

Chapter 1

McKenzie

I don't understand why I have to write this. Why *I* have to keep the journal. I'm the one who's dying.

We always keep a journal of our annual stay in Albany Beach. But I hate writing it all down as much as Aurora, Lilly, and Janine hate it. And I'm the one who's bald and spends a good deal of my time in the bathroom puking or wishing I could puke. I would think my friends, my *dearest* friends, my closer-than-sisters, could cut me a break.

They won't.

According to Aurora, the unsanctioned leader of the gang, I should keep the journal precisely because I *am* dying. If my doctors' predictions are accurate, I won't be around next July to write the damned thing. Aurora thinks I should take my turn while the option's still available.

I don't understand why Aurora's vote always seems to count more than mine, Janine's, or Lilly's. Actually I do. We all do. It's always been that way. At least since August 17, 1986.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I need to start at the beginning. But not the very beginning. I don't have that much time. *Literally*. So I'll start at the beginning of this chapter in our lives. I'll start with my arrival at *the* beach house.

I arrived at the beach house, for what is to be my last summer, a day earlier than the others. I planned it this way. I wanted to settle in. I wanted to get a good night's sleep and be rested when *the girls* arrive tomorrow. (I don't know why we still, at forty-two years old, call ourselves *girls*. We just do.) The two-hour trip from my house in northern Delaware to the beach has exhausted me. I don't want to be exhausted when they arrive.

I also wanted to get here first so I could open up the house. This is a gift to Janine, Lilly, and Aurora. We all hate closing the house up at the end of our summer stay, but we hate opening it up more. Those first few hours always take us back too close to that August night. Each time we arrive, the ghosts have to be resurrected, then folded out of sight with the sheets and tablecloths we use to protect the furniture. The nightmare that was that night has to be swept away with the spiderwebs and mouse droppings.

No one comes to the house but us. Ever. Janine's mom wanted to have it bulldozed. Or sold; it's probably worth a lot of money. Two or three million, because it's oceanfront. But she respected her daughter's wishes and deeded it to Janine instead.

As I got out of my Honda, I looked up at the two-story Cape Cod built on pilings. I'd parked in the back; the front of the house faces the ocean. The cedar shingles have weathered to a lovely gray, but the white trim is flaking and needs painting. I grabbed a duffel bag off the backseat and leaned against the car to catch my breath. I breathed deeply, and the salty breeze stung my nostrils and revived me. Most of the windows of the house were covered with curtains or blinds, but two on the second floor weren't.

I felt as if the house were watching me.

I took another deep breath, heaved my bag onto my shoulder, and crossed the short distance to the staircase that led up to the back deck and the back door. Beneath the house, there was a clutter of things: old rope, a bicycle leaning against the outside shower, a stack of bushel baskets from previous years' crab feasts. I dropped my bag on the bottom step and looked for the key in a pile of empty flowerpots under the staircase. I have no idea why the flowerpots are there. No one ever stays long enough to plant flowers. Not since 1986. Could they really have been there that long?

I found the key in a Ziploc bag inside a terra-cotta flowerpot. It was on a Dolle's keychain. Dolle's is an icon on the Rehoboth Beach boardwalk. Saltwater taffy is their specialty, although they make caramel popcorn and other beachy treats. Janine and I both worked there when we were in high school and college.

Fingering the key, I went up the steps, half carrying, half dragging my bag. It didn't seem this heavy when I put it in the car.

The beach cottage was built, circa 1935, on pilings that had saved it from more than one hurricane and nor'easter. Janine grew up in this house; lived here until she was fourteen. Her maternal great-grandparents had built it.

It seemed like a long way up the steps, and I was out of breath by the time I reached the top. A lousy dozen steps. I panted, trying desperately to fill my lungs with oxygen, knowing my lungs wouldn't cooperate. I had portable oxygen in the car. "Just in case," said my oncologist. "Just in case," said my mother. I was afraid I was going to need it.

Technically, I have thyroid cancer, but those Machiavellian cancer cells had traveled down into my lungs. I was breathing at about forty-one percent capacity right now. It beat not breathing at all. At night, I used nebulizer treatments, which relaxed the muscles around my airways and made it easier to breathe. I've been putting off the supplemental oxygen albatross as long as I can, knowing my reliance on it was inevitable.

Leaning on the rail, I took long, slow, deep breaths. Shallow breathing didn't work; it used only the top half of the lungs. Slowly, I walked across the deck to the back door. A foot seemed like a mile. The

door, an oasis. I opened the screen door and slipped the key into the doorknob. Then I hesitated.

Did I really want to do this? Did I really need to scrape the scabs off these wounds *yet again*?

It wasn't too late to cancel. I could play the *Cancer Card* and go home to my cozy little college town of Newark, Delaware. I could call my twin daughters, play the *Cancer Card again*, and insist they stay with me for the summer instead of their father. I could do that. I'm dying. I'd learned since my diagnosis that I could pretty much do and say anything I wanted and people would put up with it. But I couldn't do this to my friends or my daughters because...because they have to go on living when I'm gone.

Jared and I have the typical custody arrangement; our seventeen-year-olds live with me during the school year. They see their dad every other weekend, a few weeknights a month, and he gets them for most of the summer. He lives in Rehoboth Beach, within biking distance of the boardwalk. I think that when we divorced four years ago, he realized that living in a cool place might make the difference between seeing his girls once they got older and not seeing them at all. He wasn't smart about a lot of things that year (like cheating on me with the cashier from Home Depot), but I give him credit—he thought through his move to the beach before he made it. He used to do construction in Wilmington. Now he has his own

company in Rehoboth Beach. He's doing well, well enough to pay hefty child support for our girls and keep his new wife and baby comfortable. The baby's name is Peaches. Honest to God. It's on the birth certificate. Who names a baby *Peaches*?

I'm digressing again. I'd like to say it was the drugs I'm taking that make my thoughts wander, but that would be a lie. Ask my staff at the University of Delaware, where I used to be the head librarian. (Theoretically, I'm on *hiatus*. That's what employers say when they let you go home to die.) I was like this before I had an entire pillbox of medicine to take every day.

I turned the key and pushed the door open. I was assaulted by stale air and crushing memories. I picked up my bag and stepped into the laundry room that would soon be a catchall for stinky running shoes, wet bathing suits, *and* dirty clothes. It was late in the day, and the yellowing curtains over the window made the room dim.

Panic fluttered in my chest. I steadied myself against the washing machine. I felt a little dizzy. Weak-kneed. I wanted to blame that on the cancer, too. Couldn't. Every summer I felt this way the first time I stepped into this house.

I closed my eyes.

Every year, I wanted to slough off this feeling as quickly as possible, but not today. Today, I stood there and took in the whole experience: the

flutter of my pulse, the faint nausea, the clammy palms. Because, feeling pain...feeling fear, I'd learned, meant I was still alive.

I'll never do this again, I thought. *I'll never walk into this house for the first time. I'll never feel the way I'm feeling at this instant.*

It passed. Quicker than you'd think it would. Another thing I've learned over the last year is how adaptable human beings are. What seems unimaginable quickly becomes perfectly acceptable. The first time I said, "I'm dying," I could barely manage the words; now, I say it like I'm telling the time.

I exhaled slowly. I inhaled.

Again.

I opened my eyes. I grabbed my bag, walked through the kitchen into the big living room (that also served as the dining room), and dropped it near the staircase. It was hot in the house. Did I turn on the air or try the windows first?

I went to the floor-to-ceiling windows that ran along the front of the house, and I pushed back the long, white tulle curtains. I unlocked and slid open the windows and let the cool breeze from the ocean fill the stifling room. The late afternoon sun cast shadows on the front deck. I gazed out over the dunes, speckled with dry sea grass, intersected by a zigzagging sand

fence. The ocean rippled. Pulsed. I heard the waves hit the shore. I felt them. I closed my eyes, and I really *felt* them.

This moment passed, too. I didn't feel the waves anymore. I just felt silly standing there with my eyes shut.

I reached for the nearest dustcover, a pink, flowered sheet. I gave it a yank and uncovered a rocking chair. I moved from piece of furniture to piece of furniture. The living room, like the rest of the cottage, was decorated in shabby chic. It had been a group effort. I bought the white end tables and coffee table at a yard sale years ago. Janine contributed the two matching Ikea couches, covered in unbleached canvas. An ex-girlfriend had bought them. Janine didn't want them at her place, but she wouldn't just donate them to the Salvation Army, either. They were practically new.

I pulled a blue sheet off a faded, flowered recliner. I have no idea where it came from, but it has been here for years. I tossed the sheet in the growing pile on the floor and seriously consider sitting down in the chair. It looked so comfy, so inviting. But if I sat, I was afraid I wouldn't get up again today. Usually my energy petered out by three. It was four thirty, and I was still feeling pretty...okay.

I went to the fireplace and opened the flue, afraid if I didn't do it now, no one else would think of it and the house would fill up with smoke when we lit a fire some night. It had happened the previous year. Maybe the year

before that, too. The hinges screeched, the flue opened, and I rubbed my sooty hand on my jeans.

Lined up across the mantel, at nose height, were framed photographs of us. The Fantastic Four. There was one of us in the seventh grade. Career day. My mom took it. I reached for the five-by-seven photograph in a WE WERE FRIENDS frame.

Lilly was wearing a white lab coat and the school nurse's stethoscope. She couldn't get into medical school; she became an optometrist. Janine was dressed like a cowgirl, but she was wearing a shiny sheriff's badge; now she wore a police badge. I studied myself in the photo: dark red hair pulled into a loose ponytail. Not unattractive looking, just... awkward.

I miss my hair. I resent my hair loss. It's petty, I know, considering the fact that I'm about to lose my life, but I miss it anyway, and still spent too much time obsessing over it.

In the photo, I was wearing some sort of Lois Lane getup and holding a pen and a pad of paper. I had wanted to be a novelist back then, but I hadn't known how to portray that. My mom had made me a newspaper reporter instead. At the time, I remember thinking it was a dumb idea but had gone with it for lack of a better one at seven a.m. the morning of Career Day.

Aurora, with her blond hair, was at the very edge of the frame, wearing her school uniform, a French beret, and sporting a tiny black mustache she'd drawn above her upper lip with eyeliner. She'd wanted to be an artist. Her dream had come true. Aurora always got what she wanted.

I rubbed the dust off the top of the frame with my finger and put it back on the mantel. There was more dust. There were more pictures, pictures taken after August 1986. After Buddy died. After Janine cut her hair. After Lilly lost her mom. After I became the ordinary person I never wanted to be. But I didn't linger there any longer. We'd be here a month; there would be plenty of time to dust and reminisce.

I grabbed my duffel bag to take it into the front bedroom. We'd already agreed, in e-mails going back and forth, that I'd sleep here. Janine's parents' bedroom. It looked nothing like it did when *he* slept here, but it still creeped me out. I would rather have slept upstairs in the little room Lilly and I had always shared. But the girls were right; that made no sense. Stairs and cancerous lungs—oil and water. I left my bag on the floor, just inside the doorway. I went back into the living room and stared up the staircase. I didn't know why, but I wanted to go up. Now? Later?

Now.

I took two more deep breaths and slowly attacked the stairs, one step at a time. I longed for the days when I could run up these stairs. Hell, two

summers ago I'd chased Lilly up, then back down, when she stole my cell phone and was reading sexts from my then-boyfriend aloud to the others. The relationship hadn't lasted. In retrospect, I realized I hadn't liked him as much as I had liked the *idea* of him. It was a big deal when he broke up with me. Not such a big deal now.

My chest was tight. I had to pause. I felt as if I was physically breathing, but there wasn't enough oxygen getting to my cells. *Was this what it would feel like to suffocate?* That was what everyone with tumors in their lungs feared. Suffocating. It's the way it happens—lung cancer death—though no one wants to come out and say it. That's the kind of information you find on the trusty Internet.

I put one foot up on the next step. I leaned heavily on the rail. I told myself I was almost there. A lie. I kept going.

There were three bedrooms and a bath on the second floor. My intention, halfway up the stairs, had been to open all the rooms. But as I struggled to reach the landing I thought that maybe I'd wait until morning when I was more rested. I still had to get the food and booze and my nebulizer bag out of the car. And I was badly in need of a glass of pinot grigio. I'm not supposed to be drinking with my medication, but I have a glass a wine when I feel like it. Why not? What's it going to do? Kill me?

I was really sucking wind by the time I reached the top of the staircase. It was so damned hot. Hotter upstairs than down. The whole heat rises thing, I guess.

I bent over, hands on my knees, as if I'd run a seven-minute mile.

The thought made me laugh. Or I would have laughed if I could have gotten enough air. Never in my life, even when I was at my fittest and considered myself a runner, could I have run a seven-minute mile. I leaned against the big, square, white newel post. My hand hit the carved cap on the top, and I knocked it off. It rolled across the hardwood floor and came to rest against the wall near the first bedroom door. I stared at the cap. It seemed so far away.

It's been unattached for as long as I've been coming here. I'd knocked it down the hall, down the steps. I wondered why none of us ever got some wood glue and reattached it.

I caught my breath, which seemed to take forever, then walked over to the newel cap and slowly leaned over to pick it up off the floor. I returned it to its rightful place, slipping the stripped threads of the post over the screw. How many times had I touched this cap? How many times more would I do it?

It was weird to constantly see things in finite terms where I had once seen them in infinite ones.

As I went down the hall, I thought I heard a sound downstairs. I stopped. Listened. I didn't hear anything. The wind, maybe? Had I left the back door ajar?

I pushed open the door of the first bedroom. Janine's room. I flipped the switch on the wall, and the overhead light and two bedside lamps came on. For a second, I didn't see the pale blue walls and white trim or the blond wood floor. I saw the room as it was that night. Pink walls, beige carpet. I saw the bed against the wall to my right, not where it was now.

My gaze fell to the place on the floor where Janine's father had laid dead. I remembered what his blood smelled like. (Who knew blood had a smell?) How thick the puddle of blood seemed, the way it sat on top of the carpet rather than being absorbed. It had looked fake, like from a B movie.

It wasn't.

I swallowed hard. Fought the nausea. I had taken my medication two hours ago. Sometimes it made me nauseated. But it wasn't the cancer medication making me sick to my stomach right now; it was Buddy McCollister. Sergeant Buddy McCollister, Albany Beach Police Department.

I wasn't ready for this. I leaned against the doorframe. I thought I was, but I wasn't. I couldn't clean or make Janine's bed. I wondered if I should start with my own room downstairs.

I backed out the door, turning off the lights. But instead of going downstairs, I headed for the bedroom Lilly and I used to sleep in. I reached the bathroom. The door was open, the starfish shower curtain pulled back to expose the claw-foot bathtub and shower combination. I walked past the bathroom, past the next closed door. My hand was on the doorknob of our bedroom when I stopped. Something wasn't right. I retraced my steps. I went back to the bathroom and reached around to turn on the light. Nothing was amiss, except that there was a towel hanging on the towel rack. We never left towels out when we closed up. Dust. Mildew. I didn't know how long it had been since Janine or one of the others had been here, but we never left towels out or beds made. Maybe Janine had used the towel when she'd stopped by earlier in the week to turn on the hot water heater and the water. I fingered the turquoise towel. Was it damp? It couldn't be. It had to just be the humidity.

I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the old oval mirror over the sink. I barely recognized the woman looking back at me. I'd aged ten years in the last eighteen months. I was wearing a blue and green paisley head scarf—hippie style, not charwoman, mind you. I was wearing the silver starfish earrings my girls had given me and a green malachite pendant that hung beneath my thyroidectomy scar. Kind of classy.

But anyone who looked at me could see the big *C* on my face. My reddish brown eyebrows are penciled in. My eyelashes are barely existent—just a few stubbles. But my freckles are still there, and I could still see my old self in my green eyes. My red hair was always my best feature; I'd worn it long my whole life. Until it started falling out, in clumps. Now I think my eyes are my best feature. The greens and blues in the scarf played them up nicely. Somehow, I found a smile for myself.

I shut off the light and went back up the hall, passing Aurora's room, to reach the one Lilly and I always shared, at the end of the hall. I pushed it open tentatively. I flipped on the light switch. No lights came on, which was weird. I walked to the nightstand and turned the switch on the lamp that was draped with a pretty scarf. The light came on. I grabbed the scarf, gave it a shake, and returned it to the shade. The walls were pale teal. I painted them three summers ago. My single bed, next to Lilly's was new...new to me. Bought at a secondhand store and repainted the same summer. I loved my beach bed. It had a high headboard, and at the top was a carved, fluted seashell. I wished I could sleep in it tonight. Maybe I'd be the rebel for once and insist on sleeping here. But that wouldn't be fair to Lilly; to make her listen to me wheeze all night. And it wouldn't be fair to make one of the others sleep downstairs. In *his* room.

I yanked the white chenille bedspread off my bed, revealing the bare mattress, and tossed it out the door. I'd wash tonight...or maybe in the morning. As I turned back, my toe hit something under the bed. Something soft, but with form.

I lifted the dust ruffle and pulled out a navy rucksack. It looked like it had seen better days. It wasn't mine. I opened the bag: T-shirts, jeans, a wide-toothed comb, a toothbrush. I dropped the bag on the floor, suddenly afraid. Was someone staying in the house? A vagrant maybe? It happened. People know most of the houses along this beach are only occupied during the summer.

I listened carefully, wondering if I just heard something downstairs again. Water running?

I was suddenly dry-mouthed. My heart was pounding. Where was my cell phone? Did I leave it on the car seat? In my handbag? Did I lay it down somewhere downstairs? I couldn't remember. I always kept my cell phone with me...in case one my daughters needed me. In case I needed to call 911. Because I'm dying.

I patted the front pockets of my jeans that hung on my hips. No phone. My back pockets. No phone in the left...but in the right, a lump. I almost sighed I was so relieved. I stepped quietly into the hall. Listened.

I didn't hear a thing...except for my own labored breathing.

I walked down the hall. Still nothing. I stopped at the top of the steps and listened, my iPhone poised. I was ready to dial 911.

I heard nothing. I was beginning to wonder if I imagined the sounds. There was probably an explanation for the rucksack under my bed. I crept down the staircase. Down was easier than up.

There was no one there. There was no homeless guy camping in the house, I told myself. That was silly. I'd just go out to the car, get the rest of the things, and lock up for the night.

The final step at the bottom of the staircase squeaked. I froze. Nothing.

I walked through the living room, past the downstairs bathroom, into the kitchen. My gaze went first to the back door in the laundry room. It was closed. I was so relieved that it took me a split second to realize I wasn't alone in the kitchen.

The dark figure, backlit by the sunlight filtering through the kitchen window, turned toward me. I almost dropped my phone as I started to thumb the numbers on the keypad. Then I saw her face. "Aurora!" I gasped. My hand went to my chest. My heart was pounding.

She held open her arms, an amber bottle of beer in one hand. "Expecting someone else?"

I laughed, but I wanted to cry. I hadn't seen Aurora since April; she'd been out of the country. We talked on the phone, we FaceTimed occasionally, but it wasn't the same thing. I'd missed her so much. Missed her strength, the enormous presence she brought to a room. I hurled myself into her arms.

Everything would be all right now. I knew it in my heart's core, "*ay in my heart of hearts*" (Shakespeare's words, not mine). I could do anything if I had Aurora at my side. I could even die.

She hugged me, and I held on to her tightly. I didn't care that she was still wet from her swim. Her body was cool against my skin.

"How are you, babe?" she murmured against my temple. Aurora was tall. Taller than me, taller than any of us. She was a six-foot blond Amazon. "You're wasting away."

I didn't tell her that weight loss was the one thing I secretly liked about having cancer. It was too embarrassing to admit, even to my best friends. "I'm okay."

She smelled of the ocean, briny and clean. "Yeah?" she asked, still hugging me against her wet body. She was wearing a red one-piece swimsuit she'd had since she was a lifeguard when we were in college. I couldn't believe she could still fit in the suit. Almost more unbelievable was that she still had it, twenty-some years later. I didn't get it. She could afford to buy a

new swimsuit for every day of the year. She could buy a suit, wear it once, and toss it. Aurora is what my mother calls *filthy rich*; Mom speaks the phrase as if it's something deplorable. I wouldn't mind trying it. Especially now, with my timer about to go off.

Aurora stepped back and tugged off her faded blue swim cap; long, shiny blond hair fell down her back. She tossed the cap on the counter. Her movements were graceful; everything was art with Aurora. She could have been a dancer.

She cocked her head and pointed with the beer bottle. "What's with the scarf?"

My hand went to my head. It seemed like a silly question. I whispered, "I'm bald." My gaze locked with hers. She had big, brown, expressive eyes. You didn't expect brown eyes from a blonde.

"Let me see."

I shook my head, feeling the contours of my skull beneath my fingertips. "No."

"Oh, come on. It's me. You have to show *me*. You have to show *us*." She pursed her perfectly pink, full lips. Natural. No Juvéderm injections. "It's not like you're going to go around wearing a scarf day and night for the next month."

Honestly, I had considered it.

For me, my baldness was the ultimate substantiation of my vulnerability. I didn't want to be vulnerable anymore. I didn't want to feel scared anymore. I wanted to feel like Aurora must feel every day of her life. Invincible.

Aurora held my gaze for a long moment, then took a step toward me again. "Come on," she whispered, covering the hand on my head with hers.

I looked down at the floor.

"Just a peek," she cajoled, putting pressure on my hand. "I'll tell you if it's awful. You know I will."

True story, as my daughters would say. Aurora was the one who told me not to marry Jared; she said he'd be unfaithful. She told me not to major in literature in college because I would never become a writer that way. She also told me when it was time to start dyeing the gray in my red hair. And when to call it quits on the marriage she'd warned me against years before. And she never said, "I told you so." Never once. I trusted Aurora. Above all things, she was honest. Even when it hurt.

I let her push the scarf off the back of my head. I balled it in my fist and dropped my hand to my side. I felt like I was standing naked, with my C-section belly scar and deflated breasts in front of a stranger.

Aurora looked at me, smiling. She rubbed her palm over my almost-shiny pate. "It's already growing back in."

I tried to smile. I tried to be thankful. *Whoopee*. I may not be bald by the time I'm laid in my coffin.

"I like it." Aurora gave my head a final rub as if it was a genie lamp. "You have a nicely shaped head," she added.

I rolled my eyes. "Am I supposed to thank you for that?"

She shrugged. Sipped her beer. The brown bottle was sweaty in her hand. I bet that if I opened the refrigerator, there would be half a case of Dogfish Head 60 Minute IPA inside. There wouldn't be any food, beyond a hunk of aged cheese and some expensive bubbly water, but there would be plenty of microbrewed beer.

"It's coming in red. You know I'd give anything to naturally have hair the color of yours," she said.

She and I have had this discussion a million times over the years. She says she always wished she had a curvy body and auburn hair like me. I find that hard to believe. Who wouldn't die to have her natural thinness and gorgeous blond hair? Okay...maybe not...die.

Funny how your perspective changes.

"What are you doing here already?" I slipped the scarf back on and adjusted it. I still had to go out to the car and get my things. I certainly wasn't going to let the neighbors see my bald head. "You're not supposed to be here until tomorrow."

I was a little disappointed I wouldn't have time to myself now. When you're dying, people tend to gang up on you. I feel like I'm never alone. My girls, my mom and dad, my neighbors, my colleagues, they want to surround me day and night. They don't want me to be alone in my last hours, I suppose. And maybe I don't either, but I would like to catch my breath once in a while. Maybe pee without someone knocking on the bathroom door and asking if I'm okay.

"I was bored with the scene in Rome," Aurora told me with a sigh only the truly privileged could emit. "I got here Monday."

So the towel in the bathroom *was* damp. I wondered why her rucksack was in my old bedroom rather than hers, and why she'd been sleeping in my bed without any sheets, but I didn't ask. I found it interesting that Aurora had been here five days and there was no more evidence of her presence in the house than a damp towel and a tiny bag. No car. Who knows how she got here? (Probably hitchhiked. She did it all the time. So far, no Dean Koontz crazies have kidnapped her and held her underground in a beer barrel.) She was rich, but no one would ever know it. She was a vagabond. She rented out warehouses for studios, slept in hotels or on people's couches. No fancy cars. Few jewels. No property. I had no clue what she did with her money.

"Bored with the scene in Rome," I repeated, walking over to the sink to open the window over it. The kitchen was stifling. I wondered how she'd

stayed in the house for five days with the windows closed and the air-conditioning off, but I didn't ask that, either. I was too preoccupied with the Rome pronouncement.

I've never been to Rome; I'll never go. We talked about taking a trip to Italy, together, the four of us, but it never happened. It never will happen now, will it? I opened my arms wide, gesturing wildly with my final words, trying to understand her. "You were *bored* with Rome?"

"I needed time alone. To think. I've got a new project simmering." She tapped her temple and then downed the rest of the beer. "A commissioned work. An enormous chandelier piece. For the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston." She wrinkled her pert nose. "Or maybe it's Chicago. I don't remember what my agent said."

Aurora is an internationally celebrated sculptor. I mean she's *big*, like cover of *Juxtapoz* magazine big. Her medium is metal, her tool of trade an oxyacetylene torch. She works in her studio in hot pants, a leather apron, and a welding mask that looks like a medieval torture device. Or some kind of crazy sex game mask. She creates enormous sculptures of mixed metals to stand in reception areas of corporate buildings and in parks. Her work amazes me and scares me a little. It's beautiful and brilliant, but defies interpretation by my pea-sized librarian's brain.

“You’ve been sleeping here all week?” I asked. “You should have called me. Mia and Maura have already been down here with their father for two weeks. I’ve been sitting at home watching eight seasons of *Dexter*. I could have come sooner.”

She didn’t answer me. She’s like that. She just doesn’t answer questions she doesn’t want to. She also hangs up without saying good-bye and goes to bed without a good night. I like to think it’s the artsy dreamer in her; my mother says she’s just plain rude. Can’t remember if I said this— Mom doesn’t like Aurora. Never has. When we were sixteen, Aurora was arrested for smoking weed in a Dunkin’ Donuts while drinking a latte. Not even in the bathroom. Right at the table. My mother decided I shouldn’t associate with Aurora anymore. She tried to forbid me to see her. It didn’t work.

I’m doing it again. Digressing.

“You just get here?” Aurora opened the cabinet under the sink and tossed the empty bottle into a bucket. It clinks against other bottles. Beer for sure. Probably a gin bottle, if she’s been here since Monday. “Stuff in your car?” she asked.

“Yeah. You mind getting it?” I plopped down on a kitchen stool, chest tight. I took a couple of deep breaths. “I’ve got groceries and wine. I’ll make you dinner,” I called after her, but she was already on her way out the door.

Aurora carried everything in. She put away the groceries and lined up the bottles of wine on the counter near the refrigerator. Our makeshift bar since the days when we had to acquire our alcohol illegally. She even took the pillows I brought from home and the black nylon case with my nebulizer to the bedroom. She grabbed a quick shower upstairs, but she was down in ten minutes. Speed showering; she couldn't possibly have shaved.

Aurora didn't let me do anything but open a bottle of pinot grigio and pour a glass for each of us. We chatted while she made a veggies stir-fry. At first, we talked about unimportant stuff. Not *unimportant*, exactly. Everything is important to me now. But the stuff that isn't emotionally charged. Even though we're best friends, more than best friends, it always takes a little while, after we've been apart, to get warmed up.

Aurora didn't mention my cancer while she'd chopped vegetables, and I didn't bring it up. It was nice. Almost as if I didn't have cancer. At least for a few minutes. We talked about how my girls did in school this year, and I showed her their junior prom pictures on my iPhone. Aurora told me about a Portuguese sculptor she dated in Rome. I learned that his name was Fortunato and that he had a big wang. Her word, not mine.

When the stir-fry was ready, we carried the plates, our glasses, and the bottle of wine (we were on our second glass by then) out onto the front porch. There was a cool breeze coming in off the ocean; there almost always

was. I sat in a big Adirondack chair. My Adirondack. There were four of them lined along the front porch, one for each of us. Mine was bright green. Aurora's was white.

She refilled our glasses, and we both sat back to enjoy our dinner: asparagus, snow peas, hearts of palm, mushrooms, and zucchini, all in a thickened peppery vegetable broth.

“Lilly texted earlier. She'll be here by noon tomorrow,” I said.

“She driving over alone” —Aurora stabbed a mushroom with the tines of her fork—“or is *he* bringing her?”

He, meaning her husband. They've been married nine years, but Aurora doesn't like Matthew any better now than when we met him. She finds him stuffy and boring. Aurora thinks he stifles Lilly. That he keeps her from reaching her full potential. I disagree. Not all of us can be famous, globe-trotting artists sleeping with the Fortunatos of the world. Some of us have to be librarians, cops, and in Lilly's case, optometrists. I like Matt. He's good to her. A hell of a lot better to her than her first husband was.

“I assume she's driving over herself.” Lilly lived in Annapolis. She and Matt, also an optometrist (they met at a convention), have an upscale office there. “And Janine will be here right after work tomorrow. No later than six, she said.”

While we're all equally close, I'm the *administrator* of the group. I'm the one who keeps everyone connected with texts, e-mails, and phone calls. I always make the arrangements when we get together. I coordinate arrival and departure times. I make the dinner reservations and settle minor disputes.

Aurora set down her plate and reached for her glass. She'd barely touched her food. "We can talk about it if you want. Get the clumsiness out of the way."

I looked up from my plate, having no idea what she was talking about...for a second. Then I smiled. "You're a funny one."

She looked at me from over the rim of her glass, tipped it, and drank. She was wearing a tight white T-shirt with something in Italian on it (I don't speak Italian. I can manage a little conversational *Español*, but that's it. I was always going to learn to speak Italian. Once I finished my doctorate in library science. Once Mia and Maura were older. Guess I put it off too long.) and a pair of baggy men's athletic shorts. Her hair was still damp from her shower, her face bare of makeup.

"So you want to talk about it or not?" she prodded. "You don't have to. We're going to have to rehash it all tomorrow night. But I thought you might—"

“Want to take a *dry run*? Is that what you’re asking me?” I’ve set my plate aside. I thought I was hungry, but after a few bites, I wasn’t. The new medication did that to me. She drew her knees up to her chest. “Now who’s the funny one?” She gazed out over the dunes. She looked so serious.

Together, we watched the waves tumble in, one after the other. The tide was coming in. From the waterline on the beach, in relationship to the little picket fence in the dunes, I guessed that high tide would be in another two hours. Nine-ish. I made a mental note. I marked my days here at the beach house by the rise and fall of the tides.

I remembered, from a family vacation in Hatteras, my dad showing me a tide chart. I was nine or ten. He explained how the gravitational attraction of the moon caused the ocean to bulge toward the moon and how, on the other side of the world, it was doing the same thing. There are twelve hours and twenty-five minutes between each high tide. It would be low tide around three tomorrow.

My gaze caught Aurora’s. She was watching me now. Waiting.

“We don’t have to talk about it,” I said. But I realized that I did want to. Maybe I *did* need a dry run. Tomorrow night would be the first time we’d all been together since the death knell officially began. Last summer we’d all been so hopeful. We thought I just had a measly little case of thyroid cancer in my thyroid.

Tomorrow there would be tears. A flood of tears...hugs all around... several times. Maybe I needed to tell the story without the tears. This was something else I can always count on with Aurora; she wouldn't dissolve. I couldn't decide if that was because she was such a selfish person or such an unselfish person. Could you be both?

Aurora sat back to listen.

"Not a lot to say." I feel like I've told this story a million times. "After I had my thyroid removed, we thought I might be in the clear. I wasn't. The cancer cells drifted into my lungs," I explained. They say it that way.

Drifted. Like it wasn't an assault.

I was quiet for a minute. So was Aurora. I went on. "It's thyroid cancer, but in my lungs. The scans look crazy. Little starbursts of tumors, filling my lungs." I took a sip of wine. "That's what's making it hard for me to breathe. The tumors are filling up the space where air should go. There's no cure. No treatment. Eventually the tumors will fill my lungs and then... then they'll kill me," I added matter-of-factly.

"What about the nuclear radiation pill you took when it was in your throat?" she asked.

I shook my head. "A no-go. Thyroid cancer cells are, apparently, tricky. They know how to morph or something. I still don't quite understand." I raised my hand and let it fall. "The cancer cells are somehow

different now that they're in my lungs. The nuclear stuff can't find them, so it can't stick to them, so it can't kill them."

"Fuckers," Aurora muttered.

I smiled.

"So now?"

"So now, the doctors will make me *comfortable* until I die." I exhaled, looking into my nearly empty glass. Aurora gave me a refill. We were both quiet. Another thing I've always loved about Aurora. She doesn't feel the need to constantly talk.

I swirled my wine and watched it form a tidal pool in my glass. I sipped it. I was waiting for the question *How long?* How long do you have to live? How long before I need a dress for your funeral?

But Aurora didn't ask. She just gazed out at the ocean. She probably already had an appropriate black dress.

I took a deep breath and relaxed in my chair. The sun wouldn't set for more than an hour, but it was well behind us now and the sky was darkening.

After what seemed like a very long time, Aurora said, "I'd take it from you if I could." Again she was quiet. Then, "Your cancer."

My eyes felt scratchy behind the lids. I'm not a crier. What tears I had, I tell people, I've already cried. As if we're born with a certain number of tears in our eyes, like eggs in our ovaries. Maybe I was just afraid that if I

started crying now, I'd never stop. I didn't want to live out the rest of my days, however many there were, crying.

"I'd die for you," Aurora said. "I'd do it. I wish I *could* do it," she added softly.

"I know."

My mother said the same thing when I told her that I was terminal. She cried buckets. She said it wasn't fair that she was old and useless and I was still young, with children to raise. But there was something different about Aurora's tone when she told me that. It was as if...she was more than willing to die, that she...I don't know...she really wanted to. Which made no sense. She had a perfect life: famous, rich...and then there was Fortunato and his wang.

I realized my thoughts weren't making sense. It was probably the wine. I was feeling tipsy. The combination of the wine and the meds. I was most definitely not supposed to have three glasses.

I looked at Aurora. She seemed so sad.

This was one of the most difficult things for me about having cancer. I felt as if I was making so many people sad. Hurting so many people. Me, I got to die. They—those I love—have to stay. They have to carry my death with them for many years to come.

“I...haven’t told anyone this,” I heard myself say. “But...I’m taking part in a drug trial.”

She shifted her attention to me again.

“At UPenn.” I set my glass down. “They’re hoping the drug will slow the growth of the tumors. Maybe even reduce their size.”

Aurora unfolded her long legs and stood, holding a finger up, telling me to hold that thought.

She was back in two minutes with another bottle of wine and the corkscrew. “So the doctors have had good luck with this drug?”

I shook my head. “It’s a drug *trial*, meaning the doctors are basically taking a wild stab in the dark and need some human guinea pigs.” I stopped and started again. “Not exactly. The whole process for creating a drug and getting it approved by the FDA is very complicated and takes years. There’s been some evidence—in lab rats probably—that this drug I’m taking might have an effect on this type of cancer growth.”

“So it might work?” she asked.

“Someday. For someone. I know it’s too late for me, but I agreed to be a part of the study because I like the idea of possibly helping someone else, someday.”

“Why haven’t you told anyone?” she asked, as she stripped the foil from around the cork.

“I can’t.”

She waited.

“Nothing else has worked, Aurora. This isn’t going to work. It’s a drug trial, not a cure.” I shook my head. “I can’t tell you how many second opinions I’ve gotten. How many oncologists I’ve seen. I can’t do that to my parents, to my girls. I can’t do it to Lilly and Janine. I can’t give them hope, not when there is none.”

Aurora held the wine bottle between her bare thighs and used a simple plastic corkscrew—the kind you picked up at the counter in the liquor store and carried in your purse. She pulled on the cork, and it came free with a delicious *pop*. “But you can crush *my* hope?”

“I’m sorry.” I glanced at my hands resting in my lap. “It’s just that you’re the strong one. The brave one. I guess...I needed to tell someone, and I know you...you won’t act crazy and start planning my fiftieth birthday or anything.”

She raised the bottle to offer me another glass.

I covered my glass with my hand. I’d had enough. “I’m sorry,” I said again. Now I felt bad. “I didn’t mean to dump this on you.” I hesitated and went on. “Please don’t tell them. Lilly and Janine. Or my girls.”

“You know I won’t.”

“I know.” I watched her pour herself another full glass of wine. And these were big glasses. The kind without the stems. “You’re good with secrets. You never told anyone I made out with Kandy Delacroix at her sixteenth birthday party.”

Aurora grinned. Raised her glass in toast. “That’s because I made out with her that night, too.”

I laughed. Hard. The kind of laugh that comes from deep in your belly. I didn’t know why that delighted me, but it did. We were sixteen. We weren’t lesbians; we were just *exploring our sexuality*. And our drinking limits. I wondered if either of my daughters has ever made out with a girl. I knew I’ll never be able to ask them. We get along well, for a dying mother and her daughters, but there were lines we will never cross. Asking them if they ever kissed a girl would be over the line.

I laughed until tears came to my eyes. “I’ll be right back,” I said, getting out of my chair. I needed to use the bathroom.

“Then maybe a walk on the beach?” Aurora’s dark eyes were on mine again.

“A *short* walk. Maybe just down to the water. I’m not much of a walker these days.”

Aurora rose, glass in hand. She had already drunk half of it. “I’ll carry you. If you get too tired.”

I grinned, resting my hand on the doorjamb. "I know."

