



# One

*f*orget what you've read about the ocean. Forget white sails on a blue horizon, the romance of it, the beauty. A picnic basket in a quiet anchorage, the black-tipped flash of gulls. The sound of the wind like a pleasant song, the curved spine of the coast—

—no.

Such images belong to shore. They have nothing whatsoever to do with the sea.

Imagine a place of infinite absence. An empty ballroom, the colors muted, the edges lost in haze. The sort of dream you have when you've gone beyond exhaustion to a strange, otherworldly country, a place I'd visited once before in the months that followed the birth of my son, when days and nights blurred into a single lost cry, when I'd find myself standing over the crib, or rocking him, breathing the musk of his hair, or lying in bed beside Rex's dark shape, unable to recall how I'd gotten there. As if I'd been plucked out of one life and

dropped, wriggling and whole, into another. Day after day, week after week, the lack of sleep takes its toll. You begin to see things that may or may not be there. You understand how the sailors of old so willingly met their deaths on the rocks, believing in visions of beautiful women, sirens, mermaids with long, sparkling hair.

The crest of a wave becomes a human face, openmouthed, white-eyed, astonished. The spark of a headlight appears in the sky, edges closer, fades, edges closer still. There's a motion off the bow, and I clutch at the helm, catch myself thinking, *Turn!*

But, eventually, I learn to let my eyes fall out of focus. Blink, look again. Wipe my sweating face. There is nothing out there but gray waves, gray waves.

Clouds. A translucent slice of moon.

Space.

*We alternated watches, Rex and I: four hours on, four hours off. We had a ship's clock that rang out the hours. We had charts and a sextant, a handheld GPS. We had an outdated radar system; we had a small refrigerator, a water maker, clothing and books sealed in plastic wrap. We had five hundred pounds of canned goods, nuts, dried fruit and beans, powdered milk.*

We had a ship's log, where we jotted down notes: latitude and longitude, course and speed, wind direction, weather, unusual observations.

We had a float plan, which we left with my brother, Toby; he posted it in the fish store, on the bulletin board behind the cash register. People stopped by with farewell gifts: cookies sealed in Tupperware, a book of crossword puzzles, religious cards, funny cards, cards simply wishing us well. Everyone in Fox Harbor knew

why we were leaving, of course, and this was another reason why I'd agreed to rent our house and move onto the sailboat Rex had bought in Portland, Maine. Our first destination was Bermuda, our ETA three to five weeks. From Bermuda, we'd continue southeast to the Bahamas, island-hop down to the Caicos. Perhaps we'd winter over in Puerto Rico. Or perhaps we'd cross the ocean to Portugal—who could say? We might even head to Panama, pass through the canal, find our way north along the coast to the Mexican Bajas. So much depended on weather, on wind. On our own day-to-day inclinations.

The plan, Rex liked to tell people, is not to have a plan.

It had always been Rex's dream to live aboard a sailboat, and *Chelone* was exactly the boat that he had wanted. A blue water boat, he called her. A boat built to sail around the world. He'd grown up on Cape Cod, sailing with his father; at twenty, he was captain of his college sailing team, and before heading west to Madison for law school, he'd worked as a mate aboard a private schooner, cruising the Virgin Islands. On cold winter nights as we lay in bed, listening to the east wind screaming off Lake Michigan, he'd tell me about the islands he'd seen, casuarina trees and pink sand beaches, sailboats at anchor outside each rustic harbor. Passing these boats, you'd see dogs racing from bow to stern, bicycles lashed to the safety lines, laundry fluttering from the rigging. Entire families spent their whole lives just cruising from place to place, dropping anchor wherever they chose. No bills to pay, no responsibilities. You didn't like your neighbor, no problem, you sailed away.

Maybe, he'd whisper, his breath warm against my neck, we could do the same thing someday.

I like our neighbors fine, Rex.

Seriously.

I am serious.

At the time, I couldn't imagine saying good-bye to Toby, to my friends at the accounting firm where I worked, to our fieldstone house overlooking the lake, to the small, Wisconsin town where I'd been raised. Still, after years spent trying to conceive a child, after the shots and surgeries, the herbal teas, the special masses; after trying to adopt the infant of a teenage girl who changed her mind, I started to pay more attention whenever Rex talked about heading to sea. I leafed through his copies of *Practical Sailor*, his scrapbook of sail plans and hull designs. I studied the glossy brochures he received from boat builders around the world. I'd always enjoyed sailing, and though I'd only sailed on the Great Lakes, I figured that the ocean couldn't be all that different. Water was water, after all. You wore a life jacket. You learned to hang on.

Then, one week before my fortieth birthday, I discovered I was pregnant with Evan. After eleven years of marriage, we were finally—unexpectedly—about to have a child. Our plans no longer belonged to us, and the truth was that we gave them up eagerly. We wanted to make sacrifices. We wanted to shake our heads ruefully, saying, *But then we had the baby so we couldn't . . .*

Six years later, our lives changed again, when Evan was killed in a car accident involving someone I'd known since grade school. Someone whose birthday parties I'd attended. Someone who, the summer I turned sixteen, became my closest friend before our lives diverged, abruptly, the way the lives of young girls do. Someone who'd left her family's farm to marry a man much older than herself and build a magnificent house on the lake that was featured in magazines. Someone who, twenty years after that, was driving her own three daughters to school when her life intersected with my own once more, this time irrevocably, permanently.

It was 7:55 in the morning. It was three weeks before Christmas, 1999. Crows rose out of a hawthorn bush as I slowed for the right turn onto County C, glossy feathers like fingertips, stroking the milky air. The thin black swoop of telephone wires. The smell of Evan's cough drops, eucalyptus flavored, sweet. He'd been out of school since Thanksgiving, confined by a stubborn case of bronchitis, and I still had my doubts about whether or not he was quite ready to go back. But he'd begged, cajoled, pleaded, not wanting to miss any more school, and the truth was that I was just as eager to return to work. My cubical, across from my good friend Lindsey Steinke. My files, my favorite coffee mug, my ergonomic chair. Though I'd worked from home when Evan was younger, I never got as much done in the breakfast nook we referred to, generously, as my *office*, as I did when surrounded by colleagues, friends, everybody red-eyed and commiserating over the end-of-the-year crunch.

"If your cough starts acting up," I said, "ask Mrs. Hochman to let you see the nurse."

Evan said, "Do you know what they call a group of crows?"

"Promise me," I said, accelerating onto the straightaway, and he said, pieces of cough drop clicking against his teeth, "A *murder* of crows."

"Is that right?" I said.

He said, "Do you know what they call a group of buzzards?"

We lived just a few miles from the elementary school, which was new; beside it, the middle school was still under construction. In a matter of just a few years, County C—which ran east and west—had evolved from a sleepy back road into a busy rural highway. At the remains of the old brick schoolhouse, where my grandparents learned their ABCs, a second highway, known as the Point Road, ran to the north and south. This intersection had always been

dangerous, County C yielding the right of way, which meant you had to slow just as the slope of the hill pulled you forward. But with the schools coming in, C had gained, at last, the upper hand. Now you could ride the curve, down and down, passing beneath the flashing yellow light, until you reached the foot of the hill. Weekday mornings, cars lined up a quarter mile to turn into the school yard, everybody dropping their kids off at the flagpole in front of the principal's office.

That morning, we were running late, Evan and I. The roads were strangely empty. The power had gone off during the night—nothing much, just a blip—but enough to disable our beside clock and, with it, the alarm.

“Let me drop Evan on my way to work,” Rex said, watching me fly around the kitchen like a madwoman, but it wasn't on his way; Rex's law firm was in Milwaukee, while Lakeview Accounting was right in Fox Harbor, three doors from the fish store, five minutes from Evan's school.

“It's okay,” I said. “We'll get there.”

*We'll get there.* Looking back, it strikes me as an odd thing to have said. Because, of course, we didn't. In less than an hour, Evan would be dead.

I was coming up on the intersection when the old brick schoolhouse caught my eye and, just beyond it, headlights. People tended to forget that the Point Road, now, had the posted yield. That's why I observed those lights, noted them, tucked them away in my head. That's why I made absolutely certain that the vehicle, an SUV, was slowing deliberately, significantly, before I let myself glance away.

“A group of buzzards is a wake,” Evan said, and I grinned at him in the rearview.

“I used to know that one,” I said.

“What about a group of magpies?”

He’d been born, so it seemed to us, loving words. He’d been reading since the age of two. For the past few weeks, he’d been writing little stories as he lay on the couch, his smooth, narrow chest slick with Vicks. *How do you spell marsupial?* he’d asked me one morning, and I’d had to call Rex at work, smothering my laughter, whispering into the phone so that Evan wouldn’t hear.

“How *do* you spell it?” Rex had said.

“What the hell is it, anyway? A monkey, right?”

“No, a kangaroo.”

“I thought a kangaroo was a kind of rat.”

There I was in the kitchen, doubled over with laughter and pride. Above the sink, the cuckoo clock chimed. Already, the gods had closed their eyes.

More crows rising, wheeling. The blinking yellow light ahead absorbed as if by cotton. My mind busy with the day to come, the work that was waiting for me, Christmas shopping. Would we visit my parents in Florida this year? Rex still didn’t know if he’d be able to take the time. Already, it was the third of December. We hadn’t reserved our flight.

“A ponder of magpies?” I guessed, and Evan said, “A gulp,” and I was lying under bright lights, my neck immobilized, naked from the waist up. I do not remember the moment we were struck. I do not remember Cindy Ann Kreisler—I’d known her as Cindy Ann Donaldson—continuing to accelerate after hitting Evan and me, pushing our Taurus twenty feet along the Point Road before we spun free, flipped 180 degrees, plunged down into the gully. Evan’s neck was broken. I broke my right ankle and the bridge of my nose, cracked several ribs, bit through my tongue. Cindy Ann’s three daughters were treated for minor bumps and bruises, while Cindy Ann herself

complained of a stiff neck, a headache that—she told a triage nurse—was probably *just a hangover*. Her blood alcohol level, determined two hours after the crash, was barely within Wisconsin’s legal limit.

Why hadn’t any of the officers at the scene administered a Breathalyzer promptly? Why had it taken a nudge from that triage nurse to get it done? We would learn, Rex and I, that Cindy Ann had been argumentative, angry, cursing the paramedics who examined her daughters as they crouched by the roadside, stunned, hugging their school backpacks. Eventually, one of the officers, Randy Metz, had confined her to his squad car. He was a slow-eyed, heavysset, awkward-looking man, someone who, like Cindy Ann, I’d known since childhood. In court, he would say that no one had tested Cindy Ann because, well, they’d been busy with the injured.

And after the paramedics arrived?

“To be truthful,” Randy said, looking directly at me, “it never did cross my mind. You just don’t guess a person like that has anything to drink about so early in the morning.”

*I took a leave of absence from Lakeview Accounting, then extended it, extended it again. Even after the swelling in my face had subsided. Even after I could sleep lying down, hobble around the house. The live-in nurse we’d hired went home. Rex went back to work. My father returned for my mother, who’d stayed on after the funeral to help. She did not fly—refused to even consider it—so the two of them drove all the way back to Miami, to the planned community where they’d retired: identical townhomes with red tile rooftops, sidewalks spooling around a series of landscaped preserves. Three times a week, then twice, then once, Toby drove me to physical therapy in Horton while his girlfriend, Mallory Donaldson, filled in*

for him at the fish store, manning the register, answering the phone. We did not talk about Mallory, who just happened to be Cindy Ann's youngest sister. We did not talk about the accident, or Evan, or anything else, for that matter. At the time, I was not yet angry. Shame had lodged itself in my throat, a lump that could not be swallowed. How could I have survived, and with relatively minor injuries, while my six-year-old child, in his top-rated booster seat, died after reaching the hospital?

I didn't want to see anyone. I didn't pick up the phone. Neighbors stopped by with casseroles, but I did not let them in. Even when Lindsey circled the house, calling at the windows, I kept silent. I couldn't imagine facing people, accepting, with grace, all their genuine sorrow for Rex and me. And when I finally did venture out again, I was careful to avoid the lakefront park, the Cup and Cruller Cafe, the bicycle path that wound along the bluff, places where, holding Evan's warm hand, I'd occasionally encountered Cindy Ann.

*Hey, you*, she'd always say, as if she'd been expecting me, and she'd give her long, blond ponytail a flip. She'd ask after Toby and my parents: I'd ask after her mom, her sisters. By then, the older man was long dead; Cindy Ann had remarried and divorced, married, divorced again. Through it all, however, she'd kept his name, as well as the house, which stood less than a mile from our own: a mansion, a showplace, the sort of home that people, even strangers from Milwaukee, drove to Fox Harbor to see. After I could drive again, I always took the southern route into town, so I wouldn't have to pass it, but Rex made a point of driving that way as he went to work in the morning and, again, as he came home at night. He reported that the shades were always up, the lights always on, as if Cindy Ann were inviting anybody to look inside and see how *her* life

hadn't changed since the accident. A fat Angora cat snoozed in the bay window; roses bloomed in the greenhouse; an American flag fluttered from a mount at the side of the garage. Evenings, you could see the blue light of the TV, and the bent, blond head of Cindy Ann as she dished out the evening meal. And, too—more than once—the outline of a wine bottle, a slender long-necked glass. Rex was certain that Cindy Ann was still drinking. Still getting into her car in the morning, regardless of how much she'd had the night before, what time she'd gone to bed.

"I hope she chokes on it," he said, sitting down to our own empty table. "Christ." He pushed his plate away.

"Stop driving past her house," I said, "if it bothers you so much."

But I didn't mean it, not really. The truth was that I, too, savored each detail Rex excised from Cindy Ann's life with a surgeon's care: the new pink bicycle that appeared in the driveway; a second cat, another Angora, napping on top of the newly repaired Suburban; the small, pale face in an upstairs window, looking out at Rex until he drove away. Just as he'd feared, the delayed Breathalyzer had worked in Cindy Ann's favor. At the arraignment, Cindy Ann pleaded guilty to involuntary manslaughter; jail time was suspended in exchange for community service, driving school, and twelve months of counseling for substance abuse. As far as Rex and I were concerned, she'd gotten away with murder. And, judging from letters to the editor that ran in the parish bulletin, the *Harbor Pilot*, the county paper published in Sheboygan, nearly everyone in Fox Harbor agreed.

Excepting Cindy Ann's two sisters, of course. They were quick to counter with letters of their own; this was to be expected. What we did not expect was that the worst of these letters, the most hurtful,

would come from Mallory herself. It could hardly be supposed, Mallory wrote, that Cindy Ann set out to harm anybody. Yes, she'd had too much to drink the night before, but who hasn't woken up with a hangover, taken two aspirin, jumped in the car? Who, after all, hasn't made a mistake?

*I've know Rex and Megan Van Dorn a long time, and while I feel for the tragedy they have experienced, I don't see how they can possibly believe that destroying my sister's life—not to mention the lives of her children—will make up for the loss of their son. What happened was an accident. It wasn't deliberate. It wasn't personal.*

And then—

*The only deliberate, personal attack was the one that took place in court.*

Sallow-faced Mallory Donaldson, with her animal rights petitions, her aggressive vegetarianism—the result, we all supposed, of growing up on a farm that raised veal. Summers, she traveled around the Midwest, selling handmade jewelry at flea markets and craft fairs. Winters, she washed dishes at the Cup and Cruller, dressed in flannel shirts and shit-kicker boots, a man's synthetic cap pulled low over her forehead. Yet, Toby had fallen in love with her. They'd been together for almost two years. Every now and then, they'd even babysat for Evan.

“I can't take sides on this,” Toby said, after the letter appeared. “Not against her. Not against you.”

Everything, now, seemed poisoned. Pointless. Mornings, I'd

wake up, stare out the window at the naked, gray shoreline, littered with fat chunks of ice.

What, I thought, do I do next?

The sun coming up and going down again. The clock tick-ticking on the wall.

*Shortly after Cindy Ann's sentencing, I wrote my letter of resignation to Lakeview Accounting. "Take a little more time to decide," Lindsey pleaded, filling all the tape on our answering machine. "Let's talk over lunch, okay? C'mon, I'll meet you at the Shanty, my treat."*

But I didn't want to have lunch with Lindsey. And I'd already made up my mind. I was going to do something else, something different, though I didn't know what that might be. I thought about starting a business. I thought about going back to school. I even thought about working for Toby at the fish store, the way I'd done in high school: keeping his books, doing his taxes, helping him with the charter fishing trips he ran on summer weekends aboard his boat, *The Michigan Jack*. But since Mallory's letter, I'd kept my distance—from the fish store and, now that I was driving again, from Toby, too—and, at any rate, I wanted to move forward in my life, not step back into the past.

My mother invited me to Florida. "A change of scene," she said. She'd stopped asking if I'd seen Toby lately; like my father, she'd decided to ignore the rupture between us. After years spent building Hauskindler Stone and Brick, they'd sold out to a Chicago-based firm. Now they devoted the same fierce attention to retirement that, once, they'd devoted to the family business. Throughout my childhood, they'd worked twelve-hour days, leaving Toby—ten years my senior—to fix my supper, help with homework, read to me, tuck

me into bed. He'd been more like a parent to me than a brother. More like a parent than my parents had been. Until recently, I'd never felt this as a loss.

"Rex could come, too," my mother said. "We'd take good care of you."

I told her I'd think it over.

But Rex was a partner at his firm; he couldn't take time now, after all he'd already missed. And I was afraid to leave him on his own, picking at frozen dinners, flipping through channel after channel on TV. Shortly after the criminal verdict, we'd filed a civil suit against Cindy Ann, as well as the city of Fox Harbor, the police department, Officer Randy Metz. This triggered a new round of letters to the editor, fresh arguments at the Cup and Cruller, where everyone, Rex said, fell silent now when he stopped in for his usual to-go. Because this time, he'd hired Arnie Babcock, a friend of a friend, an attorney who was known far and wide for exacting extraordinary damages. In the past, Rex and I had both referred to attorneys like Arnie as ambulance chasers, opportunists who lined their pockets with other people's grief. Now, Rex called Arnie a genius, and the first time I'd looked into his broad, handsome face, I, too, found myself feeling as if we'd finally found someone who cared about us, who'd fight for us, someone who understood.

Cindy Ann Kreisler, Arnie said, had robbed our home like the worst kind of thief. We couldn't ask an eye for an eye, but we could demand her assets, teach her to regret what she'd done. Of course, Arnie understood this wasn't about money; still, why should Cindy Ann continue to enjoy a comfortable life while we, the innocent party, were left suffering, uncompensated, forgotten? We could donate any funds we received to charity. Or, perhaps, start a scholarship in Evan's name. Only then would we find some kind of closure.

We'd finally begin to let go. We'd come to accept what had happened at the intersection of the Point Road and County C, where Evan's teachers and classmates had erected a small, white cross.

At last, I thought, we were getting somewhere. We had a plan in place. There would finally be justice, resolution, just the way Arnie promised.

And yet, instead of feeling better, Rex and I only felt worse. Night after night, he muttered, twisted, unable to fall asleep, while I sat reading the same page of the same book over and over again. That none of Cindy Ann's three girls had been injured! It was just so unbelievable, Rex said, so ironic, so goddamn unfair. Even if she lost her house—and she would, Arnie had promised us that—she'd have those girls long after she'd forgotten about us, and she would forget, Rex was sure of this, he dealt with people like Cindy Ann all the time. She was a drunk, she'd had those girls by different fathers, she probably hadn't even wanted the last one anyway. On and on he went, rising to pace between the bed and the big bay window overlooking the lake. Rex, who was so gentle, so elegantly soft-spoken. Rex, who'd worked as a public defender for his first five years out of law school, protecting the rights of murderers and rapists, drug dealers and thieves. Not that I didn't understand. In fact, I agreed with everything he said. Mornings, I woke with an ache in my throat, a sourness in my stomach, that had nothing to do with Evan. The truth was that, with each passing month, he was harder to remember, harder to see. I felt as if I were grasping at the color of water, the color of the wind or the sky.

And this only made me angrier. My mind returned, again and again, to Cindy Ann, to what she'd done. When I passed Evan's room, the closed door like a fist, I thought about how Cindy Ann had destroyed us. When I saw other people's children, I promised

myself that someday, Cindy Ann would pay. When I managed to get myself to mass, I always lit a candle for Evan, but as I knelt before the flickering light, my prayers were for vengeance, my words red with blood. I imagined choking Cindy Ann, beating her with my fists. I had dreams in which I walked up to her front door with a gun. I constructed scenes in which she begged my forgiveness, even as I turned my face away.

I would never have guessed myself capable of hating another human being the way I hated Cindy Ann Kreisler: virulently, violently. How can I explain the sheer cathartic power of such rage? Whenever I gave myself over to its spell, I felt nothing but that one, pure thing. The nuances of sorrow, of guilt, of grief, burned away like so much kindling. I was terrible in my anger: strong, and fierce, and righteous. I could have led an army. I could have marched for days without food, bootless, euphoric, mile after mile.

“Maybe you could get some kind of counseling,” Lindsey said, when, at last, I joined her at the Shanty, sliding into my usual seat at our usual table overlooking the harbor. My fish fry had arrived, but I couldn’t touch a bite of it. Until then, Lindsey had been doing her best to hold up both ends of the conversation, chattering about her husband, Barton, the golfing lessons he’d gotten her for Christmas. Bart was an avid golfer, and he was always trying to interest Lindsey in the sport. Usually this amused me, but today I just stared out the dirty windows, wishing I hadn’t agreed to come, wishing Lindsey would do something about the gray, puffy coat and piano keyboard scarf she’d been wearing for the past ten years.

“Why should *I* get counseling?” I snapped. “I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“It’s *counseling*,” Lindsey said. “Not punishment. I just think it might help you feel better—”

“Feel *better*?” I said. “When the person who murdered my child is walking around, free as air? When *we* have to face the rest of our lives in this *prison*, this—”

I was too angry to finish.

“I’m sorry,” Lindsey said, quietly. “It was just a suggestion.” She began looking for her keys, digging around in her oversize purse. “I hate to see you suffering, that’s all.”

*Early in May, on our first warm day of the year, I saw Cindy Ann and her oldest girl, Amy, in the grocery store. Five months had passed since the accident. There they were, standing in front of the dairy case, picking out a carton of ice cream. Ice cream. It seemed inexcusable, unbearable, that they should indulge themselves in such pleasures, that they should enjoy themselves, in any way, ever again. I took a step toward them, and with that, Cindy Ann saw me. There was nothing in her face, not sorrow, not guilt or fear. She simply stared at me, hands at her sides, waiting for whatever it was I might say.*

“You—” I began, the word squeezed from my throat, and then I was running out of the store, into the parking lot, the asphalt spinning beneath me. I got into my car, another Taurus—it still smelled of its awful newness—and sat for a moment, gasping, gripping the steering wheel with both hands. I could see the double doors leading in and out of the store; Cindy Ann would emerge at any minute now, Amy beside her, the ice cream carton swinging in its plastic bag. All I’d have to do was wait until she entered the crosswalk, and then—

I blinked. I was sweating hard. There was still no sign of Cindy Ann. I pulled out of the parking space slowly, cautiously, making sure to signal when I reached the end of the row.

That night, I did not tell Rex that I'd fantasized about running Cindy Ann Kreisler down with my car. Instead, I told him about the ice cream, about the way Cindy Ann had looked at me: without remorse, blankly, indifferently.

"Oh, she'll be remorseful all right," Rex said. "Her days are numbered, believe me."

Arnie had hired a private investigator to find out if she was, in fact, still drinking; if she ever raised her voice to her kids; if she drove within the speed limit. This guy was the best, Arnie'd worked with him before, and if Cindy Ann so much as sneezed, we were going to find out about it. By the time Arnie was done with her, Rex promised, she'd wish that *she'd* died in the crash.

And I said: "That isn't good enough."

And Rex said, "Nothing could be."

The ugliness of those words. I stared down at my hands, horrified, as if they were not my own. At that moment, I began to suspect the truth: we would never be satisfied. We might tear the flesh from Cindy Ann's limbs with our teeth, strip by bloody strip, and still, it would be insufficient. In the end, we'd be animals, worse than animals. I thought about how I'd felt, sitting in the parking lot of the grocery store, my hands gripping the wheel like talons. I thought about how, whenever I tried to remember my son, I wound up thinking of Cindy Ann's daughters instead, hating them simply for drawing breath. I thought about Randy Metz, the way he'd looked at me in court.

"I can't live like this," I said.

*The following morning, I told Rex that I wanted to let the civil suits go.*

"You don't mean it," he said, scraping butter onto his toast.

“You’re tired. So am I. But it’s important that we follow this through.”

There were lilacs in water on the table, bunches of red and yellow tulips on the counter. In the window, the last of my hyacinths were just past their peak, releasing their sweet, sweet smell.

“Since when,” I said, “are you the sort of person who tells other people what they do and do not mean?”

He got to his feet, drained his coffee in a gulp. “We’ll talk about this later.”

I got up, too. “Call Arnie,” I said. “I mean it, Rex. I’m finished.”

“And what should I tell him? That we’re letting a murderer off the hook? That we’re sorry for wasting his time?”

“Tell him I won’t participate. Tell him I’ll refuse to testify.”

Rex stared at me. “You’d sabotage the case. You know that.”

“I do.”

He pushed past me into the hall, grabbed his briefcase from the stand, stood before the mirror to adjust his tie. On the opposite wall hung a framed photo of Evan, bundled into a red snowsuit, laughing. I thought of my father’s belief that the dead were always with us, always watching, and I hoped with all my heart that he was wrong.

“Fine,” Rex said, abruptly. A pale blue vein divided his forehead.

“What does that mean?” I said.

“It means *fine*.” He pounded his fists against his thighs, hips, chest; it took me a moment to realize he was looking for his keys. “It means that I don’t want to argue with you right now, okay? It means that I don’t fucking want to argue.”

“They’re on the stand,” I said.

He snatched them up in a clatter. "Only think about what you're saying," he said. "I'm pleading with you. Because we're going to have to live with this for the rest of our lives."

"We're going to have to live with it anyway," I said.

"Not if we win."

"It doesn't change anything."

"Of course it does," Rex said. "We live here, Meg. In this town. With people who know everything about us, who will always be looking at us and saying, Remember when their kid got killed?"

I laughed, bitterly, biting. "Right. And remember how they sued us because of it?"

"Remember," Rex said, landing hard on each word, "how they just lay down and took it? How they didn't have the stomach to make certain the same thing wouldn't happen to somebody else?"

For a moment, neither of us said anything.

"I don't want to live here anymore," I said.

I hadn't known I was going to say it.

Rex looked at me. "You mean it?"

I nodded.

He nodded, too. "Okay, then," he said. "Okay."

We studied each other in the mirror, a middle-aged man and woman, each sallow-skinned with exhaustion. Shadows like bruises beneath the man's eyes. Abruptly, he reached for the woman. The woman's hands rose to rest lightly, uncertainly, on his broad, shaking back.

"Okay."

Later, I put on a pair of old jeans and a T-shirt and went out into the garden. The cool mud rose between my bare toes; I bent to clean out the choked iris beds, the daffodils and peonies. But I felt nothing, cared for nothing. I could not concentrate. Inside the house,

on the answering machine, there were messages from Lindsey, from Toby, from St. Clare's—would I chair the festival committee again this year?—and I knew that I needed to call people back, get out of the house, make a life for myself. Instead, I sat back on my heels, staring out across the bluff at the water. My ankle ached, but I didn't change position. It seemed right to me that it should hurt. A single sailboat tacked to and fro, following the outline of the coast, and suddenly, I wished with all my heart that Rex and I were on it, far away from everyone and everything we knew.

Evan was gone. Living with that knowledge was like living with the sound of someone screaming inside my head. By the time we left Fox Harbor, seven months after the accident, I couldn't imagine silence anymore. It was as if the screaming sound had always been there.