped in white paper.

"Stay for supper," he said. "Fried flounder. I'd love the company. Do you good after a full day's work."

"I'm supposed to go to a dinner party."

She glanced at her watch. Six o'clock. It would take her over an hour to bike back to Walt's, shower, and drive to Olivia's house on the mainland. The thought of walking into Olivia's dinner party late caused her stomach to jump. Plus, she didn't know how easy it would be to follow Olivia's directions.

"Oh, crap," she said. "I'll never make it on time. Fried flounder did you say?"

Delaney chopped cabbage for slaw while Charlie breaded the flounder. She felt peaceful, like she had stepped back through time. She was once again a little girl helping Pap cook. Once a week, Pap had fixed his famous hamburgers. He'd load up a bowl with meat, onions, Worcestershire sauce, and loads of spices, while Delaney made slaw. They didn't talk, but the comfort of cooking together made for more memories than any conversation.

"Quarter for your thoughts?" said Charlie. "Used to be a penny, but inflation. Better make it worthwhile seeing as how I'm a lowly fisherman."

He dropped the flounder in the frying pan. At once, a sizzle filled the room.

"Believe me, my thoughts aren't worth a quarter."

"I'm thinking about my wife," said Charlie. "Jeanie used to cook with me. Always my responsibility to do the gutting, the cleaning, the breading, and the sizzling. Said she couldn't bear to look at a fish without his clothes on. She liked them fried and covered in tartar sauce. She'd mix up the potato salad with her back to me so she wouldn't have to look at the fish until they were done. Didn't mind the smell. My son hated the smell. Wouldn't eat the fish with or without its clothes on, but that's another story. Jeanie made the best potato salad on the island. Put a little pinch of cayenne pepper in it for spice."

Delaney thought again how different Charlie was from Pap, yet how similar. She and Charlie had both lost important people, and they'd both bonded over cooking.

After dinner, they played rummy. At nine, he insisted on driving her home because of the dark. She threw her bike in the back of his truck. On the way, she remembered she hadn't called Olivia.

Olivia had left ten messages on the machine. Delaney picked up the receiver, and dialed Olivia's cell. The phone rang once.

"I've been out of my mind with worry," said Olivia. "Tell me you're okay. You didn't sleepwalk out into the middle of the road and get run over or wake up in the middle of the ocean."

"I was working on my dresser and lost track of time."

A silence so cold and long filled the line that Delaney felt the receiver turn hot in her palm.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled.

"When, may I ask, did you find track of time?"

"I just got home."

"That better be a damned good-looking piece of furniture when you're through with it," said Olivia.

Delaney heard muffled voices.

"Mark says hello," said Olivia. "Says you missed a good dinner, and he hopes his dad's keeping quiet for you. You should..."

"Wait," said Delaney. "What does he mean by his dad keeping quiet?"

"Hold on."

Delaney waited while Olivia handed the phone to Mark.

"Delaney, long time no speak."

"Does your dad talk to you?" asked Delaney.

"From the grave," said Mark. "Every time Olivia changes something, I can almost hear Dad chastising me for it."

“So you don’t actually talk to him?”

“Delaney, are you okay?”

“Better drop it,” said Walt. “So they don’t think you’re crazy.”

The Bass Cleft was filled to capacity when Chaz returned. He pushed through the crowd to help out the bartender. He never knew with the tourists. Sometimes, they were content to drink beer and eat shrimp. Sometimes, they wanted to dance and gulp down tropical drinks. Tonight was a tropical drink night. He lost track of how many pitchers of banana daiquiris, strawberry margaritas, and hurricanes he concocted.

At three, he finally ushered the last customer out the door. The bartender looked so exhausted, Chaz sent him home early. Chaz swept and mopped the floors, washed the glasses, and counted the money. Not a bad night for business.

Chaz realized he hadn’t thought about Chestnut or Veronica in more than ten hours. He’d need to call Veronica today and lay down some ground rules.

As he was gathering his keys, the phone rang.

“I’m so glad I caught you,” said Shawn. “One of my guides was in a car accident, and I have a big group from Rayford coming.”

“What time?” asked Chaz.

Day 23

Delaney rarely had to wait for Zoe. She sat on a wicker couch, and leafed through an astrology magazine. A girl with long, curly black hair sat in a chair beside her. She looked impatient. Delaney hoped the girl wasn't waiting for a session too. Olivia wanted to go out for dinner tonight, and Delaney wanted to squeeze in a visit with Charlie first.

"Let me see that," said the girl, pointing to Delaney's leg. "I know a few things about scars."

"It's okay." Delaney covered the scar with her palm. "It's healing."

It had turned from red to light pink. It wouldn't have looked so bad if she didn't have a tan. The contrast made the scar look worse.

"Look." The girl held her left hand in front of Delaney's face. "Bee sting, and this..." She pulled the neckline of her shirt down to reveal her right shoulder. "Coat hanger. And this..." She showed Delaney the back of her right calf. "Iron. You got any other scars?"

"Sure," said Delaney, happy to talk about the healed ones from earlier in her life. The burn on her ankle from Jason Moore's motorcycle. The cut on her forearm from running through the glass door. The dog bite on her hip from the McClennon's German Shepherd. She'd long since made peace with motorcycles and dogs.

"Name's Veronica, by the way."

Delaney introduced herself. She had to move her hand from her thigh to shake, and Veronica glanced down at her scar again.

"I gotta tell ya. That looks fairly fresh," said Veronica. "How'd you get it?"

Delaney wondered how much longer Zoe would be.

“You know,” said Delaney. “Things happen.”

“Yeah, things.” Veronica’s voice changed from chipper to clipped.

Delaney sensed she’d offended Veronica somehow, and tried to patch things up.

“I’ve tried to keep sunscreen on it, but it looks like it’s getting worse,” she said.

“Try Cocoa Butter. That’s what I used when I tripped over the iron. I was walking through the house, hit the ironing board and it fell on the back of my leg. The burn was so bad, I thought plastic melted into my skin. You know burned skin looks like melted plastic? Cocoa Butter. Now you can barely see it.” She pulled her leg up closer to Delaney. “See, just the tip of the iron right there.”

“I hope you have good health insurance,” said Delaney.

“Mostly unemployed. Just moved back to Capers. Give a few trumpet lessons now and then. No health insurance sucks. I sprained my ankle a few weeks ago, and they charged me a bundle to wrap it up. Don’t know why my friend took me to the hospital in the first place. It was just a sprain.”

Veronica leaned back on the couch, and put her feet up on the coffee table. She wore an Ace bandage around her ankle. Delaney hadn’t noticed it before.

“You here to see your future?” she asked.

“No,” said Delaney. “You?”

“If not your future, then looking for a past life?”

Delaney put her feet up on the coffee table too. Next to Veronica, she felt pale. She looked at Veronica’s legs, trying to find one more scar they could talk about. Anything to sway the conversation from herself.

The amber beads parted with a clinking sound. Delaney breathed a sigh of relief until she saw Olivia in front of Zoe.

“Delaney, can you give me a minute?” said Zoe. “I know we’re running late, but I promise I’ll hurry.”

“I thought you had to work late today,” said Olivia. She stood there with both arms crossed.

“I did.” The air in the room felt frozen. “I didn’t finish until two.”

“You said five.”

“Did I?”

Delaney watched as Zoe led Veronica through the beaded curtains. Standing there, looking at the hurt on Olivia’s face, Delaney wished she could go back to the conversation with Veronica. She would even tell her about her fear of winding up in the creek, but as much as she could reconstruct time, she had to live it first. Olivia was really mad this time.

“How long have you been seeing Zoe?”

Delaney glanced at her leg.

“All summer.”

“Did you ever find me in a past life?”

Delaney shook her head no.

“Well, I haven’t found you either.”

Going under was harder today. A cold darkness filled her stairway like smog. Dirty. Cold Polluted. She stepped one barefoot after another, down the hard, grainy steps. It felt like cat litter

between her toes. She couldn't see. She held her arms out, reaching for the banister. She touched a cold wall instead.

Delaney breathed in smoke, and sputtered like a car revving up for a long journey, but not quite able to make it.

"Maybe we should take a break," said Zoe. Her words penetrated the smog with points of bright light.

Delaney shook her head no. She didn't trust her voice.

"I want you to relax." Zoe's voice brought forth more pinpoints of bright light like a field of fireflies. "Before you take another step, I want you to compose yourself. It's only your mind. Your body is here on Capers. Okay?"

In her mind, Delaney, though she was still standing in the smoggy stairwell, felt a warm blanket wrap itself around her shoulders. It was made of wool, and felt scratchy, like the kind they give to emergency victims. Fortified, she descended the rest of the stairs, wrapped in safety, and followed the fireflies.

This time, thick wooden doors with rectangles of glass lined the hallway. It took Delaney a moment to synthesize the scene. These doorways didn't lead to her past. They were regular doors in Saint Frances Hospital.

She looked up, feeling her neck ache with cold curiosity. How old was she? She looked down at her hands, and at her little, sharp fingernails. They were dirty and square with sharp edges.

She looked down at her feet. She was wearing white, patent leather shoes. They were shiny and had a strap across the top of her feet. Her knees were bare. She wore lace bobbie

socks, and a red ruffled dress. She remembered the dress. An Easter dress. She was four. She remembered posing with the Easter bunny.

Her left hand was cradled in the palm of a man's. She felt warm and cool, like peppermint. She didn't need to look up at him. Just the shoes. They were brown leather. She remembered them too. Uncle Greg always slipped them on with a shoe horn.

They walked toward the door. It didn't glow golden yellow or chalky pink. Instead, it glowed charcoal gray. Uncle Greg was going to push open the door, and step into the room, but Delaney didn't want to see it.

She mumbled.

"Float above it," said Zoe.

And though Delaney knew she could float out of her body and back up the stairs, she didn't. It was a traffic accident, an elephant peeing at the zoo. She had to go inside. She'd done it once. Had been strong enough to forget. She didn't know if she'd be strong enough to forget all over again.

She let Uncle Greg push open the door anyway, and walk inside.

Inside, she saw a hospital bed and beeping machines. She walked over, and saw Gram lying there. There were tubes in her nose, in the veins of her almost transparent arms that were smudged blue and black, and a tube with a dark yellow, almost brown liquid leading from the bed. Through it all, there was the pervading stench of decay.

Delaney held Gram's hand. It felt cold. Gram was sleeping. Delaney stood there holding Gram's hand, wishing Gram would die and get it over with. She remembered thinking that this was Gram's last gift to her. Gram's horrific, lingering death so that when she finally died, Delaney would be happy, if only a little.

Delaney pulled her hand back and smelled it—the alive smell of death that multiplied. Delaney looked at her hands. Her nails weren't little, jagged, and square-shaped. Her hands were bigger. More wrinkly.

“No!” Delaney shouted the word. Felt it tear from deep within her. “I remember this Godamnit. Who was in the bed earlier? I want to go back. Take me back.”

In the back of her mind, a whisper. “You're afraid. You might not forget.”

Delaney opened her eyes. Zoe's face was pale.

“Put me back under,” said Delaney. “I have to go back.”

Zoe put her spiral notebook on the table, and leaned forward.

“I'm concerned about your hypnosis,” she said. “I'm no psychologist. For you to forget an entire person, and then to have these episodes...Delaney, I'm afraid you may need help that I can't provide. I'm just a hypnotist.”

“You said the mind releases only as much as I can handle,” said Delaney. “I'm in control.”

“I think it's very evident that you are not in control,” said Zoe. “Let's take a break for a few days.”

Even though Delaney knew Zoe was right, she felt hollow. Like the inside of an Easter bunny.

Delaney arrived home to an empty house. She opened the refrigerator for a Coke, and saw new packets of deli ham and cheese, bread, containers of potato salad, Cole slaw, and baked beans, and fruit. Olivia had been staying at her house on the mainland more often, so Delaney

was surprised to see all this food. She wondered if Olivia was planning a picnic. She pulled out a can of Coke, and popped the top.

She felt relieved. She'd need to explain about Zoe, but Delaney didn't feel up to it yet. She didn't know how she could ever explain her need for secrecy. After all Olivia had done to help her, Delaney felt like a traitor.

She decided to watch TV. She walked into the living room, and plopped down on the couch. On the coffee table, she saw the sheet of notebook paper folded in half with her name on it. She picked it up.

Gone to Philly to get DJ.

Be back in a week.

Left food in the 'fridge.

Love, Olivia

Olivia had mentioned going to get DJ, but hadn't said when. Delaney thought Olivia would invite her to come along. She hadn't seen Olivia's parents since the wedding, and she still hadn't met DJ. The hurt felt like erasers in her stomach. This was how Olivia worked. A secret for a secret. When she came home, Olivia would expect an explanation, but she wouldn't be mad anymore. The scales would be balanced.

"I'm sorry," Delaney whispered into the air.

She felt a presence beside her. A touch on her shoulder.

"It's just you and me Kiddo," said Walt.

Day 25

“Why are we playing so much if we’re not going to get anything out of it?” asked Veronica. “We need to do a demo. Wouldn’t that be a great way to market the band? Sell CDs to tourists. They can take them back to wherever they came from. It’s great distribution.”

“The problem is we don’t have anywhere to record,” said Sasha. “Maybe we could rent time at a studio in Myrtle Beach. I’ll do some research.”

“Whoa,” said Chaz. He didn’t want to get famous. He liked his privacy. “We’re not that good.”

“What do you mean not that good?” asked Sasha. “People drive from Myrtle to hear us. All those bars down there, and they drive to our rinky dink island to hear us.”

“We might make Capers famous,” said Veronica. “It could be worth leaving New York for.”

Chaz noticed a look passing between Sasha and Veronica. Sasha tried to hide it, but he could detect a flash of hurt on her face. Everything suddenly made sense. Veronica hadn’t been spending as much time with him lately. Of course, it was because of Sasha. And he knew how she felt. Veronica loved people in her own way, but she needed the spotlight.

“Bob’s not in the band full-time,” said Chaz, trying to bring up a problem to salve Sasha’s hurt. “I don’t know if he’d go for it.”

“Who wouldn’t want to be famous?” said Veronica. “We could tour all over. Do festivals across the country. Where the people are as laid back as our music.”

“We could camp. Buy an old school bus, and turn it into an RV,” said Sasha.

If it was anyone else, Chaz would join in on the conversation. Hash out pipe dreams of becoming famous, throwing hotel parties, and winning Grammys. But he couldn't do that with Veronica. He'd always been honest with her. Not so much out of a need to, but because Veronica had a streak of ambition that far surpassed his. He was content on his island, but content in a happy, clammy way. He truly loved his life, and the last thing he wanted to do was take his hobby and turn it into a career. Veronica, on the other hand, always achieved what she wanted. He let Veronica and Sasha talk, and focused his attention on his eggs. Veronica was like the tide. She would slip back into his life time and time again.

The door opened, and in walked a girl. She wore her hair back in a ponytail, and was dressed in a tattered shirt and shorts. She looked and walked like a local. Even said hi to Marjorie behind the counter as if she'd known her. This girl wasn't a local, though. She looked familiar, and Chaz was sure he'd crossed paths with her a few times, but couldn't pinpoint where.

She looked at his table, and smiled. Chaz smiled back, trying to figure out where he knew her. She seemed comfortable. Like someone he could build sandcastles with and watch as the waves devoured them. Like it wouldn't matter if she got dirty, and better yet, wouldn't matter if all her hard work ended up in the ocean.

"Do you know her?" whispered Veronica, in her Veronica way. Loud.

Chaz shook his head no, and bent over his eggs, shoveling forks of scrambled eggs with cheese and dandelions into his mouth. If his mouth was full, he wouldn't have to answer Veronica's question. Veronica got up, and walked over to the girl's table. If his mouth was empty, he could have said the words to stop her.

“Your scar any better?” Veronica’s voice carried across the empty café, over the roar of the industrial-sized fan.

Delaney was mortified. She glanced up from the menu she had been desperately trying to hide behind. The girl from Zoe’s office stood in front of her. She couldn’t remember her name, but remembered the dark hair, and, especially, the mouth.

Veronica pulled a chair from across the table and sat down.

“Let me see,” said Veronica.

“It’s a little better,” Delaney said. It had turned light pink, but the scar was still puffy and raised from the skin.

“You never did tell me how you got that thing,” said Veronica. “Seems to me I’ve been up front about my imperfections.”

“Remind me what your name is again.”

She glanced over in the direction of the other table. The only other occupied one in the place. A man and woman. The man looked familiar. He had dark, spiky hair, and Delaney knew she’d seen him somewhere.

“Veronica. But you’re sidestepping the question.”

Delaney pulled at her shorts, trying to pull them down over her scar. Her shorts were too short, and the scar too far down on her leg. She crossed her legs instead, covering the blemish.

“How do you know Zoe?” she asked.

“Touché,” said Veronica, though Delaney didn’t have an inkling why. “Come on. I want to introduce you to my friends.”

“This is my friend,” said Veronica, stopping mid-sentence to look at Delaney. “What are you waiting for? Introduce yourself.”

“Delaney McNeil,” she said, holding her hand out to shake. Sasha smiled at her, but didn’t shake. Delaney didn’t know why some women did that, and it annoyed her. Chaz did take her hand. He had a nice firm handshake. She felt calluses on the tips of his fingers. “I’m here for the summer.”

“Haven’t seen you around the Bass Cleft,” said Chaz.

Delaney settled into a conversation with Chaz, discussing Capers and the beach. How different it was from West Virginia. Veronica interrupted their conversation.

“Sasha and I are taking off,” she said, looking at Chaz. “You should stay and keep Delaney company.”

Delaney watched as they left. A silence settled over the table. Marjorie approached, and Delaney ordered a fried egg sandwich and an iced Dandelion tea. As she ate, they chatted about nothing in particular. How standing on the back part of the island by Rosemary, you could see the sunset sink into the water. How different the air felt in the mornings, clean, light and fresh. How the air changed in the afternoon, becoming heavy and viscous. How funny it was to watch the tourists haul all their stuff to the beach: towels, chairs, coolers and toys.

“So you’re the new girl at Jeff’s?” asked Chaz.

Delaney took a bite of her sandwich. She’d miss the Dandelion café, and all the eccentric ingredients. As much as she liked the herb in her tea, she couldn’t imagine herself digging up weeds in West Virginia to flavor her drinks.

“Started there a few weeks ago.” She took a drink of her tea. “Are you friends with Jeff?”

“Kind of.”

“He’s hard to get to know. He spends all of his time working in the back when I’m there. Of course, that’s what he hired me for.”

“Jeff’s a good guy. Lost someone special, and I don’t think he ever got over it.”

Delaney wanted more information, but Chaz didn’t seem like the sort to gossip. She let it pass. Marjorie cleared the table. Chaz took out his wallet to pay, but Marjorie shook her head no.

“Veronica picked up the tab for the whole table,” she said. “Even left extra for a tip.”

“That was nice,” said Delaney, but Chaz only shook his head.

“Have you been to the arcade yet?” he asked. “Can’t be on vacation at the beach without visiting the arcade.”

They played ten games of Skee-ball and a couple games of Whack-A-Mole, winning 38 tickets. Chaz placed them in Delaney’s hand.

“Keep them,” he said. “You should save up a bunch and get something nicer than a big pencil or a plastic top. Maybe that big, purple bear.”

Chaz walked Delaney back to the café to get her bike.

“Stop by the bar,” he said as he waved good-bye. “I’ll buy you a drink.”

“Hey Kiddo,” said Walt, when she walked in the door. “You’re going to have a hard time leaving in August.”

“I don’t want to think about it,” said Delaney.

Day 30

The smell of hot coffee drifted through the air, dredging Delaney from sleep. When she first opened her eyes, she thought she imagined the smell. Thought she was dreaming again. Had sleepwalked into a coffee shop, but when she opened her eyes, she found herself in the guestroom. Olivia must have come home, but she never made slow-dripped coffee.

Delaney glanced at the alarm clock. It was early. Seven a.m. She heard a short, hesitant knock on the door. Self-conscious about her tousled look, she opened the door slightly and peered through the slice of air. Saw nothing. Looked down a few fractions of an inch. Spotted hair. Blond, parted in the middle, and pulled back in two pigtails.

“DJ?” she asked. Luckily her mouth was watering from the smells of breakfast, coffee and now bacon frying. Her words didn’t have the forced sound of sleep.

“Mom said to wake you up. We’re having breakfast.”

The words sounded so grown up coming out of the six-year-old’s mouth.

Delaney opened the door and bent down eye level to DJ.

“Do you know who I am?” she asked.

“Yep,” she said, blowing a purple bubble. “Mom’s friend.”

DJ skipped down the hallway, trailing a scent of grape.

After breakfast with Mark, DJ and Olivia, Delaney looked through the linen closet for extra beach towels. With the whole family around, Delaney felt out of place. She reached past the stack of wash cloths, the first aid kit, old bottles of shampoo, conditioner and sunscreen. How

odd that Olivia would keep these. Let them collect dust, but then again, Olivia was more concerned with outward appearances. She didn't much care for the insides of things.

No beach towels. She hadn't checked the top shelf. She pulled in a chair from the kitchen, and climbed on it to see the shelf. She saw old sheets that had the musty scent of disuse. They had been up here for who knows how long. Even the colors were old. One set was striped red, white and blue. From the bicentennial, probably. She moved them, and found an old basket. Like Walt had hidden it there. She wanted to ask him, but she couldn't detect him anywhere. Only empty pockets of space.

She pulled down the basket, and sat on the cold linoleum. She began sorting through seashells, paper clips, a pocket comb, and underneath it all, a basket full of green plastic Easter grass with jelly beans. The jelly beans were so old that their candy-colored coatings were covered in white. She felt them and closed her eyes, trying to picture the long corridor through the hallway from her hypnosis sessions. It had been Easter. Delaney remembered the feeling. She had felt hollow, like someone could poke a hole through her skin and there would be nothing left.

She tried to picture herself back in the corridor, with Delaney's fire fly lights to guide her, but couldn't.

"Delaney, are you okay in there?" asked Olivia.

Delaney opened her eyes and found herself in the fifties-tinted bathroom with the pink tub and sink. No Walt. No nothing.

"Can't find the beach towels," she said.

The chair was in front of the door, and Olivia could only open it a fraction of an inch, enough for Delaney to spy her pink-tinted toenails.

“Grab an old blanket or sheet then.”

Delaney grabbed the patriotic sheets from the closet, and decided to keep the basket. Not sure why really. Only knew that keeping the jelly beans all these years hidden beneath the old sheets seemed important. Maybe when she visited Zoe again, she would know why. Maybe that was Walt’s gift. If he had been around today, then he could have told her. Nope. Sorry. No beach towels in there.

Delaney carried the sheets out the walkway and stopped, watching Olivia, Mark and DJ together. Olivia was sitting in a beach chair, watching as Mark and DJ built the castle.

Mark filled buckets with sand and turned them over. They were pre-castle ready. The tops were shaped in little turrets with nooks and crannies. He turned them over, and concocted a three-tiered castle. DJ was digging a moat. The castle was perched just inches from the tide. In an hour or so, the water would swirl around it, filling in the moat. Later it would be washed away into nothingness.

Delaney didn’t want to think that Olivia’s family would be like the castle, ready to crumble. Today they seemed so perfect together. Then Walt appeared. Delaney felt the hot breath on her shoulder, knew there was no form for it. Under the cover of the wind, she heard the words, “Don’t worry. Everything crumbles. Sometimes you have to level everything to build a new foundation.”

The words didn’t make sense to Delaney. She didn’t know if he was talking about Olivia and Mark or herself. When she looked back, Olivia was helping Mark smooth the edges of the turrets so they weren’t angular. More of a smooth way of looking at things. Delaney realized that’s how Olivia loved people, by buffing all the edges. Even though she complained about how she couldn’t get close to anyone. How she had killed Mark in a past life. She knew that if

anything happened, they would build again. Mark had the stamina. Olivia had the eye for design. DJ would be the guard, the one digging the moat around their castle so no one could penetrate. Even though Delaney knew that DJ would lower the bridge for her, she wasn't sure she belonged.

She decided to visit Zoe. Find out who was in the hospital bed so she could level her own castle.

“Good thing I hired a dance instructor,” said Veronica, in between sets. “You were all mad at me, and then before you up and know it, the Wing Dings canceled. When are you going to learn everything turns out all right in the end?”

“When are you going to learn that sometimes it doesn't?” said Chaz.

Veronica shrugged, and walked over to Sasha. Chaz watched as Sasha changed reeds on her clarinet. She unclasped the silver ligature, and pulled the splintered reed off.

“I got it, babe,” said Veronica, reaching into Sasha's case and extracting a new reed.

Sasha smiled. Veronica held out the reed, and Chaz watched as they touched hands briefly. It was something no one else would notice. A friend helping another friend out, but Chaz felt loneliness slip into the room like rain clouds eclipsing the sun. He decided to call Delaney.

He stepped off the stage onto the dance floor. Most of the people now waited by the bar for drinks. Burt had talked him into installing a frozen drink machine, and Chaz watched as the bartenders poured glasses of Frozen Hurricanes.

The oyster festival drew hundreds of people. Some stayed inside where they danced and took swing lessons from Julie Perkins, a dance instructor on the mainland. Others packed his

deck to bursting. Luckily, he'd had the foresight to hire a girl to sell beer out of a metal ice bucket.

"Where you going?" asked Mac, the sax player. "I could use a beer."

"To make a phone call."

He nudged his way through the crowd to his office in the back. The room was small, and smelled like fried food and stale cigarettes. Burt smoked, and as much as Chaz tried to get him to stop, or at least smoke outside, Burt insisted on smoking in the office while he did paperwork.

Chaz picked up the telephone, and realized he didn't know Delaney's number. He replaced the receiver, and picked up the phone book. It was an old phone book, and he hoped that Olivia hadn't changed the number since Walt had died. He flipped open to Smithson, and scrolled his finger down to Walter. Excited, he picked up the receiver, and dialed. After eight rings, a little girl answered.

"Is Delaney there?"

He could hear the girl chewing gum. Must be DJ, he thought. He remembered Delaney telling him about Olivia's little girl, though Delaney said she hadn't met her yet. He wondered what they thought of each other.

"Nah. She left about an hour ago," said the girl. Then before he could leave a message, she hung up. He wondered what that meant.

Delaney pictured her staircase. Gingerbread. It was soft and smelled like nutmeg and cinnamon. She stepped her bare feet down Hansel and Gretel's witch's stairs. Did the witch even have stairs in her candy house? And, why did Delaney picture the stairs so vividly she could

have broken off a piece for breakfast? She wanted a cup of coffee. Lemon pudding to eat with the gingerbread, a treat for Christmas. Gram didn't like chocolate, so she baked every kind of dessert sans chocolate. She'd forgotten the gingerbread. Couldn't remember ever having eaten gingerbread before, but as she walked down the stairs, she walked into Gram's kitchen. A large gingerbread man sat on wire cooling racks, and Gram whipped up lemon pudding on the stove. Stirring milk and sugar into a large saucepan.

"Five," said Zoe, her voice sprinkled the air with powdered sugar. Delaney waved her hand, to signal the fact that she didn't need her counting. Had almost entered a hypnotic state as soon as she closed her eyes. She didn't need Zoe to go under, she needed her to yank her out of this place. Because she hadn't located herself yet, and if she wasn't here, wasn't in the kitchen watching Gram boil milk, lemon and sugar, then how could she have this memory?

"Just wait." The voice in the back of her head. Still child-like at this point. Taunting. Almost like she was playing. Dragging Delaney through the muck out of blame. Something happened in this kitchen, to this Gingerbread man, and Delaney's child-self didn't want to relive it.

"Ten, nine, eight, seven," said Delaney running through the numbers in quick succession. Landing at zero before Zoe had time to wonder why she was counting. "Come out. Come out. Wherever you are."

And in unison.

"You'll never find me."

"Delaney, who are looking for?"

Gram turned the knob to simmer, and let the pudding warm on the stove.

"I'm not playing," said Delaney.

In unison.

“Nha, nha nha nha.”

“Who wants to play?”

Gram opened the refrigerator. Delaney saw burnt orange and olive green Tupperware containers, a pitcher of iced tea.

“Olley olley oxenfree.”

Again, two voices, interwoven, almost canceling each other out.

“Who”

“Come”

“are”

“and”

“you”

“find”

“playing”

“me.”

“with?”

Gram carried the glass butter dish to the counter. She touched the Gingerbread man with her left hand, stroking its belly, playing with its ear. In the background, “Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire” oiled the air.

“I don’t want to play Hide and Seek.”

Two voices, Zoe’s slower, underwater, a record played at the wrong speed.

“Detaaaaach”

“Run, run as fast as you”

“yourrrrselllllf”

“*can. Can’t catch me*”

“and flooaat”

“*I’m the Gingerbread.*”

“abbbove”

“*man.*”

“it.”

Gram opened the cabinet door for the white bowl. The chicken bowl, so named for the painted brown chickens. She set it on the counter, with a soft plinking sound, and opened the drawer beneath the wire rack.

“You little chicken,” said Delaney, panic laced her voice with squeaks. “You don’t want me to find you.”

Two voices, but Zoe’s so faint, cloud-like, Delaney didn’t know if she could catch the tendrils of reality.

“Delaney”

“*I’m*”

“I’m”

“*not*”

“going”

“*listening*”

“to wake”

“*to you*”

“you up”

“anymore.”

now.”

Gram opened a bag of powdered sugar. Mixed butter and milk together for icing.

A flash. Delaney saw her child-self dart across the room, through the swinging saloon-style doors into the dining room. Delaney looked back at Gram. She mixed the icing with handheld beaters. The sound, an electrified buzz with occasional knocks against the glass bowl, overpowered the music.

“Want me to chase you? Is that it? You little weasel. Want me to pull you out from beneath the hutch?”

Delaney remembered hiding beneath the dining room hutch. She rearranged all the tablecloths, placemats and napkin ring holders. Hid behind a wall of linen, with its organic child-like shape. Like covering a television in your car with a blanket. Everyone knew that blankets weren't box-shaped, and tablecloths not child-shaped.

“I'm not playing this game,” she said, deciding to firmly stand her ground.

Once again, two voices intermingling, mixing like the vanilla icing.

“If you want”

“Delaney”

“to talk to me”

“you're starting”

“come find”

“to scare”

“me.”

“me.”

Gram detached the beaters from the handheld mixer and put them in a glass bowl. For later. For Delaney. Once again, she struggled to open the drawer, still precariously off track, and fumbled for a plastic spatula. A momentary quietness settled over the room as Bing Crosby quit singing and the next song had yet to start. Then, Elvis's "Blue Christmas" as the kitchen door slammed open bringing with it a gust of frozen air. Voices. Two, slurred and shouting. Gram turned to the couple, a man and woman. Snow dusted their tattered coats. Delaney strained to hear her child-self whimpering in the hutch. Short gusts of breaths, dry sobs, as her child-self struggled to remain hidden and quiet.

"Stop it. Stop it. Stop it." She shouted, placing her hands over her ears, but they didn't hear her.

Two voices slipped through the cracks in her fingers, found the slippery slope of her ear canal.

"Don't let"

"I want you"

"them find"

"to open your"

"me"

"eyes now."

Gram moved to the saloon doors, shielding the dining room with her body. Delaney watched a scene that she had only listened to as a child, listened as she hid behind Gram's tablecloths.

Delaney struggled to keep her eyes shut. Struggled not to open them, not to catch glimpses of the idols on the bookcase, glimpses of Zoe in her linen pants and turquoise shirt. She

struggled not to feel the dots of upholstery, the air conditioning from the vents brushing the hairs against her arm. Struggled to smell the cinnamon, the gingerbread man and lemon pudding. And as she struggled not to hear them, catch glimpses of them, the scene in front of her melted, colors running together into one soupy mixture, like an oil painting held beneath running water. Voices, all slurred, the man's the woman's, the consonants slurring together anyway, but now they goood down into one mess, consonants and vowels bumping against each other like letters in a bowl of vegetable soup. The smell of eucalyptus and peppermint blew away the smell of cinnamon.

“Pleeazzze”

“Delaney”

“don’t”

“Say something”

“leave”

“Anything. Let me”

“Nottt”

“know you’re okay.”

“yettt.”

And then in tandem, two voices blurring each other away, wiping them away.

“I need you”

“I need you.”

“to come back to me.”

Delaney looked into the blurred, gooey mess of colors. Splatters of food. Mosaics of people, dishes. She took a deep breath. Searched for Gram. Where was she? She needed to see something normal, something, if only a smidgeon of Gram, her fingernail, the end of her nose,

but Gram melted into the man and woman. Melted into the Gingerbread man, the lemon pudding, and Delaney's child-self huddled under the hutch, melted into the tablecloth, and Delaney wasn't sure if she should define the edges, put the puzzle back together, separate the paint.

Then she remembered the marbles. Her child-self telling her to put them back together in a bowl. She had to find one. A big one. It couldn't be made of milk glass. Not painted. Not textured. She needed a crystal glass. Clear, smooth and heavy. Big enough to hold all the marbles, all the painted pieces she was melting down again, watching herself melt the people down, the kaleidoscope of colors, all the memories real or not dissolving into a big old mess. Heavy enough to not break. To hold them. Maybe even a lid with a hole in the middle so she could easily deposit more marbles, more memories, into the real bowl. A lid so they couldn't spill out, melt down and break again.

And as she thought of the marbles, the day at the glass factory, the day her father held her ankles as she sat on his shoulders, her mother, alive, somewhere out there hidden, the scene before her crystallized again.

This time, one voice, crystal clear, small, full of hiccups and fear.

"If you and that man take one more step into this house, I promise you will never see Delaney again."

Chaz pushed his way back through the crowd and behind the bar.

"Got any oysters left?" he asked.

The bartender pointed to a cooler by the sink. Chaz opened the lid, and pulled out four oysters on the half shell. He slid the oysters into four glasses, splashed a dash of Tabasco on

them, and filled the glasses up with vodka. He then grabbed a six-pack of Bud Lite, and walked through the bar, holding the four oyster shots with the fingertips of his right hand, and the six-pack in his left hand. He only splashed a little of the vodka on the floor.

“Where’d Ronnie and Sasha go?” he asked when he got back on stage.

Mac pointed outside.

Chaz set the beer down, and handed Mac two of the oyster shots.

“Thought you were a vegetarian,” said Mac, as he squinted at the oysters.

“Yeah,” said Chaz. “But Dad harvested these.”

“The dad who doesn’t like alcohol?”

“Exactly.”

“What are we toasting to?” asked Mac.

“To things turning out all right in the end.”

They clinked glasses, and downed the shots in one gulp.

“Spicy and slimy,” said Mac.

“Ready to go again?” asked Chaz, picking up his second oyster shot.

“To us Krawl Daddies, crawling home,” said Mac as he tapped his glass against Chaz’s.

Chaz lifted the glass to his lips. The oyster slid down his throat, and the alcohol burned. It felt antiseptic somehow.

“We should have these more often,” said Mac.

Chaz had already drunk a six-pack, so the room started that watercolor thing it did when he drank too much. The edges blurred together, and the room started dancing. He pulled out a Bud Lite from the six-pack, and twisted off the cap with his callused hands. It seemed everything about him was a callus. Nothing really hurt anymore, but everything left a mark.

“He handed the bottle to Mac,” but Mac shook his head no.

“Got to go the can, Man,” he said.

Chaz lifted the bottle to his lips, and drank. The bubbles of the beer washed away the slimy feeling from the oysters. He was glad.

He drank, as he watched Julie teach the basic step to a group on the floor. As a teenager, he’d made a game of picking out the tourists from the locals. Now, it was too easy. The tourists wore bright new clothes on their sunburned bodies. The locals didn’t care so much about clothes, and they’d learned the fine art of applying sunscreen and tanning lotion for a more gradual tan. He was surprised at how many locals were out on the floor. Maybe he’d hire Julie to come out every Wednesday when the Krawl Daddies played.

Julie glanced up on the stage.

“How much longer is the break?” she asked. “These guys are starting to get the hang of it, and I want them to try it to music.”

“Soon as everyone gets back.”

Truth is, he was ready to call it a day, but it was only four o’clock. He sat there drinking his beer, and watching Julie shake her hips back and forth. Even though she was a bit overweight, she was pretty. He found himself wondering what it would be like to take her to bed.

Finally, Sasha and Veronica walked back in.

“What do you think? One more set?” asked Veronica. “My lips are about to give out.”

“Sounds good to me,” said Chaz.

And again, Delaney was down at the leaves, watching Uncle Greg stand there with long brown hair, slicked back into a ponytail. Then, at Pizza Hut. Then again when she was two and her mother packed her suitcase. She packed her suitcase because she never saw her mom again after that. In fast motion, the scene shifted again. Delaney, as a two-year old, sat on Uncle Greg's lap.

The coffin in the room was pretty. Powder blue with silver, ornate things. Delaney sat on Uncle Greg's lap. She smelled the piney scent of his aftershave, felt his small fingers wrap themselves around Delaney's middle.

She sensed something was wrong. Not a sad thing. A weird thing. As if all the adults in the room wanted to say something, but couldn't. They acted like this sometimes. Like when the gray-haired man in the suit visited the house. He had papers. Delaney remembered Gram and Pap sitting down with the man, and Uncle Greg sitting in the corner, saying stuff like he couldn't believe she was gone. She was too young to leave this world and stuff like that, but Delaney didn't notice anybody gone. Three people shapes sat on the couches in the living room. She felt like crawling, and she had wiggled into the room on her belly, pulling herself across the carpet with her elbows, like a snake. The people in the room hadn't noticed her. They used words she couldn't understand and couldn't remember. She remembered the man's shoes. They were brown and shiny and smelled like shoe polish.

Today was the same. She felt comfortable, felt her adult-self slide down into her child-self's body, the body that didn't know she was here, the body that would let her view what really happened, what really happened a long time ago, even if her other selves wouldn't let her.

Her adult-self saw the powder blue coffin. Closed. She wanted to know who was inside. But she didn't feel sad. She felt safe, locked within Uncle Greg's arms. He always smelled like a Christmas tree. Piney. His hands were tiny. His fingernails shaped like a girl's.

Not many people populated the room. Just the four of them. Delaney, wearing her best dress, pink with tiny hearts around the collar, and the lacey underpants that made her itch even through the plastic pull-ups that made her feel like she was sitting in a trash bag. Gram sat in her second-best dress. Her blue one with the matching jacket. She was crying, but not in a really sad way. Even though she was two, Delaney knew that cry. She did it when her mom talked sometimes. Like when she walked in the room wearing a man's suit. Delaney didn't know why. Even if she was wearing a man's suit, Delaney could tell because of the way she smelled. Like the purple flowers in the front yard. Uncle Greg looked like Mommy, but he always smelled like a Christmas tree. Pap sat in his only suit, gray with thin white lines, moving his lower lip and chin up and down, like he was trying not to cry but couldn't. Like a sob would escape at any time. Delaney knew she could float above the scene, knew her two-year old self wouldn't cling to her, felt safe in Uncle Greg's thin arms, but for some reason, she felt this was a key moment, the moment that would explode her kaleidoscope into pieces.

But voices in the back of her head. Her fifteen-year old self. "Bock. Bock. Bock." Her five-year old self, "you have to. So you won't leave me again."

And Zoe's far away, but crystal clear, lighted words that floated in the air, promising to hold her up even if she fell, came crumbling down when all her pieces broke. "Detach yourself. Come back to me."

So Delaney let go. She let herself glide up into the sparkles of Zoe's words, eyes closed, until she felt Zoe's words surround her, lift her up.

Then a voice. A new one. Papery. Grainy. Like he had swallowed a mouthful of sand.

“We are gathered here today to mourn the passing of a special lady. Deidra McNeil.”

Delaney opened her eyes. Wanted to catch a glimpse of the inside of the coffin. Before, just a peek at herself. Uncle Greg again. One more time. A glimpse of his face.

“She is survived by people who loved her. They only wish they could see her again. Wish they could make some last contact with her.”

Gram’s voice sadder than Delaney ever remembered. The words coming out in a blast of hot air, pink, full of love and fear.

“Oh, Deidra. Don’t go.”

Delaney looked back at her child-self sitting on Uncle Greg’s lap. But Uncle Greg had long brown hair. A little nose. Her mother’s hands wrapped around her belly.

Delaney didn’t need to open the coffin. The empty coffin. But full of memories. All of her memories about her mother. And she felt anger, more anger than she could have ever possibly felt in a lifetime because her mother didn’t die. She abandoned her.

The scene shifted. Back to Christmas. Underneath the hutch, crammed into her five-year old self’s body. In the dark, feeling the wool tablecloths against her skin, the musty linen, trying not to sneeze. Quiet. So quiet, listening to the shouting in the kitchen.

“She’s my daughter. I miss her,” said a man’s voice. Her dad’s. “I have parental rights.”

Then her mom’s, disguised as Uncle Greg, a notch, just a notch, beneath her normal pitch, but blurred, jagged and full of liquor. “Really, Mom. You shouldn’t make him suffer because Deidra’s dead.”

And Gram, though Delaney couldn't see her. Couldn't see anything but dark gray shapes, she remembered Gram blocking the swinging doors. Standing there with a spatula in her hand, ready to divert the couple back out of the house.

"In Deidra's will she stated that Delaney should live with us." Her voice, cool, crisp and green like sliced cucumbers. "It can't be good for her to see this."

Delaney adult-self listened through child-self ears, understanding the subtle nuances of the word "this." Meaning, it can't be good for her see her mom dressed like Uncle Greg. No, not dressed like Uncle Greg. No, believing she was Greg. Had divided herself into two, and killed the part of herself that cared about Delaney.

Delaney, both her child-self and adult-self, released a wail of grief. Like a siren. Long, harsh, and wet. A swamp of grief, full of smelly memories and gooey dirt, stirring all the muck up and releasing it in one long, angry wail of sticky grief.

Gram's voice, again. "Just go. Take care of my daughter, but let Delaney grow up with a normal life. If you love her, you'll leave her alone."

As Delaney listened to these words, listened through the wet ringing in her ears, through the sobs coming from her mouth, she wondered if her child-self had been talking to her all along, or to her mother, or to her father.

She listened as footsteps clinked against the linoleum, listened to the door shutting softly this time. A final click as the door came to a stop. Then saw greenish light through the tablecloths as Gram opened the hutch door.

"It's okay, Delaney," she said. "Help me decorate the Gingerbread man."

Delaney remembered the feel of the candies against her fingertips as she constructed the eyes, nose and mouth. The black buttons she placed on his chest. Vanilla icing for gloves and

feet. Remembered as the flood of memories came back. Remembered not allowing anyone to eat the boy because if anyone so much as nibbled on a finger, then he too would be gone. So Pap, finally, brushed varnish over his body, packed it in a box in the basement. They never ate gingerbread again. She wondered if the cookie was still in the basement. If it had disintegrated over the years, if mice had nibbled through the varnish, or if he was the only thing that remained.

After the last set, Chaz's head started to clear. The room solidified, and he noticed that maybe Julie wasn't so pretty. Her nose had a bump in the middle that reminded him of a ski slope. Any feelings he'd had of taking her to bed fell away. He nudged his way through the crowd and back to his office. The phone book was still open to Walter's number, and he picked up the receiver.

This time the phone rang only three times before a lady answered.

"Is Delaney there?" he asked.

"One moment please." The voice was elegant, and he wondered if he had dialed the wrong number. Didn't seem like Delaney was the sort who belonged in an elegant place. She seemed more Cotton than silk.

He waited. His stomach burned as if he had just drank a shot, and he longed for the exquisite, numbing feeling that accompanied the burn.

He should clean out the office, he thought. A filing cabinet in the corner was so stuffed with papers that they crumpled over the sides of the drawers. It reminded him of Veronica—the way she crammed her life so full that sometimes he hung onto the sides by a torn edge. Like tonight. After the last set, she packed up her trumpet case, and walked out with Sasha. She didn't even stay for a last drink.

“Is anyone there?”

The voice sounded like it was coming through the other end of a seashell, like when he and Veronica played telephone with broken conk shells. Then he realized that he had been holding the receiver down by his leg. He picked it up.

“Delaney,” he said.

“Yes?”

The way she said yes sounded like a question. Like she didn’t know her name.

“It’s Chaz.”

“Okay.”

This conversation was going nowhere. He’d never had to search for conversation with girls. Mostly they talked and he listened, filling in the gaps with snippets of wisdom. Delaney made him work. He’d noticed it that first day at the café. She wasn’t shy, but she let him search for conversation topics like she treasured his opinion. He realized that’s why he called her tonight. He wanted to talk to someone who would listen.

“Have you celebrated the oyster festival at all?” he asked.

“Not really. Olivia’s family’s here, and we’ve been building sand castles.”

“Want to see the fireworks tonight?”

“Love to,” she said.

Chaz let out a breath. He’d been rubbing the side of his pinkie as he talked, and was surprised to find it was the only part of his finger not covered by calluses.

Chaz made a deal with Burt. He’d stay until nine, and Burt would close up for the night. At ten ‘til, Chaz tidied up. He dunked glasses into the sudsy water and hung them up wet in the

slots above the bar. The crowd had thinned out after the band quit playing, and people were now starting to trickle back in.

At nine, the bar suddenly filled up.

A girl in a Hawaiian shirt waved a ten-dollar bill at him, and asked for an Alabama Slammer.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“The beer man ran out,” she said.

The beer man was the island equivalent of a kiosk salesperson at the mall. During festivals, the island council sold beer out of booths near the pier. To raise money for the bridge, they said. As far as Chaz knew, they either hadn’t raised enough money to fix the bridge or they’d skimmed a little too much off the top.

He looked in the direction of the door. A line was forming outside. He recognized Burt by his yellow hat trying to make his way to the bar.

Chaz handed the ten-dollar bill back to the girl.

“Burt’ll be with you in a sec,” he said, and scooted his way through the crowd. He could hear the girl cursing him for not fixing her drink.

He finally nudged his way to the front door. The bouncer sat on a stool with his arms crossed. Justin had worked for him the past three summers while on break from the University of South Carolina.

“Hey Man,” he said, patting Justin on the shoulder. “Getting kind of sticky out here.”

“Jammed up early tonight.”

Chaz scanned the line, but didn’t see Delaney. He realized he had no way of describing her. He’d only seen her once at the café. He decided to wait outside with Justin. The night felt

cool and festive. The shops had stayed open late, and he saw groups of people walking with ice cream cones and souvenir bags.

“People in Columbia call this the sticks,” said Justin. “They think we’re some backward island where everyone goes to bed at nine.”

“For eight months a year we are,” said Chaz. “I get by on what we pull in during the summer.”

“Should make a haul tonight.”

“Yeah,” said Chaz, but he didn’t care. He only cared that in a few minutes he would see Delaney.

And then he saw her. She wore cut-off jeans and a T-shirt, and her hair in a ponytail. Exactly how he remembered her.

“Delaney, over here,” he said, waving at her to come to the front of the line. She looked relieved to see him.

“Hey,” she said. “Cool place.”

“Figured the only way I could corral you over here was to call you. How about a banana daiquiri?”

“Sounds good. How’d you get my number anyway?”

“You can find anything on an island this small.”

She seemed satisfied with that explanation. Chaz motioned for her to walk inside. When her back was turned, Justin gave him the thumbs up.

“It’s not like that,” said Chaz.

Justin’s look said he didn’t believe him.

Chaz took Delaney's hand, and led her to the bar. He wasn't as aggressive as usual, so the walk took a little longer, but not long enough. He pulled her behind the bar with him, reluctant to let go. He could have held on to her forever.

Burt glared at him.

"Either help out or get out of the way," said Burt.

"In a minute."

Chaz filled a blender with Bacardi light and dark, bananas, pineapple juice, and ice. He pressed the button. The blender crunched ice, making conversation impossible. It was enough to be near her. He reached up on the shelf above the bar for two plastic cups with lids, filled them with the daiquiris, and handed one to her. He reached out for her hand as they threaded their way outside, but couldn't find it.

"This is fantastic," she said.

"Real bananas make all the difference."

They walked along the road. The kiddie carnival was beginning to close up. One lone clown twisted balloons into a giraffe. He tried to give it to Delaney, but she shook her head no.

"Give it to a kid instead," she said.

"Awful generous of you," said Chaz.

"You can't trust balloons," she said. "You never know when they'll pop."

Chaz felt the undercurrent of something profound in that statement, but he didn't have the guts to ask her. She looked empty, like she had just found out her dog was run over by a car. He didn't have the energy to cheer her up.

"Where do they set off the fireworks?" she asked.

"The pier. We can get a good view from out on the beach."

They walked across the road, through the path between the dunes, and out onto the beach. Festival goers that weren't at the Bass Cleft filtered out onto the sand. They reminded him of fiddler crabs scurrying back and forth. All bravado and no pinch.

"You really want to sit out here with all the people?" she said.

"Not really."

"How about a walk instead?"

She took off her sandals, and walked barefoot by the water's edge. With her daiquiri in the other hand, Chaz realized there would be no more hand holding. She didn't seem into it anyway.

"I used to hate it out here at night," he said. "During the day, the water stretches out past the horizon like you could sail on over the edge of the world. At night, everything's black and you have to work to see what's out there."

"When I first got here, I experienced, I don't know what you would call it, a kind of vertigo in reverse," said Delaney. "All that stretch of water. Everything's so flat. In West Virginia, you can't see past the mountains. But they're safe, you know. Like you could curl up in the trees. You all don't have any trees to speak of out here."

"Pine trees. Palmettos."

"Trees with soft leaves. Like maples. But now, I think there's something comforting in the sameness of it. Your trees aren't soft, but they don't die on you. And when you can see what's in front of you, you don't have to worry about what's behind the next mountain."

Just then, a loud boom sounded. They looked up. Chaz saw a bright stream of gold sailing up in the air. Then a second of black before it exploded into a cascade of gold stars. Chaz

realized it didn't matter where you came from. You never knew what might be lurking in the dark.

After the fireworks, he drove her back to Walt's place. No lights were on inside. Delaney looked at the driveway.

"Guess Olivia and the fam went home," she said.

"I'll walk you up. Even check your closets for boogeymen if you'd like."

They walked up the stairs, and he waited while she unlocked the door. He was beginning to dehydrate from all the alcohol, and he felt the beginnings of a hangover.

"Come on in," she said. "Want a beer?"

"Just water."

She walked into the kitchen, and poured two glasses of water from a filtered pitcher.

"I'd offer the deck as a seat, but all that dark's making my eyes hurt," she said as she sat on a barstool.

Chaz tried to stifle a yawn. He was exhausted, but he didn't want to leave just yet. He felt like Delaney was the reason Chestnut was losing her hair. He didn't know why, but he needed to be here.

"We've got cards or Scrabble if you're up for a game," she said.

"Scrabble's good."

He won the first game. She spelled out 'figment,' using all seven of her letters to win the second game. He wondered if that meant anything.

"I should go," he said, standing up and reaching for his keys. "You're tired."

"Yeah."

She walked him to the door.

“Thanks for calling me tonight,” she said. “You don’t know how I needed this.”

“Me too.”

As he turned to walk down the stairs, he heard her close the door and turn the lock. He was a bit disappointed that she didn’t watch him leave.

Day 32

Chestnut chirped in his ear. She didn't "meow," didn't "mew," didn't even squeal a "rea-oww." She chirped. The first time he heard the sound, he searched for mice, in the drawers and under the sink, but then he noticed her head bobbing back and forth in tune to make-believe music.

Today, her chirping lacked rhythm. The "cheeps" steadily softened as if the volume of her voice was directly proportional to the amount of fur on her body. When she lost it all, would her cheeps be invisible, the only effort of her noise apparent in her head bobs? An unseen psychic force was slowly whittling her away.

The air conditioner crunched ice, sputtering jagged edges of sound, an effect plowing on through months of Coastal Carolina summers set on "Maximum Cold." Perhaps it was the spurts that squashed Chestnut's voice. Chaz got out of bed, speckles of cat litter and bits of fur clinging to his bare feet as he walked across the hardwood floor, and switched the air conditioner to off. He peered out across the sun-drenched lawn, crackly and brown, and noticed the swirling pine needles, the Spanish moss waving on the trees.

He glanced at Chestnut, head bobbing back and forth and issuing barely audible "cheeps." Outside, the wind stirred. He walked to the other side of the room, and cracked open the window. Air, heavy with the coming rain, brushed his face and stirred Chestnut's remaining fur.

"Cheep. Cheep." Her head bobbed vigorously. She looked like a chicken pecking for grain.

“Sorry kid-o,” said Chaz as he patted her on the head. Patchy fur lined her ears and the edges of her body. She looked like a cartoon drawing that hadn’t been colored in, a hybrid mix of cat and chicken. “I don’t know what to do.”

He picked her up, cuddling her next to his face. Her cat mouth was close to his ear. She chirped. “Cheep.” He felt the air flow into his ear, more than he heard the sound. Today he sensed urgency in Chestnut’s chirp. An urgency that prickled his skin, bristled the hairs on his forearm, and twittered his eyelashes. If he didn’t find out what was causing Chestnut to become ever more naked...well...

“Damn it to hell,” he said, laying her back on the bed. He brushed his hands against his legs to remove the fur from his palms.

It was Sunday, his weekly swim in the ocean. He suited up. Pulled the trunks, damp from yesterday’s swim and smelling like chlorine from the pool, up over his narrow hips and stopped before sliding his feet into flip flops.

“Cheep. Cheep.” Softer still, but more insistent, and Chaz could swear he saw the hair fall out like feathers.

“Come on,” he said, the fillings in his teeth singeing his tongue.

“Chee-eeep.” A whisper, but loud enough to stir the wind by his right ear. She was on the bed, but the wind puffed by his face. It traveled through his ear canal like a sloop. Loud enough to puff the sails and blow smack into his ear drum.

“What?” He screamed the word, smacking his hand over his ear, trying to block the gust that would force the sloop through his ear drum and into his brain.

Chestnut bobbed her head. The cheep just millimeters from her thin, round pink cat lips. Her mouth opened, the yellow fangs paused, frozen. Then “Cheep.” Quiet as seaweed. Quiet as

rain falling before it hits the ground. Quiet as central air conditioning. The force of the wind took the rest of Chestnut's fur. He saw her in all her nakedness, like he had only twice before, her skin speckled like a Dalmatian. He wanted to stroke her, cover her nakedness with his palms, feel the black dots, test their texture, but he couldn't remove his hands from his ears.

Chestnut tiptoed to a pool of light by the window. There she stood, shivering, her head bobbing up and down, her mouth issuing unheard cheeps, so high they caused the air in his apartment to swirl around his body, shaking the hairs on his arms, his legs, his head.

“What are you trying to tell me?”

Then exhausted, she circled dog-like, curled up and fell asleep.

The wind stopped. He glanced out the window. The pine needles lay still on the ground. The Spanish moss lazed on the tree limbs. Chaz touched the top of his head, relieved to feel the spiky tufts of hair. Ecstatic when they didn't break off into his hands. The wind had stirred dust bunnies from under the bed, and they lay scattered across the floor, exhausted from their spontaneous orgy. Chaz took off his trunks, deciding that Sunday or no, he would not take to the sea today.

Then a coolness against his testicles. Chaz cupped them with his left palm. Bare. Smooth. He picked up his trunks. In the crotch, curly black hairs nestled against the white, netted fabric. He looked at his nuts, wrinkly and bare. Fear engulfed him - white, slimy and smelling of fish guts. He vomited there on the floor, and could have sworn he saw silvery scales.

The bag of homemade chocolate chip cookies rattled against the metal of the basket. Wind blew dirt in her eyes. It rustled the moss in the trees, the Oleanders, and the thick Palmetto fronds. A storm was coming.

The bells of Saint Luke's Episcopal belted out worship music, signaling the end of service as people filed out the door in their Sunday best. Delaney sped by them on her bike, slowing down a little to nod and smile at the strangers, and to recite a quick "Amen." If she had a bell, she would have rung it, a flat "bring bring," in time to the resonant "Bong! Bong!" church ones. Well, an "Amen" would have to do.

She didn't often ride by the church. The small white wooden building could have been a small house if not for the steeple and the two stained glass windows by the front door. Charming.

Sunday was a day of rituals. Gram had begun every Sunday baking an apple crisp, leaving it on the stove to cool as she and Pap attended morning service at Old Faith Baptist. When Delaney turned eighteen, Gram didn't force her to attend church anymore. The smell of the apple crisp forced her outside every Sunday for her long run because she couldn't so much as nibble an oatmeal crumb or Gram would have known. They worshiped. She ran. Then together, Delaney smelling of sweat and Gram and Pap of perfume and after-shave, they nibbled apple crisp and drank hot coffee.

She missed those Sundays. The ritual ended with the apple crisp, though the day was always set aside for family. Sometimes they meandered down long country roads in search of pecks of apples and tomatoes from local farmers. Sometimes they sat on the porch, drinking lemonade and soaking up the comfortable silence.

Delaney's destination made her a little queasy. She wanted to run into St. Luke's, kneel at the altar, and ask Gram to forgive her. Charlie had invited her to a family dinner at his son

Shawn's, and though the invitation was steeped in sugar, sincere as postage stamps, she wondered if she was imposing on family tradition. Another part of her felt warm, like s'mores, hoping against hope that the dinner would become apple crisp ritual.

Shawn lived in a brick one-story ranch. It would be decades before his house would require elevation, raised on stilts to hover over high tide. And Delaney's sense of permanence was kindled. As she knocked on the door, she felt oatmeal cling to her skin, the sweetness of the apple pie afternoon inviting her into a new ritual.

"Delaney McNeil," said the man who opened the door. He looked familiar. A shade like the afternoon sun when the moon remembers tomorrow. "Dad's been talking you up like you're the next best thing since sliced bread. What the hell's so great about sliced bread? Doesn't take a genius to slice up a loaf. Ain't too bad even if you grab it with your hands and just eat, if ya know what I mean."

Delaney did, in fact, know what he meant. When she was little, there was nothing better than balling a piece of bread in her fingers and sucking on it till it turned to dough in her mouth. She was on the verge of voicing this memory when a car, a convertible Cabriolet, pulled into the driveway. As she recognized the spiky black hair, Shawn said. "Well, I'll be damned." And the resemblance of Shawn to his brother Chaz hit her like a slice of Wonder bread. It didn't take a genius to figure out that destiny served up miracles pretty quick, took slices of people and fused them together into one big loaf, and Delaney felt the gooeyness of belonging wrap its arms around her belly.

“Can’t say I’m more than a little surprised to see you,” said Chaz when he got to the front door.

She looked up into his eyes as he spoke, forcing a little glance up and down his body, quick, cat-like, hoping he wouldn’t notice the extra edge of excitement in her own eyes. She didn’t think he would. He seemed edgy, fidgety. She could almost see the molecules on his skin fighting each other in an effort to hold together.

“You’ve met Dad’s newest bud?” said Shawn, the look on his face torn between questioning nosiness and brotherly silence. “You guys get on in here before I air condition all of outdoors.”

Delaney stepped into the living room, the harsh contrast between the humid outdoors and frigid insides knocked her for a loop. It smelled of fish, fried fish, and Delaney’s mouth started to water. Charlie’s Cajun fried flounder. Yummy. She glanced at Chaz. If it was possible, she could have sworn all of his color drained away. He looked gray and wiry, and a little as though he would throw up.

“Shawn, can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Later. We can’t be rude to the guests.”

“Oh, go have your fight,” she said, and left them as she followed the cookie cutter route to the kitchen.

She had regretted the words as soon as they left her mouth. They hadn’t fought, didn’t even seem like they were going to, but she detected an underbelly of friction in the room. The air was simply studded with it. She knew that until Chaz calmed down, she would feel like an outsider. The gooey belonging feeling from earlier felt stale, like burnt toast.

As she walked down the hallway, she chewed her fingernails. She never chewed her nails. As a gym teacher, she didn't have any. Once, she wore acrylic nails to a weekend party. On Monday, she demonstrated an overhead volleyball serve and ended up tearing off the index nail. After that, she kept her nails so short that she couldn't even find a sliver to gnaw if she wanted. At Capers, she let them grow wild. They were ragged and boxy, and tasted like turpentine. She peeled off a half-moon sliver, feeling the splinter of it slide between her bottom incisors.

Chaz and Shawn whispered, charging the air with short bursts of secrets that crawled through the air, amorphous.

Alone, she navigated the hallway lined with family pictures. Shawn's wedding pictures. Chaz in a black tuxedo, hair conservatively straight. Chaz and Shawn as children with sun-speckled faces and hair forever captured in abandoned control. Charlie, younger, holding the boys on his lap – his hair as dark as Chaz's, his face smooth and unlined. A woman, a replica of Chaz.

The hallway spilled into the kitchen. Plastic plates, bowls, silverware and covered dishes lined the counter. Through the sliding glass door, she saw Charlie standing by the gas grill talking with a lady in shorts. Shawn's wife, Amelia. Delaney stood a moment alone, away from the living room secrets and outside chit chat, trying to dislodge the nail fragment that crammed her teeth together. She watched as Charlie turned a tinfoil cylinder of corn, and tried to compose herself. Finally, the fragment dislodged, and refreshing, sweet air charged with secrets, squeezed through the empty space in her teeth.

The kitchen smelled of grease, fried fish, and hushpuppies. She heard a whine, and felt a wet nose nudging her bare shins. A tail wagging thump thump welcomed her.

She knelt down, taking the Golden Retriever's face between her hands and said hello.

"That's Danger," said a voice. Chaz's voice. He clipped the edges of his vowels off like a parakeet's wings.

"Hi, Danger." Delaney nuzzled the dog's ears. "Guess we'd better go outside."

"Wait." Chaz knelt down beside her. He smelled like oranges. "I have a question for you."

Delaney didn't want to hear the question. A personal question. Why was she here? No one provided warnings for innocuous questions. Instead, coolly and analytically, he asked, "How would I look bald?"

She glanced at him, at his childhood freckles sprinkled across his nose, his spiky hair, eyebrow ring. His body language didn't match his tone. His knees shook, a little, just a little. Maybe from a caffeine rush or a sugar high. He looked past her through the sliding glass doors, but she didn't think he was watching Charlie pile silver cylinders on a paper plate. His eyes flickered to hers for an instant, as if he didn't want to hear the answer, but needed to. The smell of the kitchen – the grease, the hushpuppies, the fried fish – melted away, replaced by an imaginary smell of disintegrating flesh, urine, hospitals, and lemon cleanser. Before Gram died, Delaney held her hand, squeezed it, kissed it, and when Delaney placed Gram's cold hand on the sheet, the smell clung to hers. The smell of death was so alive it penetrated her skin, and climbed out of her subconscious into reality months later. She would never forget the smell, the way she would smell one day. She looked into Chaz's brown, almost black eyes, and pictured them diluted to gray, his skin peeling back until she could see the cancer.

She pulled her hands away from Danger and smelled them. Craved the canine smell of dirt and slobber, but decay sunk its teeth into her snout.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“Your eyebrow ring might look funny,” she said, trying to conjure up the smell of fried dough, pieces of onion, little, crispy hushpuppies. Signature of the south. Dipped in honey butter.

“Yeah.” Chaz smoothed his eyebrow with his index finger. “I have a huge flat spot.”

Delaney wanted to smell his skin, see if it still smelled like oranges.

“See.” He pulled her palm toward the top of his head. Through the jagged points of hair, she felt skull, as round and flat as her palm.

“I could set a beer bottle on your head. Use you as a coaster.”

“See the dilemma. I can’t go bald. I look terrible in hats. From the back, I’ll look like a pencil eraser.”

Delaney brought her hand to her nose and smelled it. Like watermelon. The lump in her stomach started to shrink. Touching his head comforted her, and she took solace in their intimacy, reaching up and tracing his forehead with her finger. No receding hairline, and then an image of him, hairless, and once again, the smell of Gram permeated the room.

“Charlie still has his hair. And Shawn.”

“Nothing to do with it.”

Delaney stood, placed her hands on her hips, and stomped the floor like a five-year old throwing a tantrum. The words rushed out of her mouth before she could stop them. If only she could lasso them, pulled them back.

“I wish I could put cancer in a bag of poop and set it on fire.”

“What?”

From her vantage point above him, Chaz looked smaller and she could imagine him wasting away. “Gram died. Then Pap. Mom and Dad gone. People are like fireflies, and when

you get used to their lights, God scoops them up and puts them in a jar. He doesn't poke holes in it either. He lets them waste away, and you can see them inside gasping for breath, but you can't help them. There's a pane of glass in between. And now, I find out that Mom might still be alive. And Dad. And there's still a pane of glass, only this one is milky, and I can't even see them gasping."

"Delaney, why would it matter if I had cancer?"

"I can't smell another person die."

A toilet flush and door slam. Then seconds later, Shawn appeared in the room. Chaz stood, his mouth open as if he were trying to unscramble words in his brain, assemble them in the right sequence.

"Mmm," said Shawn, rubbing his hands together. "The corn and steaks are probably cooked to a T. Fried flounder. Grilled sirloin. Dad's idea of surf and turf. Don't know why he won't let me cook in my own house. But who's complaining? Thought you guys'd already be outside."

"I can't," said Delaney. "Tell Charlie I'll see him tomorrow."

Chaz grabbed her arm.

"Wait."

"I can't." She turned and walked out. Chaz and Shawn too surprised to follow. Bits of conversation drifted after her, but Delaney didn't listen. She felt like she would suffocate. Even outside didn't help. The live oaks reached out across the bike path. Delaney felt like they would strangle her.

"Where's she going?" asked Shawn.

Standing in the kitchen, Chaz stared down the empty hallway and out the front door. She hadn't bothered closing it.

"Hell if I know." He raised his hand to his head, bracing himself against the wind that rocked the front door. "She thinks I have cancer."

"You didn't tell her..."

"No. no."

"You've only seen her once?"

"Once."

Chaz felt an eerie sense of connection. He'd have to save her. The wind blew her into his life, and he'd have to save her before it was too late. Save her before his head became as slick and smooth as Chestnut's, and they were asked to pose for owner/pet lookalike contests.

"Go after her," said Shawn.

The wind slammed the front door shut.

"Later. I need to see Dad."

Outside, Charlie pressed chunks of sirloin with a spatula, watching as blood pooled and sizzled on the grill. Chaz took a deep breath, a swallow of charcoal air.

"Dad."

"Son."

The words were flat, two-dimensional. Chaz felt like they were characters in a play that didn't know their lines.

Charlie glanced at the sliding glass door.

"Delaney here yet?"

“She left.”

Charlie glared at him, tilting his head down and peering up at Chaz from under the brim of his hat. It was red, like a trucker’s, with mesh in the back and a fish hook in the front.

“You scare her off, boy?”

He felt the distance in their relationship. Blame had dissolved “Charles Wesley Martin II” to “boy.”

“I don’t know why she left.”

Charlie glared at him again. Chaz didn’t know how a person with so many wrinkles, so many folds of skin, could look so hard and unforgiving. Every river wrinkle carried him further away.

“I’d better give her a call. Don’t know why she’d run off.”

Charlie left the sirloins on the grill. The pink turned to the light gray color of well done. He sacrificed pink steaks for a tourist. Chaz needed to save her, if only so Charlie would once again bite down on the jagged letters of his name.

Because of the rain, they ate in the dining room under the formal chandelier Amelia’s parents had installed. Light filleted the crystal into rainbows, casting prisms of color across the table. The sirloins on his right permeated the air with blame. Once upon a time his favorite, but now his plate – a circle of tomatoes, hushpuppies and corn – reflected his inadequacy.

“Won’t eat meat, but you’ll drink that poison. Serve it up all over creation, but won’t eat the very food your own father catches.”

“Dad, can’t you two get along for once?” said Shawn.

“It sours my stomach to think that those people, those people that drink that poison, the poison he sells, could go out and run someone over. Run someone over just like what happened to your mother.”

Chaz took a sip of lemonade, wishing for a shot of vodka.

“Got nothing to say for himself,” said Charlie.

Chaz took a bite of tomato sprinkled with salt. He’d never been able to defend himself against his dad. He was more like his mother. An artist. Her projects filled his apartment to brimming. A latch hook owl hung in his kitchen, blue glazed pitcher on his table, beach painting behind the couch. She had loved him with little touches. She sculpted his hair with her fingertips. Showed him the two-step, the waltz, the jitterbug. Bought him the bass. Taught him the fine art of swimming. Told him he could swim forever if he learned the rhythm, always in the pool. Never in the ocean. She didn’t like the waves, the way the ocean kept pulling her out. Like it wanted to take her a long time ago. He could never explain that the Bass Cleft was his tribute to her. The music. Dancing. Even the drinks he invented -- Kamikaze Kapers and Krusted Klondike Kapers – toasted her memory. He wished she could come back, even in a dream, and make things right. Tell Charlie that Chaz loved her, and that she was proud of him.

“Wish I knew where in the dickens Delaney went. Shawn, you say she flew outta here? Like she was upset about something?”

Delaney pedaled the five miles to Charlie’s house. Wind pulled the moss on the oaks and shook pine needles to the ground. All the evergreens losing their leaves reminded her hair. Chaz’s hair.

He didn't say he had cancer. Asked why it would matter. If this was destiny, finding people to lose them again, she might as well go back to West Virginia. Stay in her house with her grandparent's ghosts -- if they would let her.

The wind on Capers had a different feel from the wind back home. Denser here. Warmer. Wetter. Thunder growled in the distance. The trees shook. She pedaled harder, faster. Moved through the humid air, against the wind. Like the island didn't want her to leave, to get to her destination. Tried to push her back to Shawn's house. She couldn't face them. Not with the smell of Gram still in her nose.

Thunder again. Louder this time. Hurricane season still a month away. The wind flung sand at her, in her eyes, stabbed her legs. She pedaled harder. Needed to make it to Charlie's house before the rain.

She veered off the bike path, down Sage Road, a half-mile of sand and potholes. Three houses. All old. Locals. She pedaled down Charlie's driveway, into the backyard, and threw her bike down on the thirsty grass as the thunder crackled again. She fumbled in her pockets for keys. Pulled out her island set. Her car keys. Keys to Olivia's. One tarnished silver key to Charlie's workshop. She jabbed the key in the lock as the rain fell. Fat drops flattened against her skin. She was wet before she opened the door.

"Dad, you mind if I stop by the house?" asked Chaz.

"For what?"

"To see if my old 10-speed is still there."

"In the garage where you left it."

Chaz felt the jab of his dad's comment. If he visited his dad more often, he would have seen his old Schwinn hanging in the garage.

"You going home soon?" he asked.

"I might stop by Walt's old place and check on Delaney."

Chaz wanted to offer to go instead, but he knew that his dad blamed him for Delaney's disappearance. Offering to find her wouldn't make peace.

When he pulled up to his dad's driveway, he noticed a light in the workshop. He decided to check it out.

She shut the door against the outside, listening to the marble chunks of rain thump the roof. She opened the paint cans, hoping to rid her nostrils of Gram's dying scent. The paint fumes swirled in the air. Light-headed, she breathed in the smell of Charlie's workshop, a smell of paint and wood that she would forever associate with Capers.

She stroked the dresser's top with her palm. She had dug through layers of paint to uncover a scratch in the wood spanning the length of the top, a scratch so deep that she couldn't sand it down. She had decided to cover it up, staining the dresser a dark Walnut. In her light-headed haze, she questioned her decision. The scratch was like her past, and covering it up didn't make it go away. Only highlighted it.

She dipped steel wool in paint stripper, and rubbed the dresser until the paint gummed up and washed away, until the dresser's top and sides stood naked, revealing every scratch and flaw. Instead of covering them up, she decided to celebrate them by applying light Maple stain. She would leave the drawers stained Walnut. She loved contrast. But that wouldn't be enough. She'd need to do something else with it. And then the idea came to her. She etched a deep scratch on

both sides of the dresser, and connected it to the one on top. She searched through Charlie's tools and found a wood burning tool. She would turn the scratches into a vine of ivy. Something beautiful out of the scars.

When Chaz opened the workshop door, she was capping the cans of stain. Her arms ached, red hot flashes of pain, and her head throbbed, but the smell of Gram was gone.

“Okay,” said Chaz, picking up their conversation where they had left off, only this time with more momentum, as if he needed to force all the words out in one hot gush of air. “I don't have cancer. I didn't mean to give you that impression. I'm embarrassed because I know that you won't believe me, and I don't know why I'm worried about what you think anyway. You're the girl I met in a café, but you're important. I can feel it in my skin. I don't know why you're important, but I want to find out before all my hair falls out. You have issues with people dying, but people die. You have to connect with people in life. I think you're important because of Dad. I'm afraid if I don't have the answers to all these questions soon, my hair will fall out. Chestnut's already has and still this life changing event hasn't occurred.”

Delaney watched as Chaz spouted off all these incoherent, incomprehensible statements. When she was nervous, she paced. She thought everyone did, but Chaz stood in one place with his hands in his pockets, like a statue. Even though she could tell he was nervous, she could also tell he had strength. That he could stand up for whatever he wanted.

“You don't have cancer?”

“No.”

“Good,” she said, as she placed a cap on the last open paint can. Embarrassment from her earlier outburst prevented her from asking questions. Chestnut? Hair? Instead, she focused on the two most important words. No cancer.

“I’m going back to West Virginia,” she said.

“For how long?”

“Long enough to go through paperwork.” There were so many unanswered questions hanging in the air, like icicles. “I’ll be back to celebrate Christmas. “We’re having a party in August.”

She glanced at the dresser. “This is for Olivia.”

“It was pretty, but plain. Not fancy enough for Olivia. She found it odd that Chaz hadn’t commented on the dresser or Christmas, but that would have been polite. They had pried off the layers of politeness until only pulp was left.

“You’ll be gone a week or two?” he asked.

“A week maybe. Depends on how well my grandparents hid things.”

They hid the past very well, but they couldn’t wipe her mother out of her life completely. She thought about the funeral director. She’d check that out, if only to test whether her hypnosis sessions were true. She would sift through the paperwork and old friends to see how well people could hide the truth all these years later.

“How much would you go through for someone you loved?” she asked.

He was quiet for a long time. Finally, he said, “can I come?”

Day 33

Holly Springs, West Virginia

The state owned seven miles of road on Kanawha Two Mile, until the blacktop forked into two gravel roads. Delaney's house sat on a pie-shaped piece of property at the fork. The Edens, Burdettes and Sloans lived up the road on what Delaney referred to as partial farms, blocks of acres carved up into gardens, fields for the horses, and yards for the homes. Holly Springs had a smell she never knew existed until she left – a combination of fresh cut grass, horses, the rich smell of potting soil, and industrial smell of gas from four-wheelers and riding lawn mowers. Today, the smell was tinted sour from Gram's lies.

Her house looked different. An ice blue glow, the color of blue raspberry, enveloped the house. She reached across the seat and held Chaz's hand, lacing her fingers through his. She needed his strength. Needed to hold onto a part of her life that belonged somewhere else, to someone else. She needed to hang onto him to prove that she wasn't under the glow of hypnosis.

"This is where you grew up?"

"All my life. Gram and Pap left it to me when they died."

She squeezed his hand. He squeezed back, and when she parked by the detached garage across the street from the house, she didn't know if she would have the strength to let go.

She felt warmth as they walked up the sidewalk to her front door. She wanted to ask Chaz about the color, but she figured he would have said something if he noticed it.

"It looks cozy," he said.

“Pap built it when my grandparents first got married.”

The white stone house had felt cozy, until Gram died. Then, little by little, it pushed her away.

She touched the front door. It was warm. Inside, the kitchen smelled like cinnamon, a scent that could have been residual from all the apple pies Gram had baked.

“Do you smell that?” she asked.

“It’s a little musty, but we can open some windows.”

So she was awake, but under some sort of waking hypnosis trance. Piano music drifted into the room, a halting version of the “Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy.” The notes were so bright and vivid, she could almost see them...

“Do you want me to...?”

“Sssh.” They never had a piano. Still, the notes drifted into the kitchen, notes from a piano plucked by a little girl. Delaney grabbed Chaz’s hand again, lacing his callused fingers through hers. She could feel her teeth start to chatter even though the house was warm.

She didn’t know if Chaz was speaking to her or not. Knew he couldn’t smell or see anything out of the ordinary. He was her anchor, her Zoe, in this hypnotic house.

She walked through the imaginary swinging saloon-style doors from long ago, pulling Chaz with her, to the indigo glow of the family room. Gram, in her early thirties, watched as Deidra plucked the song. This wasn’t Delaney’s memory. She was a spectator, trying to rack her brain for memories about her mother, fragments of conversations. She didn’t know her mother played the piano.

“That’s good, Deidra,” said Gram. “Can you pick up the tempo a little?”

“When are Dad and Greg coming back?” Deidra asked, almost with a whine. “I want to see the Christmas tree.”

The next instant shattered Deidra’s life.

Delaney heard a man yelling. “Oreda. Oh God. Oreda. Oh God.”

Pap, a young Pap, carried a young boy covered in blood.

“Call the ambulance,” he said. “Oh God. Oh God.”

Flesh hung from the boy’s arm, and Delaney could see ribbons of pink bone.

“The chainsaw jammed. I hit a nail, and the saw ricocheted and hit Greg. Don’t just stand there call the ambulance. Now!”

Somehow Delaney became her mother sitting by Gram at the piano. Watched as her twin brother’s blood flowed onto the carpet, and felt as her mother detached. Deidra lived. Gave birth. Passed on her genetics to Delaney, and became Greg. She died so he could live.

Chaz let go of her hand. Delaney saw the indigo light break and felt like she would be lost inside her mother forever. Someone was shaking her. Shaking her hard.

“Delaney,” said Chaz.

She opened her eyes and saw his frantic face.

“I know what happened to my mother,” she said. “I don’t know where she is, but I know why she is.”

She sat on the floor where her Uncle Greg had died and cried because she would never find her mother. Only a fragment of her mother. And even then, Delaney didn’t know if what she witnessed was the truth, or merely a sliver of a memory she invented.

“Do you know where to look?” asked Chaz.

Delaney looked around the basement, a basement that was creepy only because it was a basement. Cold, concrete floors and a pervasive mildew smell from occasional flooding. Only recently had the basement begun to truly frighten her. She took a deep breath, happy the furnace was still quiet.

“When Gram first got sick, I remember Pap boxing up some papers. They must be down here somewhere.”

The naked bulb hanging from a string in the middle of the room provided only a little illumination, like splashes of sunlight through clouds. She shined her flashlight on the shelves.

“Gram labeled a box for every year of school. She must have done the same for Mom.”

Two hours of peeling off the lids, releasing potato bugs and silverfish led to nothing. Delaney’s past lay splattered on the floor. Her neck hurt from pouring through boxes, and her fingers smelled dusty.

“What about this room?” asked Chaz.

Chaz stood by doorway of a small, square room. The entrance was blocked by an armoire, but Delaney remembered the room stuffed with mismatched furniture, cast-offs her grandparents saved for Delaney’s first apartment.

“Anything in there’s ruined,” she said. “The creek flooded in 1982. Pap never cleaned it out. Not even safe to go in there, I’m sure.”

“Let’s check it out anyway.”

Delaney felt tired and dejected. She wanted to take a hot bath and go back to Capers. Forget she ever learned anything about her mom. Probably just a broken memory.

She looked at Chaz’s face, at his willingness to help, and consented. She didn’t want him to feel that he could have done one more thing. If Delaney learned anything this summer, it was

that regret chewed into your soul and caramelized. She should have asked about her mother when Gram was alive. Maybe Gram would have had the strength to tell her if she'd have asked.

“We need to move this armoire,” said Chaz.

Cleaning out this room had been on Delaney's list of things to do, but she didn't have the strength to move the armoire by herself, and she never got around to asking for help.

She stood on one side of the armoire, and together they pushed it through the entrance of the now organized, and fairly empty room. Boxes lined the shelves, all labeled Deidra with the consecutive grades. No Greg anywhere.

“Pap must have done this.”

Four hours later, they had opened every box, scrutinized every item – old baby shoes, baby clothes, papers with outlines of hands, homemade ceramic ash trays.

“It's all her past,” said Delaney, holding a baby dress, faded pink. “I'm not down here anywhere. All I have left of Mom happened before me. That and the few pictures Gram and Pap saved for me. I don't have any of Dad.”

Chaz pulled an old grammar book from Deidra's third grade box. He flipped through the pages, and found a black and white photograph. Two children, a boy and a girl of the same age.

“Who's this?” he asked.

Delaney flipped it over. There was no writing on the back, but somehow she knew. She was looking at her mom and Greg.

Day 51

Capers Island

If Delaney closed her ears to the waves outside, she could almost believe it was Christmas. Tinsel and garland transformed Walt's house into a winter wonderland. Delaney and Olivia had even concocted a gingerbread house, gluing the gingerbread sides together with white icing and decorating it with gumdrops, peppermint wheels and chocolate chips.

The white tree looked snow-covered, and was lit up with dots of light. As Delaney gazed around the room, at everyone wearing shorts and Santa hats, she was amazed at the community she found herself in. In West Virginia, she had closed herself off, little by little. Like a hermit, she had sat at home with her grandparents' ghosts, not feeling sorry for herself as much as shutting herself off, refusing to do anything outside of work. And teaching was such a lonely profession. She always had to have the answers.

She looked around for Chaz, and spotted him standing in a circle with Veronica and Sasha. The Santa hat covered all of his hair so that he actually looked bald. He had finally confessed to the absurdity of his cat's hair falling out, and his fear that he would be next because of his pubic hair. She thought him brave for admitting that, but after witnessing her breakdown at his brother's house, and then her hypnotic trance in West Virginia, she figured he didn't have too much to worry about. She was as flaky as they came. What's more, she believed him and his cat. Like Zoe, she found herself drawn to the mystery.

He must have felt her staring because he glanced up at her.

"Merry Christmas," she mouthed, the words soundless.

He smiled, crinkling the corners of his eyes, and nodded his head. Veronica and Sasha looked over at Delaney, and smiled, but Delaney couldn't quite put her finger on Veronica's reaction. Veronica had done her best to try to push Delaney and Chaz together, but now seemed possessive. Like she didn't want him out of her sight. Delaney didn't know why. Veronica and Sasha acted as though they were very much in love, but Delaney detected a thread of sexual history between Chaz and Veronica. Of course, Veronica could also be annoyed that Delaney had never explained the scar.

Delaney's white sundress hung to her ankles, an outfit she wore specifically so Veronica wouldn't bring up the scar again. The scar was healing, but she knew it would always be there to remind her of her sleepwalking days. Ever since she had uncovered the truth about her mother, or at least what her subconscious led her to believe since she couldn't verify it, she had slept in the same spot all through the night. She felt better. More rested, and calmer. What's more, she'd quit having dreams about Gram. In time, she would learn to forgive Gram and Pap. If she'd learned anything about her mind, it was that her memory would only hold onto the happy times.

The doorbell rang. Olivia and Mark seemed happy together, snuggled up on the couch and drinking egg nog. DJ was in the guest room, playing with a friend from school. Delaney walked into the kitchen to answer the door.

"Delaney," said Zoe, kissing her on the cheek. "Olivia invited me. Sorry about that slip up. I didn't realize Olivia didn't know about our sessions."

"Don't worry about it," said Delaney. "We made up."

She stepped aside so Zoe could come in. Zoe handed her two gift-wrapped boxes.

"For you and Olivia," she said. "I assume you have a tree. Olivia was so excited about it."

“In the corner. Veronica’s in the living room with Chaz.”

Zoe glanced at her oddly, and nodded.

Veronica saw Zoe first.

“Merry Christmas,” said Veronica, giving Zoe a big hug. “Can you believe these crazy people celebrate Christmas in the middle of summer? Can’t pass up a party, though. Chaz, Sasha and I brought our instruments. We thought we’d play later after sunset. Maybe even start a bonfire on the beach. Always wanted to do that. Why don’t you conduct a couple of past life readings? Something to lighten up the party.”

Delaney decided to escape before they sucked her in again, trying to find another life. She didn’t think she was up for it.

She walked out onto the back porch. Charlie sat in a rocking chair smoking a cigar.

“Pull up a chair, and take a breather,” he said. “Nice break away from all the commotion. What’s going on inside?”

Delaney sat in the rocking chair beside him, breathing in the familiar scent of cigar.

“Zoe’s here,” she said. “Veronica’s trying to get her to conduct past life regressions.”

“Do you believe in reincarnation?” he asked.

She thought about how much more accepting she had become.

“Two months ago, I would have said no way.” A slight breeze blew in from the ocean, and she breathed in the salty smell. “Now I think maybe. Heaven can’t be any more exciting than life here. How many people have uncles for mothers anyway? Besides, I like the idea of getting another chance. Being able to do everything right again.”

“No one ever gets it right.” His words carried the sad, musky scent of hopelessness. “I do like the idea of living dozens of lives with the people I love.”

“Maybe we can’t get everything right, but if we get one thing right in every life... “

“We just might come out even,” Charlie said.

He looked out at the ocean. Chatter from inside groped its way out, and Delaney waved it away, feeling that nothing was more important than this moment.

“What did you get right in this life?” she asked.

“My wife. I didn’t have enough time to mess things up with her. Maybe that’s why God took her so early.”

She didn’t try to comfort him. His voice was dry. No tears. Nothing to comfort.

“You know, Sparrow. I can’t quite put my finger on why you flew into my life. Don’t you think it’s odd that you and me can sit here and talk about everything under the sun like there was no age difference at all? Every time I think I have it figured out, something new comes up.”

“Why can’t it be coincidence?”

“If there’s something I’ve learned from going out every morning, it’s that the tides are no accident. If a fish lands on my line, it’s cause the tides brought him there. Or he likes the taste of the worms.”

“Or he likes the taste of the minnow.”

“Could be.”

Delaney heard the woosh of the sliding glass door, and Olivia stuck her head out.

“Delaney, there you are.” She looked over at Charlie. “Oh, hi Charlie. What do you think of the view?” She didn’t give him time to answer. “We’re going to open presents. Let’s go.”

Everyone sat in the living room by the tree. There was an expectant feeling in the air, almost like Christmas morning. Delaney and Olivia had purchased presents for everyone, and even a few wrapped anonymous gifts for last minute stragglers.

For Charlie, a cigar humidor with his name engraved on a bronze plate. Delaney commissioned Jeff to make a set of four goblets with a copper-colored glaze to match the Bass Cleft for Chaz. She bought Veronica a bright orange beach towel and two bottles of suntan oil. For Sasha, a vase of roses. Delaney found a kite in the shape of an airplane for DJ. Olivia and Delaney went in together and bought Zoe a silver and amethyst bracelet.

Finally, Delaney nodded at Chaz, and together they brought in the dresser Delaney had refinished for Olivia. Delaney had burned a vine of ivy on the dresser's top, and the leaves spilled over the sides -- an allusion to their college days when Olivia set out pots of ivy all over the apartment.

"Delaney." Olivia walked over to the dresser and pulled out the top drawer. It was stained a dark walnut, contrasting the maple-stained base. "It's absolutely beautiful. Is this what you've been working on all summer? How did you learn how to do this?"

"I had some help," Delaney said, smiling at Charlie.

She was happy to see the little dots of tears in Olivia's eyes. Olivia was hard to impress, so if the dresser evoked tears, Delaney had all the validation she needed.

Olivia hugged her, then nodded to Chaz.

"Chaz and I went in together on your present," she said.

Chaz handed her an envelope. Delaney opened it, and pulled out a Christmas card and a business card for a private detective.

"To find your parents," said Olivia. "You need to call him with all the information. We've already paid for 20 hours."

"It's too much," said Delaney, meaning all of it. Her new friends. Her new life. Maybe even her parents.

“You’re worth it,” said Chaz.

“Time for my present,” said Charlie. He handed Delaney an envelope. “Hand me down, but it’s the thought that counts. Right?”

Delaney opened the envelope and saw a picture of Charlie’s workshop and all the tools.

“They’re yours if you want ‘em,” he said.

“Of course I do,” she said, hugging him. She had an odd sense of foreboding, as if Charlie was getting his affairs in order.

It was two in the morning before everyone finally left. Mark and DJ were in bed sleeping. Delaney and Olivia sat in the kitchen, drinking the last of the eggnog before cleaning up.

“I was thinking,” said Olivia. “We should go into business together. A sort of one-of-a-kind design shop. You could refinish the furniture. This close to Wilmington and Myrtle, we’d get tons of business. We could decorate with store pieces, but design the room around one great refinished piece.”

“Maybe even start a co-op and use local artwork.” Delaney took a drink of eggnog. “Jeff’s always complaining about going all the way to Rayford to sell his stuff.”

“That’s a fantastic idea.”

“What would we do for capital to start?”

“Mark and I can finance some. You could live here until you sell your place in West Virginia. Use that money for start-up.”

Delaney didn't say anything. She stood up, and began collecting paper cups and plates in a garbage bag. As much as she wanted to stay here, she didn't think she could sell her grandparent's house or leave everything she had ever known.

"Don't hang onto that place just because you're waiting for your parents," said Olivia.

"Let the private detective do his job. He'll find them if it's meant to be."

"I'll think about it," said Delaney.

"Stay," Walt whispered in her. "You know you want to."

Day 52

Delaney dreamt she paddled a sea kayak out to Rabbit Island, a tiny piece of land off the north shore of Capers that looked like a rabbit lying on its stomach with its ears flapped down into the water.

“Paddle to here. This is where it happens.”

The voice was like a voice-over in a commercial. Strangely without form, but comforting. It reminded her of Zoe’s voice as a guide, but more masculine and rough. Sand paper. Charlie’s voice. Disembodied.

“I came out here once,” said Charlie. He sat, with his legs propped up on the side of his boat. “When my wife died, I scribbled ‘I want my wife back’ on a piece of paper. Then I tore it up, and spread it into the sea. Legend has it, if the sea monster eats your paper, then your wish will come true. I came out here later, and the paper was gone. I felt sure my wife would walk back through the door.”

Delaney listened. Charlie was talking to her, but she wasn’t in this dream. It was like she was watching a movie starring Charlie. Like he was on one end of a telephone, and she could see him, but she couldn’t hear her own words.

“The legend doesn’t work for everything. I guess I had to die to see my wife again. Shawn’ll be okay. He’s got Amelia. Chaz I worry about. He never understood how much I loved him. Promise me you’ll watch out for him.”

Delaney woke up at five. She felt like she had swallowed a bottle of glue. Then she remembered her dream. She had to go see Charlie.

Charlie's truck was in the driveway. Not a good sign since he was usually out on the ocean by five. She prayed that he had decided to sleep in after the party. She knocked on his front door. No answer. She knocked again. Louder. She pounded so hard that she cut her knuckles on the door.

What felt like glue in her stomach melted, and seeped out into her body. She needed to go inside, but she didn't know if she could.

She waited. Knocked some more.

Finally, she reached under the flowerpot beside the door for the spare key. She slid the key into the lock, and turned the knob. Before she opened the door, she knocked one last time. She took a deep breath, and opened the door.

"Charlie, it's me Delaney," she yelled, as she stepped into the living room. "I had a bad dream, and wanted to make sure you're okay."

The house was dark and silent. She stood in the living room, waiting. Her fear tasted like aluminum foil.

"Charlie," she yelled again. "Are you okay?"

"Please, God. Please let him be okay. Please, God. Please let him be okay," she prayed aloud.

The hardwood floors creaked as she walked.

She arrived at Charlie's bedroom door. It was closed.

"Charlie," she said.

Still no answer.

"Please, God. Please let him be okay."

"Charlie, it's me."

No answer.

“Please, God. Please let him be okay.”

“Charlie, I’m coming in.”

She felt Walt brush up against her.

“What are you doing here?” she said, wiping tears from her cheek.

“I couldn’t let you walk in there alone,” he said.

He put his arm around her, and while it wasn’t solid, she felt his protection. Then, she thought about his words. He came because Charlie was dead. Walt came, so Delaney wouldn’t find Charlie dead alone.

An icy fear slid around her throat. She couldn’t breathe. She smelled death. Gram’s lingering death. The one that Delaney would carry with her forever. She couldn’t open that door because, unlike her hypnosis sessions, what lurked behind was real. She was experiencing it now. Not through the diluted years of time. But now. Charlie. She loved him with all her heart. Like a grandpa. Like a friend. There wasn’t even anything wrong with him. Charlie was more alive than anyone she’d ever known. He didn’t drink. Only smoked an occasional cigar.

Walt’s arm couldn’t support her. She sank down to the floor with her back against the wall. She looked at the door. It didn’t glow purple or yellow. It was an ordinary door. Plain. White. Wooden.

She closed her eyes and cried, as the smell of Gram’s death became stronger. Walt sat beside her, his arm draped over her shoulder, and let her cry.

“Even when we go, we’ll always be with you,” he said.

But she didn't want the memories of Charlie. Memories that her mind would bend and stretch until she couldn't remember what was real. She wanted Charlie. The real Charlie. The one who could support her when she fell.

Walt's presence was consoling. Delaney tried to remember the smell of Gram's dusting powder. It came in a plastic, round box, and she had used a round puff to dust it on. The smell came back. Like flowers. When the smell was so strong that it forced all the antiseptic smell of death aside, she stood up.

"Ready," asked Walt.

"Yes," she said. "I can't have another unopened door in my memory."

"Let's go then," said Walt.

Delaney touched the doorknob. It wasn't warm or hot like the doorknobs in her hypnosis sessions. It felt cool and old. She wondered how many people had touched it over the years. If Charlie had always lived here, and if anyone else had ever died in this house.

"You can do it," said Walt. "I'm here for you."

Delaney took a deep breath and turned the knob. Time seemed to stop. She felt as though she were moving through Jell-O. The door creaked open. Everything in this house creaked, but it was a comforting creak. The house had settled into itself, and produced its own music.

Delaney pushed the door open and walked into the room.

"Please, God. Please tell me he didn't suffer."

She felt disloyal praying. She should have prayed for his life, but she felt a void. Had felt it as soon as she stepped into the living room. Charlie wasn't here anymore. He already said good-bye in her dream, and left to go find his wife.

She walked into the room. Charlie was lying in bed. His mouth hung open like he was sleeping. His eyes were closed, but he didn't move. There were no comforting snoring noises, no shallow breathing. Nothing. She felt his wrist for a pulse to be sure. His hand was cool. His skin was rough.

She pulled her hand away, and smelled it. She smelled soap and the faint scent of fish, but no death. She was grateful. No scent meant he didn't suffer. His skin didn't decay while his body was alive. She reached down for his hand again, and kissed it.

“Charlie, why did you have to go so soon? I just got to know you.”

She waited for him to answer, hoping his ghost was somewhere in the house. That she could communicate with a part of him. She received no answer. Walt remained quiet. He stood beside her, and let her cry.

She dropped Charlie's hand.

“Good-bye,” she said.

She walked back into the kitchen to call somebody. She didn't know who to call. She wondered if Charlie wanted her to find him for a reason -- so no one else would see him like this. She called 911 even though there was nothing left for them to do.

Then she looked up at the refrigerator, and saw Charlie's list of numbers. Shawn. Chaz. The tears started again when she saw her own number at Walt's. He cared about her enough to write her name on his refrigerator.

She slid off the magnet, and took the paper. She called Shawn first, and told him. Then Chaz.

When he answered, she meant to say, “your dad needs you.” Instead, she said, “I need you.”

“I’ll be right there.”

She grabbed a pen off the counter, and went outside on the porch to wait. She wrote her wishes for a new life on Capers on the blank side of Charlie’s phone numbers. She’d make Chaz do the same. Then sometime, together, they would paddle out to Rabbit Island and tear up their wishes for the sea monster. She was a Sparrow, after all. It took her a while to grow wings.

Vita

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Education

- May 2005 Marshall University
M.A. English
- March 2005 Salem International University--Basic TESOL Certificate
- May 1999 West Virginia University
B.A. English

Teaching Experience

- Aug. 2004 to Present
WV State University, Charleston
Adjunct English Instructor
English Composition 101 and 102
Business English 204
- Aug. 2004 to Present
Marshall University, Huntington
ESL Instructor
Intermediate Grammar
- Nov. 2002 to June 2003
Saint Anthony Catholic School, Charleston
Physical Education Teacher – Grades Preschool through Eighth
- Oct. 2001 to Oct. 2002
Literacy Americorps, Pittsburgh, PA
ESL Instructor

Related Experience

- Aug. 2003 to Aug. 2004
Marshall University, Huntington
Assistant Editor, Multicultural Affairs
Edited & Wrote articles for the Multicultural Exposition. Compiled Annual Report and Brochures. Composed a fully funded grant for the Annual Martin Luther King, Jr. Symposium.
- Aug. 2001 to Nov. 2002
Slovene National Benefit Society, Imperial, PA
Assistant Editor
Edited articles and did page layout for PROSVETA, a biweekly newspaper with a circulation of 20,000, and wrote articles for the Voice of Youth, a children's magazine. Designed ads and brochures, and wrote press releases.
- April 2000 to June 2001
The Jackson Herald, Ripley, WV
Feature Writer

Conferences

- “Child’s Play: Examining the dialogism of play in *Great Expectations*.” Marshall University Graduate Colloquium, Spring 2005
- “The Price of Water.” Fiction Panel, West Virginia Association of College English Teachers Spring 2005 Meeting, Charleston
- “An unstageable play: Examining Joyce’s ‘Circe’ Episode.” West Virginia Association of College English Teachers Fall 2004 Meeting, North Bend
- “The power of free will in Edith Wharton’s *Summer*.” Marshall University Graduate Colloquium, Spring 2004
- “A close reading of T.S. Eliot’s ‘Rhapsody on a Windy Night.’” West Virginia University Undergraduate Paper Symposium, Spring 1999

Awards

- Marshall University Et Cetera Awards-1st Place “The Price of Water”
- Marshall University Maier Awards-1st Place Graduate Nonfiction Prose, March 2005
“Pickling a Legacy: Saleem’s Unreliable Narration Ensures Future Novelists will Write to Correct India’s History”
- National Civitan Citizenship Award, May 1991