

One

THROUGH THE CHILLY CURTAIN OF SLEET, IN THE INTERMITTENT wash of the great light on the jutting cliff to the south, the massive silhouette of Bluff House loomed over Whiskey Beach. It faced the cold, turbulent Atlantic like a challenge.

I will last as long as you.

Standing three sturdy and indulgent stories above the rough and rugged coast, it watched the roll and slap of waves through the dark eyes of windows, as it had—in one incarnation or another—for more than three centuries.

The little stone cottage now housing tools and garden supplies spoke to its humble beginnings, to those who'd braved the fierce and fickle Atlantic to forge a life on the stony ground of a new world. Dwarfing those beginnings, the spread and rise of golden sand walls and curving gables, the generous terraces of weathered local stone sang to its heyday.

It survived storm, neglect, careless indulgence, dubious taste, the booms and the busts, scandal and righteousness.

Within its walls, generations of Landons had lived and died, celebrated and mourned, schemed, thrived, triumphed and languished.

It had shone as bright as the great light that swept the water off Massachusetts' rocky and glorious north shore. And it had huddled, shuttered in the dark.

It had stood long, so long now it simply was Bluff House, reigning above the sea, the sand, the village of Whiskey Beach.

For Eli Landon it was the only place left to go. Not a refuge as much as an escape from everything his life had become over the past eleven horrible months.

He barely recognized himself.

The two-and-a-half-hour drive up from Boston over slick roads left him exhausted. But then, he admitted, fatigue cozied up to him like a lover most days. So he sat outside the house, in the dark, sleet splatting off his windshield, his roof, while he debated the choices of gathering enough energy to go inside or just staying put, maybe sliding into sleep in the car.

Stupid, he thought. Of course he wouldn't just sit there and sleep in the car when the house, with perfectly good beds to choose from, stood only a few feet away.

But neither could he drum up the enthusiasm for hauling his suitcases out of the trunk. Instead he grabbed the two small bags on the seat beside him, ones holding his laptop and a few essentials.

Sleet slapped at him when he climbed out of the car, but the cold, that whistling Atlantic wind, cut through the outer layers of lethargy. Waves boomed against the rock, slapped against the sand, combining into a constant hissing roar. Eli dragged the house keys out of his jacket pocket, stepped onto the shelter of the wide stone portico to the massive double entrance doors hewn more than a century before from teak imported from Burma.

Two years, he thought—closer to three—since he'd been here. Too busy with his life, with work, with the disaster of his marriage to drive up for a weekend, a short vacation, a holiday visit with his grandmother.

He'd spent time with her, of course, the indomitable Hester Hawkin Landon, whenever she'd come to Boston. He'd called her regularly, e-mailed, Facebooked and Skyped. Hester might have been cruising toward eighty but she'd always embraced technology and innovation with curiosity and enthusiasm.

He'd taken her to dinner, to drinks, remembered flowers and cards, gifts, gathered with her and his family for Christmas, important birthdays.

And that, he thought as he unlocked the door, was all just rationalization for not taking the time, making the time, to come to Whiskey Beach, to the place she loved most, and giving her real time, real attention.

He found the right key, unlocked the door. Stepping inside, he flicked on the lights.

She'd changed some things, he noted, but Gran embraced change even as she managed to embrace traditions—that suited her.

Some new art—seascapes, gardenscapes—splashing soft color against rich brown walls. He dumped his bags just inside the door, took a moment to just look around the glossy spill of the entrance hall.

He scanned the stairs—the grinning gargoyle newel posts some whimsical Landon had commissioned—and up where they curved gracefully right and left for the north and south wings.

Plenty of bedrooms, he thought. He just had to climb the stairs and pick one.

But not yet.

Instead he walked through to what they called the main parlor with its high, arching windows facing the front garden—or what would be once winter opened its claws.

His grandmother hadn't been home for over two months, but he didn't see a speck of dust. Logs lay in the hearth framed by the gleam of lapis and ready to light. Fresh flowers stood on the

Hepplewhite table she prized. Pillows sat fluffed and welcoming on the three sofas ranged around the room, and the wide planked chestnut floor gleamed like a mirror.

She'd had someone come in, he decided, then rubbed his forehead where a headache threatened to bloom.

She'd told him, hadn't she? Told him she had someone looking out for the place. A neighbor, someone who did the heavy cleaning for her. He hadn't forgotten she'd told him, he'd just lost the information for a moment in the fog that too often crawled in to blur his mind.

Now looking out for Bluff House was his job. To tend to it, to, as his grandmother had asked, keep life in it. And maybe, she'd said, it would pump some life back into him.

He picked up his bags, looked at the stairs. Then just stood.

She'd been found there, there at the base of the steps. By a neighbor—the same neighbor? Wasn't it the same neighbor who cleaned for her? Someone, thank God, had come by to check on her, and found her lying there unconscious, bruised, bleeding, with a shattered elbow, a broken hip, cracked ribs, a concussion.

She might've died, he thought. The doctors expressed amazement that she'd stubbornly refused to. None of the family routinely checked on her daily, no one thought to call, and no one, including himself, would have worried if she hadn't answered for a day or two.

Hester Landon, independent, invincible, indestructible.

Who might have died after a terrible fall, if not for a neighbor—and her own indefatigable will.

Now she reigned in a suite of rooms in his parents' home while she recovered from her injuries. There she'd stay until deemed strong enough to come back to Bluff House—or if his parents had their way, there she would stay, period.

He wanted to think of her back here, in the house she loved, sitting out on the terrace with her evening martini, looking out

at the ocean. Or puttering in her garden, maybe setting up her easel to paint.

He wanted to think of her vital and tough, not helpless and broken on the floor while he'd been pouring a second cup of morning coffee.

So he'd do his best until she came home. He'd keep life in her house, such as his was.

Eli picked up his bags, started upstairs. He'd take the room he'd always used on visits—or had before those visits stretched out fewer and farther between. Lindsay had hated Whiskey Beach, Bluff House, and had made trips there into a cold war with his grandmother rigidly polite on one side, his wife deliberately snide on the other. And he'd been squeezed in the middle.

So he'd taken the easy way, he thought now. He could be sorry about that, sorry he'd stopped coming, sorry he'd made excuses and had limited his time with his grandmother to her trips to Boston. But he couldn't turn back the clock.

He stepped into the bedroom. Flowers here, too, he noted, and the same soft green walls, two of his grandmother's watercolors he'd always particularly liked.

He put his bags on the bench at the foot of the sleigh bed, stripped off his coat.

Here, things had stayed the same. The little desk under the window, the wide atrium doors leading to the terrace, the wing-back chair and the little footstool with the cover his grandmother's mother had needlepointed long ago.

It occurred to him that for the first time in a very long time he felt—almost—at home. Opening his bag, he dug out his toiletry kit, then found fresh towels, fancy seashell soaps. The scent of lemons in the bath.

He stripped down without glancing at the mirror. He'd lost weight, too much weight, over the last year. He didn't need to remind himself of it. He turned on the shower, stepped in, hoping

to burn some of the fatigue away. He knew from experience if he went to bed exhausted and stressed, he'd sleep fitfully, wake with that dragging hangover.

When he stepped out he grabbed one of the towels from the stack, again caught the whiff of lemon as he scrubbed it over his hair. Damp, it curled past the nape of his neck, a mop of dark blond longer than it had been since his early twenties. But then he hadn't seen his usual barber, Enrique, for nearly a year. He hardly had the need for a hundred-fifty-dollar haircut, or the collection of Italian suits and shoes packed in storage.

He was no longer a sharply dressed criminal attorney with a corner office and the fast track to full partner. That man had died along with Lindsay. He just hadn't known it.

He tossed back the duvet, as fluffy and white as the towel, slid in, switched off the light.

In the dark he could hear the sea, a steady growl, and the sizzle of sleet against the windows. He closed his eyes, wished as he did every night for a few hours of oblivion.

A few was all he got.

GOD DAMN, HE WAS PISSED. Nobody, absolutely nobody, he thought as he drove through the hard, freezing rain, could trip his switch like Lindsay.

The bitch.

Her mind, and apparently her morals, worked like no one else's he knew. She'd managed to convince herself, and he was sure any number of her friends, her mother, her sister, and Christ knew, that it was *his* fault their marriage had deteriorated, *his* they'd gone from couples counseling to a trial separation to a legal battle in preparation for divorce.

And *his* fucking fault she'd been cheating on him for well over eight months—five more than the “trial” separation she'd

campaigned for. And somehow it was on him that he'd found out about her lying, cheating, conniving ass before signing on the dotted line so she could walk away with a fat settlement.

So they were both pissed, he decided—he that he'd been an idiot, and she that he'd finally clued in.

No doubt it would be his fault they'd had a bitter, vicious and public fight about her adultery that afternoon in the art gallery where she worked part-time. Bad timing, bad form on his part, he admitted, but right now? He didn't give a shit.

She wanted to blame him because she'd gotten sloppy, so sloppy his own sister had seen his estranged wife and another man all over each other in a hotel lobby in Cambridge—before they'd gotten on the elevator together.

Maybe Tricia had waited a couple days to tell him, but he couldn't blame her. It was a lot to tell. And he'd taken another couple to absorb it before he'd manned up, hired an investigator.

Eight months, he thought again. She'd been sleeping with someone else in hotel beds, in B-and-Bs, God knew where else—though she'd been too smart to use the house. What would the neighbors think?

Maybe he shouldn't have gone, armed with the investigator's report and his own fury, to the gallery to confront her. Maybe the two of them should've had more sense than to start a shouting match that carried through the place and out to the street.

But they'd both have to weather the embarrassment.

One thing he knew: the settlement wouldn't be so sweet for her now. All concept of clean and fair, and no need to stick hard to the prenu? Done. She'd find that out when she got home from her charity auction and found he'd taken the painting he bought in Florence, the Deco diamond that had been his great-grandmother's and had come to him, and the silver coffee set he had no interest in but was another family heirloom he'd be *damned* if she'd throw into the community property pot.

She was going to find herself batting in a new ball game.

Maybe it was petty, maybe it was stupid—or maybe it was right and just. He couldn't see through the anger and betrayal, and simply didn't care. Riding on that anger, he pulled up in the driveway of the house in Boston's Back Bay. A house he'd believed would serve as a solid foundation for a marriage that had begun to show some cracks. One he'd hoped would one day house children, and one that, for a short time, had plastered over those cracks as he and Lindsay had outfitted it, chosen furnishings, debated, argued, agreed—all of which he considered normal—over little details.

Now they'd have to sell it, and both likely walk away with half of little to nothing. And instead of renting a condo for what he'd hoped would be the short term, he'd end up buying one.

For himself, he thought as he climbed out of the car and into the rain. No debates, arguments or agreements necessary.

And, he realized as he jogged to the front door, that came as a kind of relief. No more holding time, no more maybes, no more pretense his marriage could or should be saved.

Maybe in her lying, deceitful, cheating way, she'd done him a favor.

He could walk away now without guilt or regret.

But he'd damn well walk away with what was his.

He unlocked the door, stepped into the wide, gracious foyer. Turning to the alarm pad, he keyed in the code. If she'd changed it, he had his ID, listing his name and this address. He'd already worked out how to handle any police or security questions.

He'd simply say his wife had changed the code—true enough—and he'd forgotten it.

But she hadn't. The fact that she hadn't was both relief and insult. She thought she knew him so well, was so sure he'd never enter the house that was half his without her permission. He'd agreed to move out, to give them both some space, so he'd never intrude, never push too hard.

She assumed he'd be fucking civilized.

She was soon to discover she didn't know him at all.

He stood a moment, absorbing the quiet of the house, the *feel* of it. All those neutral tones serving as a backdrop of splashes and flashes of color, the mix of old, new, cleverly quirky adding style.

She was good at it, he could admit that. She knew how to present herself, her home, knew how to arrange successful parties. There had been some good times here, spikes of happiness, stretches of contentment, moments of easy compatibility, some good sex, some lazy Sunday mornings.

How did it all go so wrong?

"Screw it," he muttered.

Get in, get out, he told himself. Being in the house just depressed him. He went upstairs, directly to the sitting room off the master bedroom—noted she had an overnight bag on the luggage rack, half packed.

She could go wherever the hell she wanted to go, he thought, with or without her lover.

Eli focused in on what he'd come for. Inside the closet, he keyed in the combination for the safe. He ignored the stack of cash, the documents, the jewelry cases holding pieces he'd given her over the years, or she'd bought for herself.

Just the ring, he told himself. The Landon ring. He checked the box, watched it wink and flash in the light, then shoved it into the pocket of his jacket. Once the safe was secured again and he started back down, it occurred to him he should've brought bubble wrap or some protection for the painting.

He'd grab some towels, he decided, something to shield it from the rain. He took a couple of bath sheets from the linen closet, kept going.

In and out, he told himself again. He hadn't known how much he wanted out of that house, away from the memories—good and bad.

In the living room he took the painting off the wall. He'd bought it on their honeymoon because Lindsay had been so taken with it, with the sun-washed colors, the charm and simplicity of a field of sunflowers backed by olive groves.

They'd bought other art since, he thought as he wrapped the towels around it. Paintings, sculptures, pottery certainly of greater value. They could all go in the communal pile, all be part of the mechanism of negotiation. But not this.

He laid the padded painting on the sofa, moved through the living area with the storm slashing overhead. He wondered if she was driving in it, on her way home to finish packing for the overnight trip with her lover.

"Enjoy it while it lasts," he murmured. Because first thing in the morning, he was calling his divorce attorney and letting him off the leash.

From now on, he intended to go for the throat.

He turned into the room they'd fashioned into a library and, as he started to hit the light switch, saw her in a shuddering burst of icy lightning.

From that moment to the answering bellow of thunder, his mind went blank.

"Lindsay?"

He slapped at the switch as he lurched forward. Inside him waged a war between what he saw and what he could accept.

She lay on her side in front of the hearth. Blood, so much blood on the white marble, the dark floor.

Her eyes, that rich chocolate that had so captivated him once, were filmed glass.

"Lindsay."

He dropped down beside her, took the hand stretched out on the floor as if reaching. And found her cold.

*

IN BLUFF HOUSE, Eli woke, dragging himself out of the blood and shock of the recurring dream and into sunlight.

For a moment he just sat as he'd reared up, disoriented, hazy. He stared around the room, remembering as his thumping heart leveled again.

Bluff House. He'd come to Bluff House.

Lindsay had been dead nearly a year. The house in the Back Bay was finally on the market. The nightmare was behind him. Even if he still felt its breath on the back of his neck.

He shoved at his hair, wished he could delude himself so he could just go back to sleep, but he knew if he closed his eyes again, he'd be right back in the little library, right back beside the body of his murdered wife.

And yet he couldn't think of a single good reason to get out of bed.

He thought he heard music—dim, distant. What the hell was that music?

He'd gotten so used to noises—voices, music, TV mumbling—during the last few months in his parents' house he hadn't registered there shouldn't be music, or anything but the sound of the sea or the wind.

Had he turned on a radio, a television, something, and forgotten? It wouldn't be the first time since his long downward spiral.

So, a reason to get up, he decided.

As he hadn't brought in the rest of his bags, he yanked on the jeans he'd worn the day before, grabbed the shirt and shrugged into it as he started out of the bedroom.

It didn't sound like a radio, he realized as he approached the stairs. Or not just a radio. He recognized Adele easily enough as he moved through the main floor, but clearly heard a second female voice forming a kind of passionate—and loud—duet.

He followed the sound, winding through the house toward the kitchen.

Adele's singing partner reached into one of the three cloth market bags on the counter, drew out a small bunch of bananas and added them to a bamboo bowl of apples and pears.

He couldn't quite get his mind around it, any of it.

She sang full out, and well—not with Adele's magic, but well. And looked like a fairy, of the long and willowy variety.

A mass of long curls the color of walnut tumbled around her shoulders, spilled down the back of a dark blue sweater. Her face was . . . *unusual*, was all he could think. Long, almond-shaped eyes, the sharp nose and cheekbones, the top-heavy mouth down to the mole at its left corner struck him as just a little other-worldly.

Or maybe it was just his fogged brain and the circumstances.

Rings glinted on her fingers. Dangles swung from her ears. A crescent moon hung around her neck, and a watch with a face as round and white as a baseball rode her left wrist.

Still belting it out, she lifted a quart of milk, a pound of butter from the bag, started to turn toward the refrigerator. And saw him.

She didn't scream, but did take a stumbling step back, and nearly bobbed the milk.

"Eli?" She set down the milk, laid a beringed hand on her heart. "God! You scared me." With a throaty, breathless laugh, she shook back all that curling hair. "You aren't due until this afternoon. I didn't see your car. But I came in the back," she continued, gesturing toward the door leading out to the main terrace. "I guess you came in the front. Why wouldn't you? Did you drive up last night? Less traffic, I guess, but crappy roads with the sleet.

"Anyhow, here you are. Would you like some coffee?"

She looked like a long-legged fairy, he thought again, and had a laugh like a sea goddess.

And she'd brought bananas.

He just stared at her. “Who are you?”

“Oh, sorry. I thought Hester told you. I’m Abra. Abra Walsh. Hester asked me to get the house ready for you. I’m just stocking the kitchen. How’s Hester? I haven’t spoken to her for a couple of days—just quick e-mails and texts.”

“Abra Walsh,” he repeated. “You found her.”

“Yes.” She dug a bag of coffee beans out of a sack and began to fill a machine much like one he’d used daily at his law offices. “Horrible day. She didn’t come to yoga class—she never misses. I called, but she didn’t answer, so I came over to check. I have a key. I clean for her.”

While the machine hummed, she put an oversize mug under the spout, then continued putting away the groceries. “I came in the back—habit. I called for her, but . . . Then I started to worry maybe she wasn’t feeling well, so I walked through to go upstairs. And she was lying there. I thought . . . but she had a pulse, and she came around for a minute when I said her name. I called for an ambulance, and I got the throw off the sofa because I was afraid to move her. They were quick, but at the time, it seemed like hours.”

She got a carton of cream out of the refrigerator, added it to the mug. “Counter or breakfast nook?”

“What?”

“Counter.” She set the coffee down on the island. “That way you can sit and talk to me.” When he just stared at the coffee, she smiled. “That’s right, isn’t it? Hester said a dollop of cream, no sugar.”

“Yeah. Yes, thanks.” Like a man sleepwalking, he moved to the island, sat on the stool.

“She’s so strong, so smart, so herself. She’s my hero, your grandmother. When I moved here a couple of years ago, she was the first person I really connected with.”

She just kept talking. It didn’t matter if he listened, she

thought. Sometimes the sound of someone's voice could be comfort, and he looked as if he needed comfort.

She thought of the photos Hester had shown her of him, from a few years back. The easy smile, the light in his Landon blue eyes—crystal blue with a dark, dark rim around the iris. Now he looked tired, sad and too thin.

She'd do what she could to fix that.

So thinking, she took eggs, cheese, ham out of the refrigerator.

"She's grateful you agreed to stay here. I know it upset her thinking of Bluff House empty. She said you're writing a novel?"

"I . . . mmmm."

"I've read a couple of your short stories. I liked them." She put an omelet pan on the stove to heat. While it did, she poured a glass of orange juice, put some berries in a little colander to wash, bread in the toaster. "I wrote bad romantic poetry when I was a teenager. It was even worse when I tried to set it to music. I love to read. I admire anyone who can put words together to tell a story. She's so proud of you. Hester."

He looked up then, met her eyes. Green, he realized, like a sea in thin fog, and as otherworldly as the rest of her.

Maybe she wasn't here at all.

Then her hand lay over his, just for a moment, warm and real. "Your coffee's going to get cold."

"Right." He lifted the mug, drank. And felt marginally better.

"You haven't been here for a while," she continued, and poured the egg mixture into the omelet pan. "There's a nice little restaurant down in the village—and the pizza parlor's still there. I think you're pretty well stocked now, but the market's still there, too. If you need anything and don't want to go into the village, just let me know. I'm in Laughing Gull Cottage if you're out and want to stop in. Do you know it?"

"I . . . yes. You . . . work for my grandmother?"

"I've cleaned for her once or twice a week, as she's needed it. I

clean for a few people—as they need it. I teach yoga five times a week, in the church basement, and an evening a week in my cottage. Once I convinced Hester to try yoga, she was hooked. I do massages”—she gave him a quick grin over her shoulder—“therapeutic. I’m certified. I do a lot of things, because a lot of things interest me.”

She plated the omelet with the fresh berries and toast. Set the plate in front of him, added a red linen napkin and flatware. “I have to go, I’m running a little late.”

She folded the market bags into an enormous red tote, slipped on a dark purple coat, wound a scarf of striped jewel tones around her neck, yanked on a purple wool cap.

“I’ll see you the day after tomorrow, about nine.”

“The day after tomorrow?”

“To clean. If you need anything in the meantime, my numbers—cell and home—are on the board right there. Or if you’re out for a walk and I’m home, stop by. So . . . welcome back, Eli.”

She walked to the patio door, turned, smiled. “Eat your breakfast,” she ordered, and was gone.

He sat, staring at the door, then looked down at his plate. Because he couldn’t think of anything else to do, he picked up his fork and ate.

Two

ELI WANDERED THE HOUSE, HOPING IT MIGHT HELP HIM orient. He hated this feeling of free-floating, just drifting from place to place, thought to thought, without any sense of anchor or root. Once he'd had structure in his life, and purpose. Even after Lindsay's death, when the structure broke to pieces, he'd had purpose.

Fighting against spending the rest of his life in prison equaled a strong, defined purpose.

And now with the threat less immediate, less viable, what purpose did he have? His writing, he reminded himself. He often thought the process and the escape of writing had saved his sanity.

But where was his anchor now? Where was the root? Was it Bluff House? As simple as that?

He'd spent time in this house as a boy, as a young man, so many summers with the beach always tantalizingly close, so many winter holidays or weekends, watching snow heap itself on the sand, on the rocks jutting through it.

Simple times—innocent? Had they been? Sand castles and clambakes with family, with friends, sailing with his grandfather in the pretty sloop he knew his grandmother still kept moored in

Whiskey Beach marina, and noisy, crowded, colorful Christmas dinners, with all the fireplaces snapping and sizzling.

He'd never imagined himself wandering through these rooms like a ghost straining for the echoes of those voices or the faded images of better times.

When he stood in his grandmother's bedroom, it struck him that while she'd made changes here—the paint, the bedding—much remained just as always.

The big fabulous four-poster where his own father—due to a blizzard and a rapid labor—had been born. The photograph of his grandparents, so young and vibrant and beautiful on their wedding day more than a half century before still stood, as it always had, in its gleaming silver frame on the bureau. And the view from the windows of the sea, the sand, the jagged curve of the rocky coastline remained constant.

Suddenly he had a vivid, movie-stream memory of a summer night, a wild summer storm. Thunder crashing, lightning whipping. And he and his sister, who'd been spending the week at Bluff House, running in terror to his grandparents' bed.

What had he been—five, or maybe six? But he could see it all, as if through a clear, crystal lens. The flashes of light outside the windows, the wonderful big bed he had to climb up to. He heard his grandfather—and wasn't it odd to just that moment realize how much his father had come to resemble his grandfather at a similar age?—laughing as he'd hauled the terrified Tricia into the bed.

They're having a wild party up there tonight! It's heaven's rock concert.

Even as the image faded, Eli felt steadier.

He walked to the terrace doors, flipped the lock and stepped out into the wind and cold.

The waves kicked, riled up by the strong, steady wind that tasted of snow. On the tip of the headland, the far end of that

curve, the bride-white tower of the lighthouse rose above a tumble of rocks. Far out in the Atlantic, he saw a speck that was a ship plying those restless waters.

Where was it going? What did it carry?

They'd played a game long ago, a variation on A is for Apple. It's going to Armenia, Eli thought, and it's carrying artichokes.

For the first time in too long, as he hunched his shoulders against that ice-pick cold, he smiled.

To Bimini with baboons. To Cairo with coconuts. To Denmark with dental floss, he thought as the speck vanished.

He stood a moment longer before stepping back inside, back into the warm.

He needed to do something. He should go out, get his stuff. Unpack, settle in.

Maybe later.

He walked out again, wandered again, all the way to the third floor that had once served—before his time—as the servants' domain.

Storage now, ghost-draped furniture, chests, boxes, most in the wide space while the warren of rooms where maids and cooks had slept stood empty. Still, with no purpose in mind, he walked through them to the sea side, and the gable room with its wide, curved windows facing the sea.

The head housekeeper's room, he thought. Or had it been the head butler's? He couldn't remember which, but whoever had slept there claimed prime territory, down to the private entrance and terrace.

No need for all that staff now, or to keep the third floor furnished, maintained, even heated. His practical Gran had closed that off years ago.

Maybe one day whoever was in charge would repurpose it, bring it back, shake off all those ghost cloths and strike up the warmth and light.

But right now it felt as empty and cold as he did.

He went down again, continued to wander.

And found more changes.

In what had been one of the second-floor bedrooms, his grandmother had reimagined, redesigned it into an office/sitting room. A study, he supposed. Complete with a computer station on a gorgeous old desk, a reading chair and what he thought of as an afternoon nap sofa. More of her art—petal pink peonies spilling out of a cobalt vase, mists rising over windswept dunes.

And the view, of course, spread out like a banquet for a hungry soul.

He moved into the room, to the desk, and pulled the sticky note off the monitor.

Hester says:

Write here, and why aren't you already?

Relayed by Abra.

He frowned at the note a moment, not sure he appreciated his grandmother's using her neighbor to relay her orders. Then, the note still in his hand, he looked around the room, the windows, even into the little bathroom, the closet that now held office supplies as well as linens, blankets and pillows. Which meant, he concluded, the sofa was a pullout.

Practical again. The house held a dozen bedrooms or more—he couldn't remember—but why waste space when you could multipurpose?

He shook his head at the glass-fronted mini-fridge stocked with bottled water and his own guilty favorite since college, Mountain Dew.

Write here.

It was a good space, he thought, and the idea of writing held a lot more appeal than unpacking.

“Okay,” he said. “All right.”

He went to his room, retrieved his laptop case. He slid the keyboard and monitor to the far left, gave himself room for his own tool. And since it was there, what the hell, got a cold bottle of the Dew. He booted up, plugged in his thumb drive.

“Okay,” he said again. “Where were we?”

He opened the bottle, chugged as he brought up his work, did a quick review. And with one last glance at the view, dived in.

He escaped.

Since college, he’d written as a hobby—an interest he’d enjoyed indulging. And it had given him some pride when he’d sold a handful of short stories.

In the past year and a half—when his life began to shake into the dumpster—he’d found writing offered him better therapy, a calmer mind than a fifty-minute hour with a shrink.

He could go away into a world he created, he—to some extent, anyway—controlled. And oddly felt more himself than he did outside that world.

He wrote—again, to some extent—what he knew. Crafting legal thrillers—first in short stories, and now this terrifying and seductive attempt at a novel—gave him an opportunity to play with the law, to use it, misuse it, depending on the character. He could create dilemmas, solutions, tightrope along the thin and slippery line, always shifting between the law and justice.

He’d become a lawyer because the law, with all of its flaws, all of its intricacies and interpretations, fascinated him. And because the family business, the industry of Landon Whiskey, just wasn’t a fit for him as it was for his father, his sister, even his brother-in-law.

He’d wanted criminal law, and had pursued that goal single-mindedly through law school, while clerking for Judge Reingold, a man he admired and respected, and into Brown, Kinsale, Schubert and Associates.

Now that the law had failed him in a very real sense, he wrote to feel alive, to remind himself there were times truth held out against lies, and justice found a way.

By the time he surfaced, the light had changed, gone gloomy, softening the tones in the water. With some surprise he noted it was after three; he'd written solidly for nearly four hours.

"Hester scores again," he murmured.

He backed up the work, switched to e-mail. Plenty of spam, he noted—and deleted. Not much else, and nothing he felt obliged, right then, to read.

Instead he composed a post to his parents, and another to his sister with nearly the same text. No problems on the drive, house looks great, good to be back, settling in. Nothing about recurring dreams, sneaking depression or talkative neighbors who fixed omelets.

Then he composed another to his grandmother.

I'm writing here, as ordered. Thank you. The water's gone to rippling steel with fast white horses. It's going to snow; you can taste it. The house looks good, and feels even better. I'd forgotten how it always made me feel. I'm sorry—don't tell me not to apologize again—I'm sorry, Gran, I stopped coming. But I'm sorry now almost as much for me as for you.

Maybe if I'd come to you, to Bluff House, I'd have seen things more clearly, accepted things, changed things. If I had, would it have all gone so horribly wrong?

I'll never know, and there's no point in the what-ifs.

What I'm sure of is it's good to be here, and I'll take care of the house until you come home. I'm going to take a walk on the beach, come back and start a fire so I can enjoy it once the snow starts to fall.

I love you,

Eli

Oh, P.S. I met Abra Walsh. She's interesting. I can't remember if I thanked her for saving the love of my life. I'll make sure I do when she comes back.

After he sent the e-mail, it occurred to him that while he couldn't remember if he'd thanked her, he did remember he hadn't paid her for the groceries.

He wrote himself a note on the pack of Post-its he found in the desk drawer, stuck it to the computer monitor. He forgot too easily these days.

No point in putting off unpacking, he told himself. If nothing else, he needed to change the clothes he'd worn two days straight. He couldn't let himself go down that road again.

He used the lift writing had given him, dragged on his coat, remembered he'd yet to put on shoes, then went out for his bags.

In the unpacking he discovered he hadn't packed sensibly. He hardly needed a suit, much less three of them, or four pairs of dress shoes, fifteen (Jesus Christ!) ties. Just habit, he told himself. Just packing on autopilot.

He hung, folded in drawers, stacked up books, found his phone charger, his iPod. Once some of his things worked their way into the room, he found it did make him feel more settled in.

So he unpacked his laptop case, tucked his checkbook—had to pay the neighbor when she cleaned—in the desk drawer along with his obsessive supply of pens.

He'd go for a walk now. Stretch his legs, get some exercise, some fresh air. Those were healthy, productive things to do. Because he didn't want to make the effort, he forced himself as he'd promised himself he would. Get out every day, even if it's just a walk on the beach. Don't wallow, don't brood.

He pulled on his parka, shoved the keys in his pocket and went out the terrace doors before he changed his mind.

He forced himself to cross the pavers against the maniacal

bluster of wind. Fifteen minutes, he decided as he headed for the beach steps with his head down and his shoulders hunched. That qualified as getting out of the house. He'd walk down, head in one direction for seven and a half minutes, then walk back.

Then he'd build a fire, and sit and brood in front of it with a glass of whiskey if he wanted to.

Sand swirled up from the dunes to dance while the wind sweeping in from the sea kicked at the sea grass like a bully. The white horses he'd told his grandmother about reared and galloped over water of hard, icy gray. The air scored his throat on each breath like crushed glass.

Winter clung to Whiskey Beach like frozen burrs, reminding him he'd forgotten gloves, a hat.

He could walk thirty minutes tomorrow, he bargained with himself. Or pick one day of the week for an hour. Who said it had to be every day? Who made the rules? It was freaking cold out there, and even an idiot could look at that bloated sky and know those smug, swirling clouds were just waiting to dump a boatload of snow.

And only an idiot walked on the beach during a snowstorm.

He reached the bottom of the sand-strewn steps with his own thoughts all but drowned out in the roar of water and wind. No point in this, he convinced himself, and on the edge of turning around and climbing up again, lifted his head.

Waves rolled out of that steel-gray world to hurl themselves at the shore like battering rams, full of force and fury. Battle cry after battle cry echoed in their unrelenting advance and retreat. Against the shifting sand rose the juts and jumble of rock it attacked, regrouped, attacked again in a war neither side would ever win.

Above the battle that bulging sky waited, watched, as if calculating when to unleash its own weapons.

So Eli stood, struck by the terrible power and beauty. The sheer magnificence of *energy*.

Then, while the war raged, he began to walk.

He saw not another soul along the long beach, heard only the sound of the bitter wind and angry surf. Above the dunes the homes and cottages stood with windows shut tight against the cold. No one moved up or down the beach steps or stood on bluff or cliff as far as he could see. No one looked out to sea from the pier where the turbulent surf hammered mercilessly at the pilings.

For now, for this moment, he was alone as Crusoe. But not lonely.

Impossible to be lonely here, he realized, surrounded by all this power and energy. He'd remember this, he promised himself, remember this feeling the next time he tried to make excuses, the next time he tried to justify just closing himself in.

He loved the beach, and this stretch remained a sentimental favorite. He loved the feel of it before a storm—winter, summer, spring, it didn't matter. And the *life* of it during the season when people dived into the waves or stretched out on towels, or settled onto beach chairs under umbrellas. The way it looked at sunrise, or felt in the soft kiss of summer twilight.

Why had he robbed himself of this for so long? He couldn't blame circumstances, couldn't blame Lindsay. He could, and should, have come—for his grandmother, for himself. But he'd chosen what had seemed the easier way than explaining why his wife hadn't come, making excuses for her, for himself. Or arguing with Lindsay when she'd pushed for Cape Cod or Martha's Vineyard—or an extended vacation on the Côte d'Azur.

But the easier way hadn't made it easier, and he'd lost something important to him.

If he didn't take it back now, he'd have no one to blame but himself. So he walked, all the way to the pier, and remembered the girl he'd had a serious, sizzling summer flirtation with just before he'd started college. Fishing with his father—something neither of them had even a remote skill for. And further back to

childhood and digging in the sand at low tide for pirate treasure with fleeting summer friends.

Esmeralda's Dowry, he thought. The old and still vital legend of the treasure stolen by pirates in a fierce battle at sea, then lost again when the pirate ship, the infamous *Calypso*, wrecked on the rocks of Whiskey Beach, all but at the feet of Bluff House.

He'd heard every variation of that legend over the years, and as a child had hunted with his friends. They'd be the ones to dig up the treasure, become modern-day pirates with its pieces of eight and jewels and silver.

And like everyone else, they'd found nothing but clams, sand crabs and shells. But they'd enjoyed the adventures during those long-ago, sun-washed summers.

Whiskey Beach had been good to him, good for him. Standing here with those wicked combers spewing their foam and spray, he believed it would be good for him again.

He'd walked farther than he'd intended, and stayed longer, but now as he started back he thought of the whiskey by the fire as a pleasure, a kind of reward rather than an escape or an excuse for a brood.

He should probably make something to eat as he hadn't given a thought to lunch. He hadn't, he realized, eaten anything since breakfast. Which meant he'd reneged on another promise to himself to regain the weight he'd lost, to start working on a healthier lifestyle.

So he'd make a decent meal for dinner, and get started on that healthier lifestyle. There had to be something he could put together. The neighbor had stocked the kitchen, so . . .

As he thought of her, he glanced up and saw Laughing Gull nestled with its neighbors beyond the dunes. The bold summer-sky blue of its clapboard stood out among the pastels and creamy whites. He remembered it as a soft gray at one time. But the quirky shape of the place with its single peaked roof gable, its

wide roof deck and the glass hump of a solarium made it unmistakable.

He saw lights twinkling behind that glass to stave off the gloom.

He'd go up and pay her now, he decided, with cash. Then he could stop thinking about it. He'd walk home from there, renewing his memory of the other houses, who lived there—or who had.

Part of his brain calculated that now he'd have something cheerful—and true—to report home. Went for a walk on the beach (describe), stopped by to see Abra Walsh on the way home. Blah, blah, new paint on Laughing Gull looks good.

See, not isolating myself, concerned family. Getting out, making contacts. Situation normal.

Amused at himself, he composed the e-mail as he climbed. He turned down a smooth cobble path between a short yard laid out with shrubs and statuary—a fanciful mermaid curled on her tail, a frog strumming a banjo, and a little stone bench on legs of winged fairies. He was so struck by the new—to him—landscaping and how perfectly it suited the individuality of the cottage, he didn't notice the movement behind the solarium until he had a foot on the door stoop.

Several women on yoga mats rose up—with varying degrees of fluidity and skill, to the inverted V position he identified as the Downward-Facing Dog.

Most of them wore the yoga gear—colorful tops, slim pants—he'd often seen in the gym. When he'd belonged to a gym. Some opted for sweats, others for shorts.

All of them, with some wobbles, brought one foot forward into a lunge, then rose up—with a couple of teeters—front leg bent, back leg straight, arms spread front and back.

Mildly embarrassed, he started to step back, to back away, when he realized the group was following Abra's lead.

She held her position, her mass of hair pulled back in a tail. The deep purple top showed off long, sculpted arms; the stone-gray pants clung to narrow hips, slid down long legs to long, narrow feet with toenails painted the same purple as the top.

It fascinated him, tugged at him as she—then the others—bowed back, front arm curved over her head, torso turning, head lifting.

Then she straightened her front leg, cocked forward, leaning down, down until her hand rested on the floor by her front foot, and her other arm reached for the ceiling. Again her torso turned. Before he could step back, her head turned as well. As her gaze swept up, her eyes met his.

She smiled. As if he'd been expected, as if he hadn't been—inadvertently—playing Peeping Tom.

He stepped back now, making a gesture he hoped communicated apology, but she was already straightening up. He saw her motion to one of the women as she wove through the mats and bodies.

What should he do now?

The front door opened, and she smiled at him again. "Eli, hi."

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize . . . until I did."

"God, it's freezing! Come on inside."

"No, you're busy. I was just walking, then I—"

"Well, walk in here before I freeze to death." She stepped out on those long bare feet, took his hand.

"Your hand's like ice." She gave it a tug, insistent. "I don't want the cold air to chill the class."

Left without a choice, he stepped in so she could close the door. New Agey music murmured like water in a stream from the solarium. He could see the woman at the rear of the class come back up to that lunging position.

"I'm sorry," he said again. "I'm interrupting."

"It's all right. Maureen can guide them through. We're nearly

finished. Why don't you go on back to the kitchen? Have a glass of wine while I finish up?"

"No. No, thanks." He wished, almost desperately, he hadn't taken the impulsive detour. "I just— I was out for a walk, and I just stopped by on the way back because I realized I didn't pay you for the groceries."

"Hester took care of it."

"Oh. I should've figured that. I'll talk to her."

The framed pencil sketch in the entry distracted him for a moment. He recognized his grandmother's work even without the *H. H. Landon* in the bottom corner.

He recognized Abra as well, standing slim and straight as a lance in Tree position, her arms overhead, and her face caught on a laugh.

"Hester gave it to me last year," Abra said.

"What?"

"The sketch. I talked her into coming to class to sketch—a gateway to persuading her to practice. So she gave this to me as a thank-you after she fell in love with yoga."

"It's great."

He didn't realize Abra still had his hand until she took a step back, and he was forced to step forward. "Shoulders down and back, Leah. That's it. Relax your jaw, Heather. Good. That's good. Sorry," she said to Eli.

"No, I'm sorry. I'm in the way. I'll let you get back to it."

"Are you sure you don't want that glass of wine? Or maybe, considering . . ." She closed her other hand around his, rubbed at the cold. "Some hot chocolate?"

"No. No, but thanks. I need to get back." The friction of her hands brought on a quick, almost painful warmth that emphasized he'd let himself get chilled down to the bone. "It's . . . going to snow."

"A good night to be in with a fire and a good book. Well." She

let go of his hand to open the door again. “I’ll see you in a couple of days. Call or come by if you need anything.”

“Thanks.” He walked away quickly so she could close the door and keep the heat in.

Instead she stood in the open door, looking after him.

Her heart—one some often told her was too soft, too open—just flooded with sympathy.

How long had it been, she wondered, since anyone but family had welcomed him out of the cold?

She shut the door, moved back to the solarium and, with a nod for her friend Maureen, took over again.

As she completed final relaxation, she saw the snow Eli had predicted falling thick and soft outside the glass so her cozy space felt just like the inside of a fanciful snow globe.

She thought it perfect.

“Remember to hydrate.” She lifted her own water bottle as the women rolled up their mats. “And we still have room in tomorrow morning’s East Meets West class in the Unitarian Church basement at nine-fifteen.”

“I *love* that class.” Heather Lockaby fluffed her short cap of blond hair. “Winnie, I can pick you up on the way if you want.”

“Give me a call first. I’d love to try it.”

“And now”—Heather rubbed her hands together—“was that who I thought it was?”

“Sorry?” Abra responded.

“The man who came in during class. Wasn’t that Eli Landon?”

The name brought on an immediate murmur. Abra felt the benefits of her hour’s yoga practice dissolve as her shoulders tightened. “Yes, that was Eli.”

“I *told* you.” Heather elbowed Winnie. “I told you I’d heard he was moving into Bluff House. Are you seriously doing the cleaning there while he’s in the house?”

“There’s not a lot to clean if nobody’s living there.”

“But Abra, aren’t you nervous? I mean, he’s accused of murder. Of killing his own wife. And—”

“He was cleared, Heather. Remember?”

“Just because they didn’t have enough evidence to arrest him doesn’t mean he isn’t guilty. You shouldn’t be alone in that house with him.”

“Just because the press likes a good scandal, especially where sex, money and bedrock New England families are involved, doesn’t mean he isn’t innocent.” Maureen arched fiery red eyebrows. “You know that old rule of law, Heather. Innocent until proven guilty?”

“I know he got fired—and he was a criminal defense lawyer. Seems fishy, if you ask me, that they’d fire him if he wasn’t guilty. And they said he was the prime suspect. Witnesses heard him threaten his wife the same *day* she was killed. She’d have gotten a pile of money in a divorce. And he had no business being in that house, did he?”

“It was his house,” Abra pointed out.

“But he’d moved out. I’m just saying where there’s smoke . . .”

“Where there’s smoke sometimes means someone else started the fire.”

“You’re so trusting.” Heather gave Abra a one-armed hug—as sincere as it was patronizing. “I’m just going to worry about you.”

“I think Abra has a fine feel for people and can take care of herself.” Greta Parrish, the senior of the group at seventy-two, pulled on her warm and practical wool coat. “And Hester Landon wouldn’t have opened Bluff House for Eli—always a well-mannered young man—if she had the smallest doubt of his innocence.”

“Oh, now I’ve nothing but affection and respect for Ms. Landon,” Heather began. “Every one of us hope and pray she’ll be well enough to come home soon. But—”

“No buts.” Greta yanked a cloche cap over her steel-gray hair. “That boy’s part of this community. He may have lived in Boston,

but he's a Landon, and he's one of us. God knows he's been through the wringer. I'd hate to think anyone here would add to his troubles."

"I—I didn't mean that." Flustered, Heather looked from face to face. "Honestly, I didn't. I'm just worried about Abra. I can't help it."

"I believe you are." Greta gave Heather a brisk nod. "I believe you've no reason to. This was a very nice practice, Abra."

"Thank you. Why don't I drive you home? It's snowing pretty hard."

"I believe I can manage a three-minute walk."

Women bundled up, filed out. Maureen lingered.

"Heather's an ass," Maureen stated.

"A lot of people are. And a lot of people will think the way she does. If he was suspected, he must be guilty. It's wrong."

"Of course it is." Maureen O'Malley, her short, spiky hair as fiery as her eyebrows, took another pull from her water bottle. "The problem is, I don't know if I'd think the same, at least in some little cynical pocket, if I didn't know Eli."

"I didn't realize you did."

"He was my first serious make-out."

"Hold that." Abra pointed with both index fingers. "Just hold that. That's a glass-of-wine story."

"You don't have to twist my arm. Just let me text Mike that I'm going to be about another half hour."

"You do that. I'll pour the wine."

In the kitchen Abra chose a bottle of Shiraz while Maureen plopped down on the sofa in the cozy living area.

"He says that's fine. The kids haven't killed each other yet, and are currently in the happy throes of snowstorm." She looked up from her phone, smiled when Abra handed her the wine, took a seat. "Thanks. I'll consider this girding my loins before I walk next door into the battle and feed the troops."

“Make out?”

“I was fifteen, and while I had been kissed, that was the first *kiss*. Tongues and hands and heavy breathing. Let me say first, the boy had most excellent lips, and very nice hands. The first, I’ll also admit, to touch these amazing ta-tas.” She patted her breasts then sipped her wine. “But not the last.”

“Details, details.”

“July Fourth, after the fireworks. We had a bonfire on the beach. A bunch of us. I had permission, which was hard-won, let me tell you, and which my kids will likely have a harder time winning due to my experience. He was so cute. Oh my God, Eli Landon up from Boston for a month—and I set my sights on him. I was not alone.”

“How cute?”

“Mmm. That curling hair that would get more sun-streaked every day, those fabulous crystal blue eyes. And he had a smile that would just knock you senseless. An athletic build—he played basketball, as I remember. If he wasn’t at the beach—shirtless—he was at the community center playing ball—shirtless. Let me repeat: Mmm.”

“He’s lost weight,” Abra mentioned. “He’s too thin.”

“I saw some pictures, and the news clips. Yeah, he’s too thin. But then, that summer? He was so beautiful, so young and happy and *fun*. I flirted my butt off and that July Fourth bonfire paid the dividends. The first time he kissed me we were sitting around the fire. Music banging out, some of us dancing, some of us in the water. One thing led to another, and we walked down to the pier.”

She sighed with the memory. “Just a couple of hormonal teenagers on a warm summer night. It didn’t go any farther than it should have—though I’m sure my father would have disagreed—but it was the headiest moment of my life to that date. Seems so sweet and innocent now, but still ridiculously romantic. Surf and sea and moonlight, music from down the beach, a couple of

warm, half-naked bodies just beginning to understand, really, what they were for. So . . .”

“So? So?” Leaning forward, Abra circled both hands in a hurry-up gesture. “What happened then?”

“We went back to the bonfire. I think it might have gone farther than it should have if he hadn’t taken me back to the group. I was so unprepared for what happens inside your body when someone really flips that switch. You know?”

“Oh boy, do I.”

“But he stopped, and after, he walked me home. I saw him a few more times before he went back to Boston, and we had a few more lip-locks—but nothing hit me like the first. The next time he came down, we were both dating someone. We never reconnected, not that way. He probably doesn’t even remember that July Fourth with the redhead under the Whiskey Beach pier.”

“I bet you’re selling yourself short.”

“Maybe. If we ran into each other when he’d come up to visit, we’d have a nice little chat—the way you do. Once I ran into him in the market when I was enormously pregnant with Liam. Eli carried my bags out to the car. He’s a good man. I believe that.”

“You met his wife?”

“No. I saw her once or twice but never met her. She was gorgeous, I’ll give her that. But I wouldn’t say she was the type who enjoyed those nice little chats outside the market. Word was there was no love lost between her and Hester Landon. Eli came up alone or with the rest of his family a few times after they were married. Then he just didn’t come. At least not that I know of.”

She looked at her watch. “I’ve got to get home. Feed the ram-paging horde.”

“Maybe you should go by and see him.”

“I think it might feel like an intrusion at this point—or like I was morbidly curious.”

“He needs friends, but you may be right. It may be too soon.”

Maureen carried her empty wineglass to the kitchen, set it down. “I know you, Abracadabra. You won’t let him wallow, not for long.” She pulled on her coat. “It’s your nature to fix things, heal things, kiss it where it hurts. Hester knew just what she was doing when she asked you to look after him and the house.”

“Then I better not let her down.” She gave Maureen a hug before she opened the back door. “Thanks for telling me. Not only a sexy story of teenage lust, but it gives me yet another perspective on him.”

“You could use a lip-lock or two.”

Abra held up her hands. “Fasting.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m just saying should the opportunity arise—he’s got great lips. See you tomorrow.”

Abra watched from the door while her friend hustled through the thick snow, and until she saw the back door light on the house next door shut off.

She’d build a fire, she decided, have a little soup, and give Eli Landon some serious thought.