

# The Witches Sib

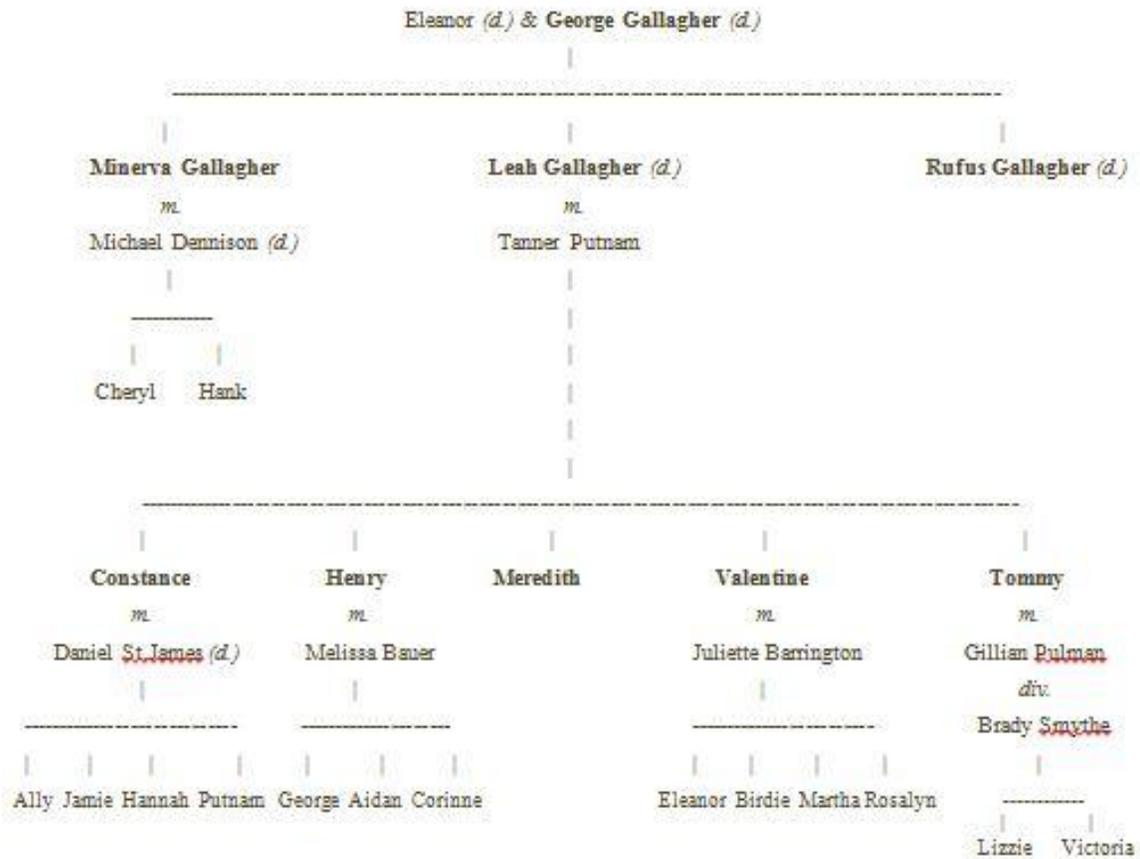
by Judi Cutrone





*For Melissa, Jenn and Lee*

# The Gallaghers



*Some things have to be believed to be seen.*

*Ralph Hodgson*

## Prologue

*The Township of Hammond*

*July 7, 1697*

Sarah glanced out the tiny window. “They’re coming.”

“I know that.”

“We have to hurry.”

“I know that too.” Elizabeth got to her feet and examined the circle she had drawn on the floor, her hands on her hips, lips pursed. “Will have to do.” She grabbed a fistful of hay from the corner and scattered it over the dark line. “I need earth.”

“Out there?” Sarah’s blue eyes, pale as fine glass, widened and she stepped away from where she kept watch, a lash of wind slapping the window. The tiny house seemed to shake with the force.

“For heaven’s sake, Sarah.” Elizabeth scowled at her and pushed back her cap, the slight difference in their ages all the more apparent as the lines around her eyes and mouth deepened. “I’ll do it myself though you be the one saying we have to hurry.”

Sarah swallowed and took a step back as the wind saw fit to attack the walls once more. She opened her mouth to speak but no sound came out as Elizabeth threw open the door and stepped out into the dark.

Sarah crept forward and noticed immediately how the wind, despite its furious work on the trees around her, did not affect her sister. It was most evident in her dress, the way it lay flat and still against her skin as she moved briskly to collect what she needed, the trees and brush around her quaking with force.

Such strangeness had always surrounded Elizabeth. For a moment, Sarah Jane Gallagher saw her sister through the eyes of their magistrate, Jedidiah Hobbs. She watched Elizabeth stomp back into the

house, her eyes blazing and her arms full of dirt and weeds, the white cap pushed back on her raven head. She did look dangerous.

Sarah stepped back as the earth was sprinkled over the floor. She watched her sister's mouth move furiously, noiselessly, as she circled her circle. Once. Twice. Three times.

It was no wonder why they came for her, Sarah thought. For them. It was easy to see. She stared at the intent in her sister's eyes and found she could not look away.

When Elizabeth had finally gone still, Sarah took her place back at the window to watch for the light. "How do you know what to say?" She tried not to look at the circle. It made her feel ill.

There was no answer at first but Sarah was used to asking twice. She watched as Elizabeth grabbed a candle and placed it carefully in the center of the circle." How do you-"

"It's a prayer," Elizabeth replied sharply. "Like their prayers. Like all the rest. Preacher's always saying that the words move in him. They move through me too. Just different words is all." She looked around the room, calculating, and then Sarah could practically feel the energy shift and change as her older sister suddenly went still and closed her own blue eyes, their mother's eyes, the fists at her side relaxing, her broad shoulders dropping.

She took a deep breath and Sarah did too. The fingers that she had been drumming restlessly on her thigh stilled as well. It had always been so, she thought dreamily as a wonderful stillness entered her own heart. When Elizabeth was still, the world was still.

"We're ready." Sarah opened her eyes and saw her sister watching her, her round and pretty face a picture of calm. Elizabeth offered her a small smile. "It will be all right, Sarah."

The wind lashed once more around the house and now the rain came too, the heaviest rain Sarah had ever heard. She heard something then, shouting in the distance. She put her hand up to the window, the glass cold against her palm. "They're coming."

"The rain will put out their torches," Elizabeth said quietly. "It will give us a bit more time. Come. We must try."

Sarah took a deep breath, the nerves still skittering over her skin like a breeze. She stepped into the circle with Elizabeth and did as she did, sat cross-legged on the floor with the candle between them. Her hands felt cold as she twisted them into the folds of her skirt. "If they come in while we-"

"We'll be dead anyway, Sarah."

"Not necessarily." A coil of fabric tightened around her finger. She watched the skin change from red to white, mesmerized by it. "We could make a case, as that Smith woman did in Maybury."

"No, we can't." Elizabeth's own strong hand dropped over her own. Her hand was rougher than Sarah's and laced with deep wounds. Her face mirrored the sadness, the finality, in her voice. "Father is dead. We are alone. There is no one here to speak for us."

Sarah did not want to think about Father. She closed her eyes and listened for the shouting, muffled by the rain and wind. “What do you need me to do?”

“Just breathe. Do nothing else. Keep your eyes closed, that’s my good girl.” Sarah did as she was told, as she always did, and she felt Elizabeth pull her hands closer to the flame of the candle.

She felt the warmth of the flame and, like before, a stillness slowly entered her body. She heard Elizabeth murmuring and then there was nothing, no sound at all. The wind stopped. The rain too. She couldn’t even hear her own heart or the shallow breath that seemed trapped in her chest.

It was like stepping into the house on a summer night, when the heat made everything dark and heavy. Sarah felt a swaying then and there was a light, a glimmer of something in front of her. She lurched for it and swayed back, the light cutting into the dark in a way that made her eyes hurt, then her lungs and her stomach and everything. She felt alive in a way that she never had before, like every part of her was filled with that light and it was too much, too much light everywhere. She heard her name.

“Sarah!”

She opened her eyes and Elizabeth’s worried face swung close to hers. “It’s all right. I’m here.”

She felt something wet on her palm and stared down at the smear of blood. “My,” she said dimly. Where it was silent before, now it was thunderously loud with the wind and the pouring rain screaming for attention as Elizabeth wiped her throbbing palm clean with a damp cloth.

She heard the shouting then. Sarah leapt to her feet, eyes wild as she scanned the floor for the evidence of Elizabeth’s circle and finding it bare. The room was empty, carefully blank. “Where did-”

“There is no time.” Elizabeth looked the same but different too. Her eyes were bright and steady, the color ripe and glowing in her face. Sarah felt the calm wash over her and took a step back, amazed by the strength of it. It seemed to flow from Elizabeth more easily now.

There was a thudding at the door then and a man shouted their names, their full names. Sarah shuddered and the calm rippled within her. Great as her sister’s power was, it was no match for Sarah’s fear.

Elizabeth threw an arm around her waist and gripped her close. “It will be all right, Sarah.” She grabbed her hand tight in her own and Sarah saw that her hand was bandaged too, the tattered cloth spotted with blood and dirt. Sarah dragged her eyes up until they met her sister’s. They had the same eyes. Elizabeth’s jaw was set. “They will do us no harm. Not today.”

But the shouting. Sarah wanted to believe, but the men at the door were pounding and shouting and calling out things, the anger and hatred burning through their voices like ash through a flame. Sarah jolted as something was flung through the window. The rock hit the wall with a loud thud and another struck the wall outside. A small pebble struck Elizabeth in the head and Sarah stared at the blood that trickled down, though Elizabeth still stared at the door.

The door was kicked open and they surged inside, the lot of them. Elizabeth gripped her hand as they entered, drenched with rain and purpose, the man leading them tall and imposing as he towered over them, his dark eyes flashing, his gray hair streaked through with black.

Jedidiah Hobbs took a step closer and looked right at Elizabeth, who did not flinch as Sarah trembled beside her. Samuel Gallagher's oldest daughter was not afraid.

Hobbs gripped his lantern, the wisp of light ravaging his wet face. "Witch." That's what he said. That's what he called her.

And with that one word, the spell was cast. And the whole world was changed.

## Chapter 1

*Long Island, NY*

*Present Day*

Constance St. James stood over her dead husband's body in the cold hospital room, not quite sure what to do with herself.

She was alone, thank God, though where her brother Henry had taken the children, she wasn't sure.

That's something I should know, she thought dimly, studying her husband's still face. I should know where they are.

Her mother had always known where every one of her five children was and what they were doing, every moment of the day. It had driven Constance to distraction throughout her life, that her mother could know such things and now she was even more amazed at the ability, at how her mother had even managed it. Henry could've taken the kids to Guam by now and she wouldn't have the faintest idea.

What was wrong with her? Danny was gone, her husband, her Danny, and these were the thoughts that came to her?

If he were alive, if he were standing there, she'd say it all out loud, and he would smile. "You think there's a right thing to think at a time like this?" he'd say.

She dragged her eyes over his face one more time, trying to take in the cut of his shaggy brown hair, his mouth, the way his chin laid against his chest, the lines in his neck, the tan that had just started to deepen on his face, his neck, the bottom part of his arms.

It was the ridiculously uneven tan that almost undid her. She felt her body pitch forward of its own accord and she gripped the metal bars that rose at the foot of the bed. She felt her stomach roll. Her chest and throat burned.

She would not be sick, she told herself. Not in this room. She shut her eyes tight and forced herself to stand up straight. She was just removing her hands from the bar, swallowing back the rush of bile in her mouth when she heard the door open.

Her sister-in-law Melissa, Henry's wife, was standing in the doorway. Constance focused on her face and noted mechanically that it was pale and blotched with redness, her soft, gray eyes swollen and rimmed with red as she looked at the body on the bed. As soon as her sister-in-law's eyes met her own, she started to cry. It emerged from her like a sudden gash. Constance stepped forward and folded Issie into a tight embrace.

Her eyes remained dry. When she felt Issie shudder once and then take a deep breath, she pulled back. "Where are the kids?" Constance asked. Her voice sounded flat, even to herself.

"Gillian drove them back to the house." Issie's eyes slid past her and over to where Danny lay. She glanced back at Constance, her eyes awash with sadness and concern. "We'd like to say one last good-bye if it's all right with you. Everyone's here."

*Not everyone.* Though she didn't say it out loud, it was an automatic response, the truth, and it felt like the words hung in the air between them. Constance tried to push past the thought and nodded, giving Issie one last comforting pat on the arm as she stepped back over to the bed. She was there to help them say good-bye while she looked on and waited. She was, for the moment, an angel of death.

She heard her sister-in-law slip out of the room and into the hall and Constance looked down one more time into her husband's face, frozen in time, like in a fairy tale, like the stories she used to read to her daughters. Their daughters.

Constance caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror on the door. She'd cut her hair off recently, for the summer, and it was terribly short. "A Mom haircut," her oldest had said and Constance had tried not to show how much it stung. She'd just wanted something easy.

A widow at 38. She blinked at the stranger in the mirror, the person with the narrow face and shadows under her dark eyes whose shoulders were slumped in an ugly white sweater she'd grabbed out of the car.

Issie returned with her brothers and sister-in-laws, Danny's parents, her father all in tow. Her nephew George was there. They were going to say good-bye, she told herself as they filed past her.

*That's why they are coming back in. Danny is gone and they want to say good-bye.* Constance wondered how many times she could think the words before they no longer felt false.

She wanted to take his hand but didn't. She was afraid it would be cold. Instead, she took a deep breath and looked into his face, which looked gray. All of these people were here to say good-bye. But she would not say good-bye. Not yet.

As soon as the words popped into her brain, fully formed, Constance felt a rush of relief. She didn't have to say good-bye, not right now, not right this second. She never had to do it, not if she didn't want to. Her family would say good-bye and she would stand next to them, nodding, consoling, understanding, thinking and feeling nothing at all.

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"We're closed."

The man at the door glanced up at the hours of operation that were printed and stuck to the glass. "This says you're open." He glanced over his shoulder at his buddies, who shrugged and waited.

"Well, I own the bar," Sam Guthrie replied through gritted teeth. "And I say we're closed. Come back another time."

The man rolled his eyes and muttered something to his friends, who all cast Sam a dark look from behind the glass.

He watched them go and went back to drying the glasses, setting them up along the shelf and had made it through only three when a voice piped up from the other end of the bar. "You weren't very nice to them."

Sam sighed and glanced down at the small, brown-haired girl who sat on the stool, her skinny legs kicking the rungs and making a pinging sound that Sam had just been able to ignore until now. When he didn't reply, she persisted. "You're supposed to be nice to customers. What if they don't come back?" She glanced around the empty bar, the scattering of dark tables, the long row of empty stools, as if the state of the place was a current indication of Sam's business. Which, if he were honest with himself, probably wasn't too far off. But still.

"Been doing ok so far." He tossed her a rag. "Make yourself useful, please."

Maggie Cooper eyed the rag and blinked. "Child labor's against the law," she said.

He rolled his eyes. "I'm pretty sure there's a law against a ten-year old hanging out in a bar during a school day too." When she didn't move, he stopped what he was doing, dropped his hand to the bar and

looked at her pointedly. The look worked as it usually did and she sighed, scooting over to where he stood and grabbing a glass to dry.

They worked in silence for a few minutes until Sam grew suspicious of the quiet. The girl was usually full of questions, of both the serious and ridiculous kind, and she seemed to collect answers like other kids her age collected stuffed animals. But there she stood, her unusually light blue eyes fixed on polishing the clear glass in her hands, her mouth pursed in thought.

He had just started to relax, had just started wondering about the endless list of things he had to do in the office, when she spoke up again. "Why did you close today?"

"No particular reason."

She narrowed her eyes at his tone. "It have something to do with that call you got before?"

"Why do you say that?"

"I dunno." Maggie shrugged. "You looked sad." She studied him and, as if he could somehow see what she saw, Sam looked into the mirror over his register. He saw his own face as it always was, the same dark hair with its nondescript cut, the dark eyes that belonged to a man he'd never met, and the lines that had suddenly appeared around his eyes and mouth when he turned thirty-five.

Maggie nudged her glasses up her nose. "You never look sad. Why are you sad? Who called before?"

"When are you going home exactly?" he asked her instead.

Maggie rolled her eyes and went back to work.

Ally St. James needed air.

The scene in the living room had gotten to her. It wasn't the way her sisters sat on the couch, wrapped up in Aunt Gillian, their arms locked and heads bent together or the way Aunt Gillie's long, red hair swung low over her thin, pretty face to hide her tears.

Ally understood the tears. But the way her brother Putnam played on the floor made her chest constrict. He was only five and this was how he played, banging trucks together, making explosions, exclaiming over the accidents he'd created to no one in particular.

Every once in a while, he'd look up and ask his Aunt Gillian why everyone was so sad and Ally couldn't bear the made-up answers, the way Aunt Gillie sounded as she spoke, her voice thick and shaking, unsure of what she should say, how much she should say. At one point, she caught Ally's eye and they both looked away immediately, both aware how hollow her replies sounded, even to a five-year-old just looking for reassurance. Ally got up from her chair in the corner and went outside.

It was shockingly hot for early June, for so early in the day, but the silence and the blast of warm air was a welcome relief from the forced chill of the living room. Her aunt had finally turned on the air conditioning, though it was too early in the summer for it. Ally sat down on the top step and leaned back against the rail post, thinking of her father.

Ever since they'd left the hospital, since the moment she knew he was gone, she had waited for the tears to come. When their mother wrapped her arms around them all, Ally had waited, expecting that well of sadness, of pain, to rise up within her. Jamie had cried at once and she actually envied her sister's fat tears, the redness of her face, the proof of her love.

When Jamie appeared beside her, Ally felt a flash of irritation at her puffy face. "What?"

"Jessica's on the phone."

Ally looked away. "I don't want to talk to her."

"Well-"

"Look, just hang up or whatever. I'm not here."

A minute had passed, maybe a few more, when she opened her eyes again. They were so dry that they hurt and it took a moment for them to refocus on the sloping green hill in front of her, and yet another to realize that she was no longer alone.

The fox was small. It stood at the top of the hill and looked at her, the deep red of the fur a pure shock against the fading grass on the hill. It had dark eyes. It blinked and took a step toward her, then another.

Ally stared at it a moment longer and then closed her eyes once more.

Meredith Gallagher lay on her back on the floor of the old canoe and stared up at the night sky, as calm and still as the ocean that cradled her.

Out there, in the middle of nothing, hundreds of miles from the next available shore, it felt as if the world itself had stopped moving altogether.

She took a deep breath but did not bother to close her eyes. Though she knew it was approaching two in the morning, it was still too early for her to sleep, despite the perfect conditions presented to her. Despite the silence, the gentle rocking of the boat and the strangely comfortable nook of wood under her head, sleep would not come to her. She ran a hand under her neck, under her mass of long, dark curls and pulled until her hair fanned out about her head. "Mermaid hair," an old man had called it once. He'd been trying to sell her a comb.

But the moon was lovely. The earth felt quiet and flat.

The tiny boat rocked, a bit more forcibly than before and enough to draw her notice. Meredith sat up to lean against the canoe's solitary bench, though it seemed nothing more than a few gentle waves had caused the disturbance. Still, she felt something tremor within her, once and then again, as if her insides had been strummed like a set of guitar strings. A familiar feeling. Familiar and not entirely welcome.

Just a few seconds had passed before she saw it. The sparrow was perched on the lip of the hull, its tiny feet grasping it firmly as the canoe pitched once more though the water surrounding it remained as still as glass.

Meredith frowned at the small bird, feeling a mixture of affection and annoyance as the sparrow stared into her face, dark eyes unblinking. "What are you doing here?" Meredith asked her mother.

The bird stared, not moving in the slightest, even as Meredith moved closer to it and that's when she felt it, a wave of grief that was so huge, so overwhelming that Meredith froze. The grief was not her own but her mother's. She was as sure of it as she was of anything.

Meredith stared at the sparrow, her mother's grief replaced by her own powerful fear. She drew her knees up to her stomach, where it felt like a cannonball now resided. "Who is it?" she whispered. "What's happened?" She thought of calling her brother. Her palm started to itch.

The sparrow, she thought, hesitated. It lifted its tiny feet and didn't so much fly as hopped from the lip of the narrow boat to Meredith's elevated, outstretched arm. Meredith looked down as the sparrow stepped cautiously over her tanned skin and those same tiny feet arrived at the tied rope that lay limp on Meredith's wrist. The sparrow looked down at the rope and up into Meredith's face, the gesture unmistakable in its intent.

"No." She wanted to finger it with her free hand but couldn't bring herself to do it. She could not move at all. No. Not Danny.

As if reading her mind, the sparrow inched closer, carrying its sorrow with it, the strength of it more than Meredith thought she could bear. She looked into the bird's eyes. "I have to go home." The bird's tiny gray head bobbed once.

Meredith lifted her hand now and stared at the mark that was tattooed onto her palm long ago. She brushed over it with her finger and instantly felt her youngest brother's reply. He'd been waiting for her.

If her greeting had been meant as a question, his response was just as clear. *Come home.* She closed her eyes.

It took her a while, longer than she wished, to steer the canoe back to the yacht where it was tethered, to secure the little boat in its rightful place and shake the water from her clothes as she straightened up on the deck, the sleek, white boat as silent as when she had left it. The quiet failed to bring her peace now. It felt oppressive, her isolation.

Meredith looked up at the dark sky and down again at the deck where, somewhere below, the Harringtons were fast asleep.

She sighed, unsure of what she should do as it sunk in just how stranded they were out there in the middle of the Pacific, hundreds of miles from the next available shore and days before their scheduled stop in Tuvalu.

The sparrow swooped down over her head and landed primly on the boom of the main sail and Meredith was rewarded with a memory, as vivid and focused and real as if she were still living in that very moment.

She was twelve, thirteen and in the kitchen, poring over the ancient atlas that her father had dragged out of a pile of dust in the attic, just for her.

She sensed her mother's presence behind her. It was impossible, in fact, for her mother to stand in a room and be unnoticed for long. She felt her mother's broad hand rest on her back. "What if something happens to the family while you're so far away?" her mother asked quietly.

Meredith glanced up at her mother. She didn't have to ask her how she knew that Meredith planned to leave them one day. Her mother knew things. "Something good or something bad?"

Her mother studied her in a cool way that made Meredith shift in her chair. "Does it matter?"

Meredith hesitated. "Yeah. I mean, I think so."

"Why?"

Meredith shrugged. "I don't know. If something good happens, I don't mind missing it so much. But something bad-" The words trailed off. She thought of the last bad thing that had happened to them, when her uncle had died.

"What will you do if something bad happens? And you're out there, in the middle of nowhere?" Her mother cast a disparaging glance at the yellowed pages spread out before them, the places that meant nothing to her but distance and danger. "How will you get home?"

Meredith did not want to think about that happening, about what she would do. She did not like to play with "what-ifs" in this way, with an eye toward disaster. But her mother's eyes were fixed intently on her now. She was waiting for an answer and there was no backing out when Leah Gallagher looked at you this way, as if this moment was more important than any other. "I'll do whatever I have to. I'll get home," Meredith said dimly and it felt like the words were just there, waiting for her. It felt like someone else spoke through her, like a ghost.

Her mother's eyes narrowed, just a fraction. "Is that a promise?"

Meredith felt her breath catch as her own voice returned. "Ok," she said slowly. She looked down at the map, her fingers itching to touch a place here, there. "Ok. I promise." As she uttered the words, she felt something warm and solid wrap around her from the inside.

“Good.” Her mother straightened up and moved away from the table.

When her mother walked away, she took the heaviness of the air, the moment, with her. Meredith stared down at the pages but found herself looking past them, lost in a place between thoughts.

“Meredith.” She glanced over her shoulder where her mother had paused at the doorway that separated the kitchen from the living room.

“You’ll get home for the good things too.” Meredith opened her mouth to reply but her mother continued in a way that defied argument. She was not a tall woman but she stood rod straight and her cropped hair, severely straight, worked as a frame for her plain, serious face. Nothing about her, not even the freckles across her nose that Meredith had inherited, spoke of joy or laughter. “Every wedding, every birth. Every single one.” And she left the room before the two could exchange another word on the subject.

A heavy breeze fluttered past Meredith on the deck and she glanced over to where the sparrow had stood, just moments before. She was gone now.

Meredith took a deep breath, thinking of Danny, and headed for the steps that led below deck. Lost in her thoughts, she did not feel the wind pick up behind her in a strange gust, nor the sudden chill that came with it.

## Chapter 2

Gillian Smythe Gallagher glanced down at the time on the dashboard as she carefully maneuvered the car off the freeway.

“You’re going to miss it. I’m sorry.”

Gillie shook her head with a smile at the woman sitting next to her. “It’s just a silly little tradition. They won’t even notice I’m not there.” She cast an assessing glance over her former mother-in-law, who shifted in her seat with a grimace. “We’ll be there soon. Not far now.”

Annie Smythe nodded and directed her gaze out the window, giving Gillian an opportunity to check the phone resting in her lap. Tommy had called, probably wondering where they were, how close they were to home.

It would’ve been better for them to fly home to New York from Boston, she thought as she caught Annie reflexively clench and unclench her hands in her lap. Certainly it would’ve been faster. But Gillian had thought the time in the car would be good for them, give them a chance to talk, to more firmly settle into this change they had initiated.

And there were Annie’s things to consider. Driving had helped in that regard. Currently, the remainder of Annie Smythe’s worldly possessions were strapped tightly in the bed of Tommy’s ancient truck and the small trailer attached to the back. The most important things, her jewelry and papers and a few framed photos, sat heavily in Annie’s wide, gray purse on her lap, wrinkling her pale linen pants.

The car ride had been difficult for her, Gillian thought now as she mindlessly made the necessary turns to get them home. At the rest stops, Annie had all but jumped out of the car. She wasn’t prone to sitting for so long at a stretch, she told Gillian apologetically.

I should've let her drive a little, Gillian mused with a twinge of regret. Brady had said his mother loved to drive, hadn't he?

She glanced up at the sign ahead, the one that told them Wild River was only thirty miles away. Not too long now. She flipped the visor down to block out the sharp sun, hovering over the tree line.

"We should probably go over it again." There was a sigh in Annie's voice as she spoke. Gillian struggled against reading too much into it.

"Constance is the oldest. She's married to Danny."

There was no time to correct herself. Annie was already shaking her head. "Poor woman."

"Yes."

"How long has it been now? I offered my condolences, didn't I? Before?"

"You did, thank you. It's been two weeks." Gillian cleared her throat. She didn't want to arrive home with red eyes. "Constance and Danny have four children. Ally's sixteen, she's the oldest. And then there's Jamie, Hannah and Putnam."

"And then Henry," Annie supplied with a nod, speaking of Constance's brother.

"Right. Henry's next in age. He's married to Issie, short for Melissa. And they've got George, Aidan and Corinne. They're in the yellow house, the nice one."

"Right."

"And then Meredith is next but she doesn't live on the farm."

"That's right." Annie waved a hand. She was concerned, for the moment, on the large group of people she was now expected to live with. There was no room for the wayward Gallagher daughter, who was so out of touch with the rest of them that she had failed to even make it home for her own brother-in-law's funeral.

For her part, Gillian banked down her irritation along with her tears. She barely knew Meredith, let alone would know her excuses for missing the funeral, she reminded herself. And the rest of the family was angry enough without her piling on. "Then Val." Automatically, she felt her lips curve upward. "He's married to Juliette. They've got four girls."

"Mmm," Annie mused with a smile of her own. "The girls with the funny names."

"Eleanor, Birdie, Martha and Rosalyn. Rosie's the baby, she's almost one now."

"And then your Tommy." There was warmth in her voice. The women shared a smile. "Nice of him to do this," Annie said suddenly. "To let me, you know." Her words trailed off.

Gillian swallowed. Miles from home and we finally talk about it, she thought. "We wanted you with us. The girls miss you." And with Annie there in New York, it would be easier for them to take her to see Brady in DC. And it would put his mind at ease to know his mother was no longer alone.

They drove on in silence for a while and then the scenery began to change. Gone were the strip malls and parking lots, replaced by stretches of farmland as they swung north and onto smaller and smaller roads. Gillie drove quietly, even silencing the low hum of the radio, taking in the place that had become her home not too long ago, trying to see it as Annie saw it now.

It seemed like only seconds before the scenery changed once more and suddenly the road was lined with tall trees. "One of the state parks," she told Annie.

"It's beautiful."

Gillie nodded as Tommy's classic Ford sailed underneath the tightly clustered tree limbs, the leaves seemingly waving at them, welcoming her home like sentinels under the clear sky. She turned slowly onto an even smaller road, mindful of the trailer behind them, the strip of pavement so narrow that another car would force them to slow to a stop and wait on the shoulder to pass.

She felt the truck give a pleasant little lurch over the more adventurous road and made another turn, wondering if Annie had noticed the tidy lineup of mailboxes on the corner, each sporting the last name Gallagher. The trees suddenly pulled back and revealed flat land once more.

"I'll drive you around the property so you can get a sense of where everybody lives."

"We're here?" Annie looked around, surprised. "Was that a driveway?"

"We don't get a lot of traffic down this way," Gillian said wryly. "But technically it's a road."

She had told her mother-in-law all about how she and her new in-laws all lived on the family land but she was entirely aware, being the newest Gallagher herself, how different it was to describe it out loud and actually see it in person.

Annie glanced up at the sky as Gillian angled the truck down the narrow road and over the first small hill. The trees seemed to grow taller here, clustered more closely together. "It looks like it's going to rain." Annie frowned. "It was so nice out a second ago."

Gillian spared a glance up at the rolling, dark clouds overhead. She was unsurprised to see them.

The first house appeared on their left, at the top of a slight hill. They could just see the wrap-around porch and the peeling white paint as they hugged the curve of the road. The way the house was situated on the hill, facing the other homes, made it seem like it was watching over them.

It was all angles and sharp corners, with black shutters and the front door hidden in shadow. An ancient swing sat beside the door, alongside a potted plant and a few rusted chairs. "Constance's house," Gillian said and observed quietly that the house was as silent as when she had left it the day before.

The deliberately mowed lawn, usually littered by a bike or two and a few spare toys, seemed foreign without them.

They continued on the narrow drive toward the other houses and Gillian pointed to the small hill on their left. "There's a play area for the kids over there." Next, she pointed the right where they passed a

small clearing and a round, stone circle with a row of chairs that faced the trees. “A firepit. There’s a barbeque there too.”

“How nice.”

The road curved left as they passed the firepit and Gillian nodded at the tidy Victorian home that suddenly swung into view. “Oh, my,” Annie breathed. The house looked like a postcard. The paint was a fresh, buttery yellow that seemed to glow behind the shade of trees that surrounded it and even the posts that lined the front porch were beautifully and intricately carved. The row of bushes that lined the front and side of the house were all evenly trimmed, the lawn brutally short and almost startlingly green. A riot of colorful flowers surrounded the house, with a few cheerful antiques peeping through the leaves.

“Henry and Issie’s house.” Gillian smiled at her mother-in-law’s reaction to it. She had invited a girlfriend to visit once and she’d had the same reaction. “Like something out of a magazine,” her friend had said, sounding both awed and a bit scared.

Annie’s reaction to the house next door, a rambling, scattered monstrosity, was a bark of surprised laughter. “Is it- did they paint that house purple?”

“I think the proper paint color,” Gillian replied, imitating her niece’s tone, “is called Lavender Punch but you’d need to ask Eleanor. She’s very precise about these things.”

“Eleanor.” Annie nodded thoughtfully. “So, this is where Val and Juliette live.”

“Yes, very good.”

“Well, I pay attention.”

Gillian grinned as the old truck lumbered past the perfect yellow house and towards the purple giant, with its colorful windows and patches of peeled siding. It looked as if rooms had just been attached haphazardly so that the top floor of the house looked shockingly wider than the base.

“Yeah, Val is kind of outnumbered. When five girls tell him they want a purple house, he gets a purple house.” She pressed on the brakes so that they hovered between the two houses and leaned forward to point beyond their joined backyards, where there was nothing but a tight wall of oak trees. “Tanner’s little cottage is back there, behind those trees. We can go see it later.”

There were more trees now as Gillian followed the road beyond Val’s house and soon, she pulled the truck into the stunted driveway, marking the end of the road and their trip. “Home sweet home.” She pulled the truck all the way up and turned off the engine. The truck seemed to sigh. She knew how it felt.

She glanced over at Annie, who was taking in the little house that was so far smaller than the three homes they’d passed on the way, a little two-story number with dark brown shingles that nearly blended in with the trees that surrounded it, giving the place a sense of being tucked away into the woods, as if someone had just pushed it back there.

“You have a white picket fence.”

Gillian glanced over at her once-mother-in-law, saw her quiet, unsettled eyes, and wondered if she was remembering the cramped, ancient apartment that she and Brady had shared on base when they had first been married, right before his first tour. “Let’s go find the girls. Tommy says they’ve been waiting for us all morning.”

Annie nodded and the moment passed. “There’s still time for you to make that breakfast.”

Gillian shrugged, thinking of her sister-in-laws and their little tradition. “That’s ok. Let’s get you settled. Come on.”

The stately yellow house where Henry and Issie Gallagher resided was as perfect on the inside as it was on the outside.

The sparrow mysteriously found its way, as it usually did, past the forest green front door, and hovered in the sparest of entryways, admiring the polished, antique coat hanger on the right and the cheerful welcome mat on the left, held down by a neat row of rain boots.

The little bird considered its options. It could coast up the set of stairs in front of it, where a low hum of voices could be heard. Or it could turn to the left and swoop through a formal sitting room where light from the front windows played games with the rows of books lining the walls, the fireplace and its neat stack of logs, the baby blue couch framed by small, chestnut tables, both adorned by vases of white daisies.

Instead, the sparrow made its way toward the back of the house and flew into the expansive kitchen, where two women sat at a marble island, a plate of leftover pie completely surrounded.

The pie was purchased from a nearby bakery, was blueberry, and the woman with the perfect, curly blonde hair paused as a forkful was halfway to her mouth. She glanced up at the corner of the kitchen ceiling, to the foremost beam, and tapped the other woman’s slim hand. “Jules.”

Juliette Barrington Gallagher was distracted, inspecting her piece of blueberry pie as if she wasn’t quite sure of the best way to dispose of it. When her sister-in-law murmured her name again, more urgently the second time, Jules tore her wide, brown eyes away from the bite. “What?”

Issie pointed to the beam in the corner and Juliette swung around, her straight brown hair flying up as she did. Issie mused to herself that it was a good thing her hair was pulled back into a thick ponytail or their breakfast pie would’ve been sunk. Jules shed like a golden retriever.

“Damn.” Jules dropped her fork onto the foil pie plate. “How’d she get in here?”

Issie rolled her eyes at the use of the pronoun for the little bird and immediately walked to the door that stood off the kitchen, the one that led onto her screened-in-porch and, from there, out to the garden. Without another word, she opened both doors and pointed outside.

It took a moment and both women held their breath, Issie tapping her foot on the polished cedar beneath her feet, but the sparrow eventually swooped elegantly down and out the door, first one and then the other. Issie closed both doors firmly behind her, though she knew it was an empty gesture.

They resumed their places around the pie and Jules pushed up the sleeves of her worn, pink cardigan. “Just like when she was alive,” she murmured and shoved the bite of pie into her mouth before anything else interrupted them.

“Stop. It’s just a bird.” Irritated, Issie pulled herself back onto the stool on the other side of the island and dug her spoon into the carton of vanilla ice cream that was busily melting on the counter, despite the constant hum of the air conditioner.

“You know what I mean.”

Issie shook her head. It was true that when she was alive, Leah Gallagher had just let herself in whenever and wherever she pleased. She felt her stomach tighten. “Just don’t, ok?”

Jules bit her tongue. She wanted to ask that if Issie felt so strongly that the bird was just a bird, why did she open the door and just beckon it to fly out, instead of shrieking and chasing it with a frying pan? Still, she knew better than to cross her sister-in-law on the subject. “You think Gillian’ll make it?”

Both women glanced up at the old clock on the wall and Issie shook her head, visibly relaxed as the topic of conversation shifted to their other sister-in-law. They only had twenty minutes left of peace and quiet. Twenty minutes left of the quiet Sunday morning that the Gallagher in-laws carved out for themselves almost every week.

As if sensing the time was almost up, as if issuing a warning, they heard a thump from upstairs. Issie let out a sigh that seemed to come from the very soles of her bare feet.

She looked tired, Juliette thought. She had long been amazed at Issie’s ability to look calm and put together, despite running the house, raising three children and managing the vast Gallagher property for the whole lot of them. On most days, Juliette was proud if she herself managed to comb her hair before she left for work in the morning.

Lately, however, Issie’s long, blond curls were a bit wild and frayed at the edges and there were dark smudges under her big, gray eyes. Gone were her usual flowered dresses and pretty printed skirts for summer, replaced by one of Henry’s old T-shirts and a pair of jeans, a stained macaroni necklace around her neck, one that Jules’ daughter had presented her with that morning. The red paint left faint smudges against the T-shirt collar and Issie didn’t seem to really notice or care.

Issie bit down on another bite of pie and Jules wondered if she should mention how tired she looked. She was about to do it when there was another thump from the floor above and she saw her sister-in-law briefly close her eyes, summoning her patience. “I can go up there, tell them to knock it off.”

Instead of responding, Issie shoved the plate away, considering. "What do you think Gillian was thinking?"

Juliette pondered the pie plate which was suddenly, tantalizingly closer to her. "You mean, about inviting Annie to live with them?" She shrugged. "I don't know. It's closer to DC from here. Tommy told Val it's harder for her to get down there by herself these days. Plus, it's nice for the twins to have their grandma here. And God knows, they can use the help."

Issie eyed her. "You don't think it's weird?"

Jules tried to imagine herself in the distinctly awkward position of asking her first husband's mother to live with her second husband and his family. "I think it's Gillian." She smiled sheepishly. "I think it's just so Gillian, the whole thing."

When Issie failed to smile in return, Jules pushed the plate away as well. The silence in the kitchen, though brief, was suddenly overwhelming and Jules knew why. They were waiting for another voice to chime in. "Can we just say it out loud?"

"What?"

"This sucks." She crossed her arms over her chest and looked over at the empty stools beside them. Gillian's absence was temporary. Danny's was not.

"It isn't the same and I think one of us should just say it."

"Yeah, well." Issie sighed and grabbed the dirty plates, the leftover pie and the silverware. "Yeah."

Juliette swung around to watch Issie as she carried the dishes to her farmer's sink and placed them inside carefully, turning the water on and testing the water for the ideal temperature before grabbing her rubber gloves. It made Jules smile. Issie was still in there. "Talk to Constance lately?"

"I saw her for a second yesterday. She was taking Jamie to karate." Issie grabbed a sponge and glanced over her shoulder. "She looked all right."

Juliette was about to ask for more detail than that, having only seen Constance once that week herself, when the front door flew open and there was a great pounding on the stairs.

Soon after, the upstairs door flew open and slammed shut. The women looked at each other. "Who was that?"

"No idea." Issie grabbed the dish towel. "Who've we got up there, anyway?"

"Eleanor and Birdie of mine. You?"

"All three. I think. I mean, I know all three are up there. Well, George might be out." Jules snorted a laugh and Issie grinned, another flash of her old self. "C'mon."

They headed to the base of the stairs and Issie hollered up. A second later, Birdie Gallagher's small head, her brown hair identical to her mother's and styled much the same way, appeared around the banister. "We weren't doing anything."

Jules bit back a sigh. "That's not worrying at all. Who just came in, Bird?"

"Jamie." Birdie whipped her head back toward one of the bedrooms and glanced down at them with pleading eyes. "Can I go back in now? Please?"

"Yes, you've been a good little ambassador. Try not to destroy Aunt Issie's pretty house, please." They listened as she whirled around and ran back into Aidan's room where there was a lot of chattering going on.

The women were about to head back to the kitchen when the front door blew open again and, this time, Constance's two youngest, Hannah and Putnam, ran in. They yelled hello to their aunts as they stumbled up the stairs and into Aidan's room.

Jules and Issie looked at each other. "They're having a summit up there."

Issie narrowed her eyes. "You think they know something?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"How should I know?" Jules snorted. "I'm standing here with you. I thought *we* were supposed to be gossiping today. We're pathetic. Our kids are having a formal meeting and we know nothing."

"Maybe not. Maybe they're just playing. What?" Issie asked when Jules laughed.

"The last time they all got together like this, one of us had to buy an ice cream maker."

"That was your fault," Issie pointed out. "You're the one who taught the girls about proposals and committees. They had flow-charts," she persisted as Jules doubled over.

"You're the one who caved."

"Well," Issie grinned, "I really wanted an ice cream maker."

They wandered back into the kitchen, frowning as something thudded against the floor above them. The meeting now seemed to be in full swing. "Maybe we should--"

The front door opened once more and this time both Issie and Jules ran to the stairs, effectively blocking the pair that had just entered. Issie threw up her hands and stared down her fifteen-year old son and sixteen-year old niece. She glanced at Juliette. "They called the big ones. It's serious."

Ally and George rolled their eyes. "Mom, please." George was taller than Issie now and he lacked the awkward air she had carried around for far too long at that age. Her sweet, gangly little boy had turned into a sweet, confident, gangly teenager overnight.

"What's going on?"

"Mom--"

"George," she echoed, mimicking his voice. "Spill. Now."

The pair looked at each other and exchanged a conversation in silence. Finally, Ally turned to her aunts and laid it out in the same flat, uninterested tone she had perfected since she was twelve. “Aunt Meredith’s coming home.”

Issie dropped her hands, the playfulness draining from her. “What?” she asked, at the same time that Juliette asked them if they were sure.

“Took the call myself.” Ally said. There was the barest of slaps to her tone.

Issie, a bit stunned, opened her mouth but Juliette shook her head and let the kids pass. They went upstairs without another word.

Issie and Jules looked at each other. “Well.”

“Well.” Issie blew a light, ruffled curl out of her eyes. “Batten down the hatches.”

Contrary to what her aunts believed, Ally and George had no intention of joining the council that was taking place in Aidan’s room. They were just passing by when Ally heard her twelve-year-old sister Jamie yell out over the dim, “It’s true! I saw it last time!”

Ally swung open Aidan’s bright blue door and stood in the doorway, surveying the motley group of siblings and cousins that had gathered within. Her cousin Birdie brightened at the sight of her and darted over immediately. She was wearing an old feathered headdress and purple, sparkly lipstick that Hannah had carried over in her pink purse. Ally recognized it from her old makeup kit. “We’re having a war council,” Birdie declared and their cousin Corinne, also eight years old, blond but much more serious, shushed her.

Ally ignored Birdie and looked down at her sister Jamie, whose round face was flushed and damp, her brown hair a tangled mess in its ponytail, as she held court on the floor. “Listen, Big Mouth,” Ally said with narrowed eyes. “You watch what you tell them.” She bent down and whispered fiercely in Jamie’s ear, “Do not freak them out. I mean it.”

“Whatever.” Jamie rolled her eyes and turned back to her rapt audience, not willing to say another word until her older sister was out of the room.

Ally climbed up the ladder to George’s room in the finished attic where it was blessedly cool, cooler than the rest of the house. Her cousin was already sprawled out on the colorful rug on the floor, feet crossed at the ankles as he stared up at the arched ceiling, currently covered in posters from old ‘70s television shows.

She flopped into the red bean bag chair he kept in the corner and looked around the room, flooded with cheesy toys, a Lava Lamp and a pair of vintage bell-bottoms actually stapled to the wall above his bed.

Before his this phase had kicked in full force, before he had started lightly feathering his white-blond hair and listening to everything from Karen Carpenter to The Clash, he'd been obsessed with, of all things, Motivational Speaking. Ally stared at the walls, remembering the Hang in There! poster and how he drove her aunt and uncle crazy with his self-help speeches at their big Sunday dinners. He was in love with the supportive, yet slightly terrified looks on their faces, he'd told her.

George, still staring up at the ceiling, frowned. "What were they talking about down there?"

"Who? Oh, them?" Ally leaned back and experimented with the way her bare legs stuck to the shiny vinyl. "Jamie's telling them about Aunt Meredith, about that time she saw her with the candles."

"Huh?"

"Nothing. It's stupid."

George lifted his head and grinned. "We used to talk about how weird she was all the time, remember?"

"Yeah." Her aunt was coming home. Too little, too late, Ally thought and it was a mistake because it made her think of him. And that was when she felt it, those familiar licks in her stomach. Her skin started to burn.

She was distracted by George, who took no notice of her silence or the way she had ducked her head, averting her eyes from his gaze as she fought desperately to think about something else, anything else. Her heart began to pound, her breathing more and more shallow. She gripped the chair with her hands and when it started to smoke underneath her skin, she stared.

He had jumped up and walked to the book case. "Well, I'm glad she's back."

Ally took a deep breath and stuck her hands under herself. "Why?"

"It's always more interesting around here when she's around. Everyone gets all twitchy and weird." He grinned and then hopped on one foot, toeing off his sneakers. "When's the last time she was home? Christmas?"

"Uncle Tommy's wedding. I think." Ally knew full well that was the last time. She came just for the wedding and left before the reception was over, not even bothering to say good-bye.

It took her a moment to realize that her cousin had spoken to her. Ally opened one eye, found him lying on his bed in the corner, and asked him to repeat whatever he'd just said.

"I was wondering if you heard from your friends. If they called again."

"Oh." Ally felt a chill run under her skin. "No." She wanted to say more, wanted to tell him not to call them that, wanted to tell him not to ask about them, ever again. Instead, she stayed quiet and watched the clouds roll by.

“So, I walked down the stairs and there she was. And there were candles everywhere and the one on the stairs, it wasn’t lit but suddenly it was! Just like that! And I looked in the living room and what did I see?”

“What?” Birdie breathed out with rapt excitement. Her eyes were wide as saucers. All the other children looked a little scared.

“Aunt Meredith, dressed all in black.” Jamie licked her lips. Her aunt had actually been in jeans and a t-shirt but she knew what her audience wanted, demanded. “And she was sitting in the living room surrounded by these candles. And the flames were *dancing*.” She’d heard someone say that on a TV show. “And she was saying all these weird words.” Jamie tried to approximate what her aunt had been saying, a rush of unintelligible sounds. Her cousins all held their breath, except Aidan, who rolled his eyes.

“And then,” she said slowly, drawing out the moment, “she disappeared! Vanished!” She snapped her fingers and the loud popping sound made her cousin Corinne jump and squeak a bit from her spot in the circle.

Aidan, who was her age and her mortal enemy, coughed. “You didn’t see anything. Give me a break.”

“Did too,” she snapped back and he hopped off his bed where he’d been pretending not to listen. “This is stupid.”

Jamie jumped up and the three girls followed. Put looked from one group to the next from their half-circle on the floor. At twelve, Aidan and Jamie were almost exactly the same size, though Jamie had almost an inch in height and three months in age over her blonder cousin. “Just because you weren’t there-”

“You didn’t see anything.” Aidan narrowed his eyes. “Just Aunt Meredith and some dumb candles. Everyone knows there’s no such thing as witches.”

“Is too.”

“Is not.”

“Is *too*.” Jamie’s heart thudded loudly in her chest. There was something about Aidan’s voice that made her want to shove him. “You just wait. When Aunt Meredith gets here, I’m going to ask her. Right to her face.”

“You won’t.”

The thudding in her heart intensified. “Will too,” she said back, her eyes flashing.

Aidan sneered. “I’m going to the tree house.”

Before she could reply, he pushed past her and left his own room. Put sprang up and darted after him.

Jamie reacted too late. “Put!” she called after him. “Shoot.” She glanced down at Hannah, who was sitting again and whispering something to Corinne. “Hannah, come on, we’re supposed to watch Put remember? Stupid Aidan won’t even know he’s there.”

Hannah pushed her glasses up on her face. Her hair was lighter brown than Jamie’s and her eyes were like their mother’s. The only place where they resembled each other were in their smiles. “I want to stay here.”

Jamie grabbed her arm, pulling her roughly to her feet. “Ugh! Move!” Hannah whined and groaned.

They had just made it to the bottom of the stairs when Hannah put on the brakes. Jamie crashed into her. “What? Oh.”

She stepped back and glanced up at her mother, who reached out to steady her with a frown. “Hey, Mom.” Her brother peeked out from behind their mother’s legs. Jamie swallowed.

Her mother looked down at the pair of them, her expression unreadable behind her light brown sunglasses. “You were supposed to stay together.”

“I know.”

“Why was Put outside then? He was halfway down the road when I saw him.”

“I was right behind-”

“Cars go down that road,” her mother said. She looked at both of them. “Well?”

Jamie and Hannah glanced at each other nervously. “Sorry,” they muttered.

“Don’t let it happen again. What, Put?” she asked, exasperated as he tugged on her shirt one more time. “Use your words. Come on, all of you, we’re going home.”

Jamie was about to argue but her mother’s mouth was small and set and so she bit her tongue. Hannah, not yet old enough to read when their mother had enough, started whining about wanting to stay with Corinne and Birdie, just as Put started speaking up about the tree house and Jamie jumped a little as her mother suddenly snapped, “Enough!” The word whipped out of her and they fell silent. “Let’s go.”

They hustled quickly out of the yellow house and headed home.

When Sam managed to grab himself a five minute break, he walked into his office and found his entire wait staff waiting for him.

There were his six waitresses and two bar backs, all crowded together in the little room off the kitchen. He frowned at them. “This a revolt or something?” He motioned behind him toward the bar where his evening crowd was starting to slowly thicken with Sunday regulars. “I know at least some of you have customers.” He narrowed his eyes at Bianca, Stacey and Clive, all of them in their civilian clothes. “What are you three doing here? You never work Sundays.”

His staff all looked at each other and then at Mona, who bested them all in years, both in age and tenure at the bar, and Sam guessed she was the ringleader for whatever this turned out to be. As long as it wasn't a wage hike, he thought with a sigh.

Mona barely bit five-foot even, was shaped like the Liberty Bell and her short bob of hair was platinum these days. She had Sam by almost twenty years in age and had worked at Flasky's since he was a bar back himself. When she put her hands on her wide hips and looked at him with her red-rimmed eyes, he felt himself stand up a little bit straighter. "We gotta talk about Helen, Sam."

He looked around the room and the rest of his staff met his eyes easily, though some of them looked more uncomfortable than others. "Can we talk about this after your shift? When I don't have a bar full of people wondering where their drinks are?"

"Nope." Mona lifted her chin and nodded toward the others. "We're going to say our piece, we're going to say it quick and then we'll get back to work. But we're not waiting until closing. We've waited long enough. This is important."

Sam grunted and shooed Mike out of his chair. "All right. Say what you have to say."

Mona faced him across the desk, her thick arms crossed over her chest. "We think Helen's using again."

Caught off guard, Sam looked into her face and saw she was dead-serious. And worried. "Why do you think that?"

"She hasn't been to work in two weeks," piped up Lila. She was leaning against the wall and now she stood up straight. She glanced nervously at Stacey who stood beside her and nodded.

Sam narrowed his eyes. "This is the first I've heard of that."

"We've been covering her shifts," Mona lifted her chin. "All of us." Off of his exasperated look, she threw up her hands. "She's a single mom, Sam! She's worked here forever. I just figured she needed a break and I didn't want her risking her job to do it. God knows she never gets any help from anyone else in her damned life, her husband hasn't even been heard from in nine years--"

"And you thought I wouldn't understand that?" he snapped back in reply. She narrowed her eyes a bit, eyed him, as if he would have the balls to fire a waitress who'd been around longer than he had. He was about to say so when something else occurred to him. "Maggie hasn't been around much either." He looked around the room, caught the eyes of some of his staff. "You're sure about this?"

Stacey nodded. "I went over there this afternoon to check on her myself." She tugged on her ponytail, her narrow face drawn, her mouth pinched. "It's bad, Sam. She was messed up and the place was disgusting. The smell alone--" She shuddered once but it was real. Stacey wasn't one for drama. "I tried to get her to leave, to step outside with me but she wouldn't. She told me to get out."

Though he didn't say anything, couldn't really with the blood thundering in his ears, he must've looked the way he felt because, at once, Mona nodded toward the others and they all trooped out of the office.

Only Mona and Stacey stayed behind. "Sam," Mona said quietly. "You want me to take care of this?"

He wanted to say yes. Badly. "Where's Maggie?"

"I don't know. She wasn't there when I was there." Stacey jumped up, seeing the flash in his eyes. "I'm sure she's fine, Sam. Helen would've said something if she--"

"You don't know that." If Helen was as out of it as they said, she'd forget she even had a daughter. He nodded to both of them. "Ok. I'm going over there now. Mona, you watch the bar?"

"Sure." She chewed on her painted lip. "You want me to come with you?"

"No." He reached for his keys. "I got this."

Tanner Putnam sat in his chair with a book in his hands but he wasn't reading it.

For as long as he could remember, he'd spent his Sunday morning in this fashion. A big chair, his chair, a small pot of coffee and a pile of books. He liked books of all kinds, especially the ones that sent him to far away places and distant lands. But this morning, he was lucky if he'd read five sentences.

He was more easily distracted than he would've liked and his memory was betraying his sixty-five years. Just that morning, he'd stood in his tiny kitchen, wondering why he'd wandered in there. It took him almost five minutes to remember that he'd come in to brew a small pot of coffee, that it was morning. That morning meant coffee.

His own parents had both battled with this loss of memory, of focus, and by the time he lost both of them, neither truly remembered he was their son. So, he sat in his chair, his book up in the perfect illusion of reading, and he looked beyond the pages to go through his exercise, his silent and secret game of mental calisthenics. Who he was, where he was, the names of his children, his grandchildren, their ages, who won the '84 World Series, the ingredients in a Mai Tai.

He kept his eyes closed for a moment longer, listening as the wind picked up and knocked a few light branches against the walls of his little house on the edge of the woods. He had chosen the spot because, when the time was right, he could hear the Sound rushing up against the shore.

Tanner opened his eyes and jumped slightly as he discovered he was no longer alone in his little cabin.

His eyes, as deep brown and steady as his own father's had been, settled on the face of his daughter, the only one of his children who left home and stayed gone.

She stood in the arched doorway, her black hair in a riot of curls, dressed the same as when she was a teenager in jeans and a T-shirt, a red suitcase at her feet.

“Hi, Dad,” said Meredith and she offered him a smile. “I’m home.”

## Chapter 3

Minutes before, Meredith had stood on the long, winding road that led home. She faced the row of mailboxes at the end of the drive, her red suitcase in hand and a dog at her feet, unsure of where to go.

She had glanced down at her Uncle Rufus, who'd appeared suddenly as she stood on a road in Los Angeles, getting ready for the first leg of her journey back east. The last time she had been stateside, almost two years ago, he had appeared in the form of a scruffy, gray terrier that constantly made her feel like Dorothy in Oz. Now, the dog that stood beside her was a large, shaggy, yellow mutt. Meredith stood on the driveway, aching close to home, and looked into his hazel, all-too-human-like eyes. "Well."

He hadn't moved or blinked, merely panted. She sighed. So much for wise council.

She looked down at the initials on the boxes and considered where to go first, her eyes falling first on the mailbox at the end.

Tommy was out, she thought as her palm itched. He would tell her he was glad she was home and, in the same breath, that he was pissed at her and why. Meredith usually appreciated the full force of his honesty but not when that honesty was primed to tell her she'd acted like a - no, she thought as anxiety gripped her. Tommy was out for now.

Her glance skipped over the little rectangular box marked with a curved H. Henry was just a year younger than Constance and he belonged to her and always had.

And Constance. No. She was not ready for that either.

Which is how she came to Val and Jules and the girls first, risking the usual chaos of the purple house. She was disappointed to find it silent and empty. The more steps she took down the road toward his big, rambling purple monster, the more she wanted to see her brother.

She'd wandered out of the open, empty house and into the backyard. And as soon as glimpsed the stone wall of the cottage that peeked between the trees, she'd smiled softly to herself, shifted her suitcase in her hand. Her father.

Meredith felt a hitch in her breath as she stepped into the woods and though something strange seemed to vibrate against her skin, paid it little notice. She slipped into the house in her usual way, completely unnoticed by the man who sat in his cozy living room, eyes closed as the wind began to blow outside.

Meredith's joy in surprising him faded a little as she stood in the little room, crowded with books and throws and the small things he'd carved over the years. She looked at her father, who sat hunched in his favorite stuffed chair, his brown eyes shadowed, his cheeks thinner, his graying hair ever more gray. He'd always worn his age so well. Now, time seemed to be overtaking him.

Meredith waited for him to see her there. She stood in the silence of the room and waited for his eyes to open at last, for them to fall on her in the archway.

Her father gazed at her. "You missed the funeral," he said.

Not knowing what to say, she looked away, looked around the room, avoiding his eyes now. "Yes." She shifted where she stood and carefully placed the red suitcase on the floor by her feet. He didn't move.

It had taken seconds, mere seconds, of being at home to make her feel like a child. "I was in Fiji," she said lamely.

"You didn't call."

"I did," she insisted. The lump in her throat refused to move. "I just--"

"Your sister--" he broke off and she nodded, saying words that made no difference. "I know, I just--" She stared down at the handle on her suitcase, the one that had worn down to the grooves of her fingers, her fingers. She stared at it as if it might intervene.

When she looked up next, he was standing before her, his eyes still so deep and dark and sad. He wrapped his arms around her, not saying another word and Meredith blinked and held on. It was the first real contact she'd had in months. Something inside her threatened to shake loose.

She stepped back, not wanting to cry in her father's arms, and glanced around the little house, cool and comfortable despite the early summer heat. "The place looks good."

And it did. It looked more like it belonged to him now. Her mother hadn't been removed from it completely but enough. Meredith looked him up and down, taking in the ill-fitting sweatpants, the old T-shirt, the bruised slippers on his feet. "You look good too."

"So do you. You look well." He peered into her face, the angles of it so similar to his own, her eyes and nose and mouth all her mother's. He was the frame and her mother was the picture, Meredith thought. "You look tired."

Meredith had caught a glimpse of herself in the mirrored glass of Val's front door. "I'm fine." She shrugged. It was true. Seeing him had sent a jolt of energy through her. "Just need a shower and some food."

He nodded and she could tell he was a little at a loss. Her father frowned. "You'll stay with Val, I assume? I don't think they're home. The girls," he said and motioned toward the twin houses beyond the cottage walls, "It's Sunday morning so they had their in-laws thing." Meredith realized that when he said girls, he meant his daughters-in-law.

"Oh. Right."

"I think Val was taking the kids to the park." He cleared his throat. "Tommy's home with the twins, they're getting the place ready for his moth-, for the twins' grandmother," he corrected himself, looking momentarily uncertain. "Annie."

Meredith frowned, confused. "Brady's mother is visiting?"

"No. She's moving in with them."

"What? Really?" She stared at her father as he moved past her and into the kitchen where Uncle Rufus was helping himself to a piece of leftover chicken he'd plucked off the counter. "You got a dog?"

"Oh. Crap." Meredith glanced down, feeling responsible for him even though he wasn't, technically, her dog at all. "Sorry. Uncle Rufus!" she called down reproachfully to the dog. He stopped chewing and eyed her balefully. "I know you're hungry but that's rude." She nudged him away from the counter with her leg. "Even for you."

"Rufus?"

Meredith met her father's eye and smiled. "Yes."

He raised an eyebrow, studying the dog. "Huh. I didn't know he was back." He looked back at Meredith as he crouched down, scratching the dog behind the ears. "Has he always been this big?"

"Not until recently. I could've fit the last Rufus in my purse."

Tanner tossed the dog another piece of chicken. He ate it fast, before anyone could change their minds. "And you're sure this is him?"

"I hope so. Otherwise, I just hitchhiked with a stranger for the last 3,000 miles." As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she wanted to take them back. Her father's eyes narrowed sharply and suddenly she was a child again. "Dad--"

"Hitchhiked?" He shook his head. "Again? Are you insane? Do you know how dangerous--" he broke off as something else occurred to him. His gaze sharpened on her. "How long did that lunacy take you? If you had flown, you would've been back--"

“No, I wouldn’t have,” Meredith snapped in reply. Father or not, she was thirty-four years old. And there were some things he still knew absolutely nothing about. Her heart burned. “I’m going to Val’s. I am tired. I’m sorry.” She walked back into the living room and Rufus trotted behind her.

“Mer-”

“I’ll see you later, Dad,” she said quickly, not daring to look at him. “It’s Sunday, right? You said it’s Sunday?”

“Yes. Meredith-”

“Great. Is the dinner on for tonight?”

“I- yes.” He sighed.

“Good. I’ll see you at dinner then. Where is it this week anyway?” She hitched the suitcase up and stepped into the open doorway, finally peering back at him. It was her mother’s move and they both knew it well; insist the conversation was over and change locations.

Her father looked pained. He hesitated. “It’s at Constance’s house.”

“Oh.” Of course it was. Meredith nodded and left.

“This way, Grandma! Swings!”

Lizzie’s small hands gripped Annie’s and she laughed as the little girl pulled her grandmother up off the stone bench in the back garden with a grunt. Up ahead, Victoria was yelling and jumping over the sprinkler that danced over Gillian’s herb garden. Annie winced as she caught sight of her granddaughter’s red sneakers that were quickly getting soaked, along with her flowered white dress, the one she’d been told to wear for the special day, when Grandma arrived.

She was about to call out when Lizzie whirled around and addressed her sister, hands on her hips, her dress identical but a dark blue and dry as a bone. “Victoria! You are getting your dress all wet! Get out of there right now!” she called out imperiously.

“No!” Victoria stuck out her tongue at her twin and Lizzie shrieked and launched herself across the garden, chasing her around and yelling after her like the deranged matron of a jailhouse.

Annie put a hand to her head and wasn’t sure whether to laugh or swear. She had only been there for an hour and the twins had gotten into no less than twelve arguments. She realized, as the twins darted past her, that it would’ve been no problem if the two were identical after all; their vastly different temperaments would give them away instantly. But as it happened, their differences in personality was just added to the list.

Annie let them chase each other for another moment, with Lizzie going on and on about rules and “regulstations”, when she caught sight of a woman walking out of the woods. Annie stared as she

emerged like some kind of wood nymph out of the trees and made her way through the backyard, toward the back of the big purple house. She was carrying a red suitcase and a big yellow dog trotted after her without a leash.

Though there was a house and a full yard separating them, Annie could see that the woman's resemblance to Constance Gallagher was unmistakable. Their hair was the same dark brown, almost black, though Constance wore hers straight and short while this one was long and curly, almost wild. Her head was down as she walked. Annie felt a breeze brush past her and the same breeze lifted the woman's hair off her shoulders. Annie watched her pause and pick up a hand to hold it in the breeze, like a greeting.

Annie stood, wondering how long the prodigal Gallagher was to stay, when she saw that Victoria had grabbed hold of the sprinkler, hose and all, and was just seconds away from turning it on herself and her sister. Annie surged forward, feeling a twinge in her back as she moved faster and more sharply than she had in months, and Meredith Gallagher's mysterious reappearance was briefly forgotten.

Sam made it as far as Helen's apartment building. He sat out front in his rusted sedan and thought about punishments, about karma and ghosts.

The building was old and plain, nothing like the shack where his mother lived, where they had lived for most of Sam's youth. Still, he knew it would feel the same, smell the same. He knew it would.

It was thoughts of Maggie, small and eagle-eyed, that finally propelled him to open the car door, to walk through the building entrance, with its broken buzzer, the heavy oak door propped ajar with a brick. Someone on the top floor of the three-story building was blasting music. He could hear the thick thud of the base as he climbed up the stairs.

He'd only been to Helen's house once, years ago, and had to consult her tax form to dig out the apartment number. He walked up the stairs to the second floor and spotted a thin line of tape along under one of the peepholes. *H. and M. Cooper.*

Sam knocked but there was nothing, not even the muffled bumble of the TV. He knocked again, harder and, finally, the door opened a crack.

The stench hit him first, made his eyes water. Sam blinked and frowned at the skinny, teenaged kid who answered the door. He was wire-thin and his face was sallow, his brown hair a tousled mess, his clothes old and well-worn and reeking of sweat. He grimaced at Sam, glassy-eyed. "You're not the boyfriend or anything, right?"

"Hey!" the kid said as Sam shoved past him and into the apartment. "Rude. God. You can't just-"  
"Get Helen."

The kid opened his mouth to retort but must've thought better of it because he just shrugged and trooped back into the bedroom, his thin shoulders hunched so that the blades poked out of his T-shirt like an angel's wings.

Sam looked around the apartment. Two floor lamps were knocked over and something foul-smelling dripped over the top of the television. Trash littered the floor with piles of paper plates, food wrappers, soda lids and beer cans mingling with ancient scraps of food and puddles of pure grime. "Jesus Christ," he muttered.

He walked over to the closest window and threw it open, then the others, the smell overwhelming. When that didn't help fast enough, he opened the door and propped it open with the remnants of a pizza box, the greenish pizza within poking out from the sides. That's when he saw it, the letter that was tucked underneath with only four big, black letters exposed. E-V-I-C.

Sam's hand recoiled from the letter as if a rodent had pulled itself out from under the box. For a second, his heart began to pound and sweat pooled under his arms, a long lost reflex for such notices.

He pushed aside his questions as to why Helen was taking so long to get her sorry ass out of the bedroom and, instead, headed right to what he assumed was Maggie's room, thanks to the paper flowers taped to it. The skinny kid had disappeared into the room directly across the hall. The apartment was silent again.

Frowning, Sam knocked on Maggie's door and called her name. He tried the knob, which turned but did little else. Sam pushed on the door and, when it gave an inch, he saw that the edge of the dresser had been shoved in front of it.

Sam took a step back and, propelled by his own old fears, kicked the door open. The dresser slammed against the wall and the thwack reverberated through the apartment. The moan he heard across the hall was ignored, for the moment. He stepped inside Maggie's room.

It was neat as a pin. And it was empty. He glanced up at the open window and the fire escape perched behind it.

She had that, at least. At her age, he would've given his life for a fire escape.

Sam walked over to it, hoping to see her perched out there like a bird with her books, but it was empty. He turned around and headed across the hall where he slammed his fist against the door. He heard the kid whimper something.

"Is she breathing in there?" When there was no answer, Sam banged on the door again. "I'm calling an ambulance. And the cops." His voice sounded flatter than he felt. Inside, he was haywire.

There were sounds of a scuffle and the door opened a crack. Sam stared into the small, pale, face. Helen barely resembled herself. Her brown hair was loose and streaked with grease. If possible, she smelled worse than the kid who stood behind her. "Don't do that," she mumbled. "I'm up." She squinted

up at him, her eyes glassy and the same light brown color as her daughter's. He saw her thin hand reach up to tug down her shirt, then touch the greasy ends of her hair.

Sam bit back an oath at the state she was in, torn between pity and disgust, as she blurred and blended with the memory of his mother, staggering and wasted. "Where's Maggie?"

Helen mumbled something and Sam slammed his fist against the door so that both she and the kid jumped halfway out of their yellowed skin. "Where is she, Helen?"

"Library." Helen raised her chin defiantly, her eyes blurred. He realized she was trying to focus on his face. "She's at the library."

Sam backed away from the door and left the room. He heard the kid whispering, heard Helen coming up after him but he didn't turn back around. He didn't have to look to know she had stumbled and fallen against the door.

"Sam. Wait."

In the hallway, Helen straightened up but her legs seemed to twist without her knowledge. She licked her lips. "I could use an advance. On my salary."

He narrowed his eyes. The kid had disappeared into the bedroom but Sam felt his presence in the hallway all the same. He looked back at Helen. "Come to work tomorrow."

"Work?"

He stared at her until she blinked. "Work. You show up, sober, and we'll talk about an advance."

"I can't. I-I'm sick." Her eyes darted around the living room, at the mess she'd made, and then back at him, pleading. "I've been sick. That's why I've been out- it's the flu."

Sam looked into her eyes. He waited until she looked at him, really looked. "You come to work," he repeated slowly. "Sober and clean and we'll talk about it." He reached over and plucked the eviction notice off the counter. "We'll talk and then we'll go see your landlord with that advance." He held out the stained piece of paper and she swayed but didn't take it.

"Landlord." She blinked. Sam tried to put this woman, this hollow-eyed creature, side by side with the woman who'd worked quietly and steadily at his bar for the last five years.

"Maggie's at the library. She's studying, that's all. She's fine," Helen said, more to herself than to him, and the way she looked at him then, the way she clutched at the air, suddenly sent him backward.

He turned and left, walking fast before the past could strengthen its hold on him.

The hot water didn't last long but it did the trick. Meredith dried her mass of dark hair as best as she could, trying not to knock anything over in the tiny bathroom on the second floor. It was

disproportionately small in relation to the kids' bedrooms that flanked it and the ceiling slanted down low, making Meredith feel like she was once more in the cabin of a ship.

She sidestepped the pile of damp, colorful bath towels in the corner and barely made it out before annihilating a family of rubber ducks. She would've been more comfortable in Val and Jules' master bathroom but there was something comforting about being surrounded by her nieces' things, seeing their little toothbrushes lined up along the back of the tiny sink and Martha's bath toys in their net, dangling from the faucet of the bathtub.

Nevertheless, Meredith stretched out her arms as she walked into Martha's room, just because she could. The room was a soothing baby green, the color of smashed baby peas, and the small bed, with its white, frilly comforter and pink pillows, couldn't come fast enough. Meredith laid down and brought up her knees slightly so that her feet wouldn't dangle over the edge. Her hair was still damp and smelled like strawberries.

The curtains were drawn but thin enough to fill the room with a dull light, the clouds still swarming overhead and blocking the sun, moving at a restless pace in the sky. Meredith followed a thin ray of light to the wall and noticed the delicate crystal figurines that were stashed all over the room, high out of Martha's reach. She was sure that when the sun streamed in through the tall windows, they made rainbows dance throughout the room. Constance had a set like it when they were young. Meredith would stare at the tiny swatch of rainbow and slide her hand beneath it to see how it played on her hand.

It took only a few seconds before Meredith's eyes closed but she didn't sleep, not yet. Something was rushing through her, something powerful and strange, a feeling that was vaguely familiar but not entirely her own.

Meredith had felt something similar in scattered places through her travels. A few hills in Ireland, a field in southern England, a thatched hut in Thailand, her aunt's home in Massachusetts, had all made her stop, pause to take it in. It felt like the air and the ground were singing around her.

They were traces, her aunt had told her when Meredith asked about it. Traces.

It was nothing like this, Meredith thought, curled up on her side. If those were traces, this was a wave.

Meredith rolled over onto her back and stared up at the tangle of white and yellow flowers that had been traced over the ceiling. She had learned enough over the years about what she was and the origins of it, how it worked and where it could be found. It made sense that she would feel it here more than anywhere else, she chided herself.

She had, after all, been born and grew up here, loved here, lost here. Her mother had done magic here, as did her aunt and uncle. Her brothers and sister had taken up residence in scattered points over the

land. Their lives were deeply entwined with the place and they too possessed the power, even if they refused to acknowledge it.

Perhaps that's what was so unsettling to Meredith. How could magic thrive in a place where everyone chose so fiercely to ignore it?

She thought about what it felt like to stand in her father's woods, the trees rustling and moving around her. The sky with its rumble of gray. That morning as she made her way closer and closer to the farm, she had watched the clouds roll darker. Did her family even realize that the sky surrounding them was so piercingly blue everywhere but over their own heads?

Meredith stood in those woods, staring up the sky, frowning as the clouds grew darker and darker, rolling toward her. She felt a trickle of its menace then and jumped as a crack of thunder boomed, so close to her that she began to feel nervous standing there, exposed under the sky, under cover of the trees she'd known intimately since she was small.

That song, that same song, the siren's call of the trace, seemed to get louder, the humming and thrumming more prominent until it felt like a second pulse in her ears. Meredith turned around and it felt like the earth beneath her feet was trembling too. She stared down, wondering where her shoes had disappeared to and, worse, why her feet felt suspended over the dirt.

She turned again, her heart racing now, her mind a blank as the trees suddenly loomed over her, foreign and forbidden. The humming grew louder and louder and Meredith felt something move and quake beside her, something launched itself through the trees with a scream. It was dark and huge and it had massive, white teeth and it lunged right for her throat.

Meredith opened her eyes with a gasp, her heart pounding in her ears, and stared up into her niece Martha's smiling face.

## Chapter 4

Meredith gripped the comforter beneath her and her head dropped back against the pillow, her brow bathed in sweat as she struggled to breathe. When she opened her eyes once more, Martha was still leaning over her but her smile quivered.

“Hi.” Quick to reassure, Meredith smiled and Martha, relieved, smiled in return. Her little face was round and chubby, her brown curls swept into two low pigtails at the base of her neck. She patted Meredith’s face with her little hand and Meredith grinned at the hello back.

Meredith pushed herself up, a bit worried at the way her arms buckled beneath her, and signed, “Do I get a hug?” Her four-year old niece’s dark eyes followed her hands and she nodded and immediately threw her warm, chubby arms around Meredith’s neck. The touch worked like a balm, banishing the lingering dread from her dream.

Martha jumped off the bed, signing as she did that she wanted to show Aunt Meredith her dolls. Meredith nodded and swung her legs over the side. For the first time, she heard the ruckus that was erupting up the stairs and down the hall. She made the appropriate oohs and aahs over Martha’s beautiful curly-haired doll, one deliberately designed to look just like her, hearing aids and all, and then turned around as the rest of Val’s brood filled the doorway.

“Aunt Meredith!” Birdie, smeared in both purple lipstick and war paint, whooped and launched herself across the room. She had skinny legs, knobby knees and heavy feet.

“Hey, Bird.” Meredith laughed as her niece wrapped her arms tightly around her waist and beamed up at her. “Still not combing your hair, I see.” Behind the headdress, Birdie’s brown hair was a mess of tangles.

Birdie wrinkled her nose. “Combs are for sissy ninnies.”

Meredith glanced up at Eleanor, who stood shyly in the doorway. “Ellie, you’re so tall! What are you, 6-9’ now?”

“Almost five feet,” Eleanor replied quietly. She stared at her aunt appraisingly. Meredith felt Eleanor’s twinge of envy as Birdie crawled onto Meredith’s lap and examined the slim crystal that hung there. But she didn’t move from the doorway.

Meredith kept one hand on Birdie’s back and her eyes locked on Eleanor’s. “Almost ten-years-old,” she mused quietly, feeling a pang. She’d been in the room when Eleanor was born, the only birth she’d actually been present to witness, and now she was practically a decade. She offered her a smile. “I have a birthday present for you. It’s in my suitcase.”

Eleanor nodded and the ghost of a smile appeared once more. “Mom and Dad are downstairs.” Her eyes were on Birdie and there it was again, that brush of envy. Meredith frowned, about to push, when the wriggling mess on her lap grabbed the chain around her neck with two hands and pulled. “Oof. Careful, Bird. There’s a person under there.”

“This is pretty,” Birdie cooed, cupping the blue crystal in her hand. She smiled broadly. “Can I have it?”

“Birdie!” Eleanor’s jaw dropped but Meredith grinned and withdrew it from over her head. Martha was watching with narrow eyes. “Here.” She placed it over Birdie’s head, careful not to damage the pink and blue feathers of her headdress. She felt Martha’s eyes on her, boring holes into her as she signed. “Share it with Martha please.”

Birdie’s face immediately sagged. “But-”

“I’m being generous with you so be generous with Martha.” Meredith kissed her on the forehead and signed to Martha that she could share the necklace with her sister. Martha beamed and signed furiously back that she would make sure Birdie didn’t lose it.

“Come on, Marty! Let’s show Mom!” The two girls darted out of the room and Meredith looked up at Eleanor. “She’s signing fast now.”

Eleanor nodded solemnly. “She’s a chatterbox.” She was gazing at Meredith, her round, quiet face unreadable. Meredith took the quiet moment and gave the quietest of pushes in her niece’s direction, surprised to discover the twinge of envy was gone and replaced by nothing, nothing at all.

If Eleanor knew she was blocking her, it did not show on her face.

“Come on,” Meredith said, her eyes on her niece. “Let’s go downstairs.”

They headed down the creaky hallway and down the lopsided stairs, where Meredith could hear Birdie excitedly exclaiming over her necklace in the kitchen.

“Hey there!” Juliette turned from where she stood over the ancient farm table and smiled at Meredith, both her voice and smile void of any anger. Meredith relaxed.

Her sister-in-law looked the same as ever, casual and pretty in her pink sweater and jeans, and a little rounder than the last time she had seen her. No doubt this was due to the presence of baby Rosalyn, who was perched in her arms, her owl-like eyes dark and fixed on the stranger in the doorway.

Another baby. Meredith smiled at the sight of her. Another girl for Val and this one had his nose, his chin and his belly.

Meredith exchanged a one-arm hug with Jules and looked down at the chubby-cheeked girl in her arms. "Nice to meet you, Rosalyn. I'm Aunt Meredith." Sorry it took so long to get here, she told her newest niece silently.

"Take her." Jules grinned and offered the baby sideways. "I need to see if it happens again."

Meredith plucked the girl out of her arms and Rosalyn didn't utter a peep. She sat placidly in her aunt's arms, staring up at her, calm as a lake and as comfortable as when she was with her mother.

"Amazing," Jules said with a bemused shake of her head. "Every time."

"The benefit of being a Gallagher," Meredith murmured back. It never stopped amazing her too, that her nieces and nephews should know her so quickly, as if she had always been there. She grinned at the chubby-cheeked baby and murmured a hello. To her great surprise, Rosalyn removed the wet, chubby hand from her mouth and gurgled, "Hi" in return.

"She's smart." Jules grinned. "Like Eleanor, remember? I wish I had known, I would've named her Parrot."

"There was a First Lady named Parrot?" They grinned at each other.

Meredith glanced over her shoulder where her niece was reading at the counter, oblivious to Birdie and Martha's swordplay that had erupted around the kitchen. "She seems quieter than usual," Meredith noted, nodding toward Eleanor.

Jules frowned over her eldest daughter. "She took Danny's death very hard, I think," she replied quietly. She was about to say something else and she hesitated, instead taking the time to draw Meredith outside and onto the screened porch.

"What is it?"

Jules sighed. "She keeps asking how Constance is, how the kids are. Every day." They both stepped over a clatter of brightly colored toys and Jules shook her head, bewildered. "I don't know what to say half the time. *I'm* having trouble finding out how they're doing, how they're really doing. I just can't believe she's thinking about it all in this way, you know. She's only ten."

Meredith thought about how she had tried to sense Eleanor's feelings just upstairs and the wall she met instead. She glanced back into the kitchen where her niece was reading. "Well, she's a smart girl. Observant," she replied finally, for lack of anything else to say.

Jules bit her lip. "I'm sorry."

“What?”

Her sister-in-law shook her head. “You probably don’t- how are you doing? With the news, I mean.” Her eyes pored over Meredith’s face anxiously.

Meredith tried to smile and failed, focusing instead on the unsettling way Rosalyn stared up at her as if she understood every word. “I’m- here.” She glanced around the porch, the backyard. “Where’s Val anyway?”

“Probably unpacking the car. There he is.”

Meredith turned as her brother stepped onto the porch from the backyard. Valentine Gallagher was her height and, to her constant irritation, almost as thin, dressed for the weekend in jeans, a faded black T-shirt and his favorite sneakers.

He smiled at her and hugged her, minding the baby in her arms, his dark hair a mess and going in every direction, just like Birdie’s. “Hey, stupid.”

“Hey, stupid.”

Jules smiled briefly and took Rosalyn from her arms. “I should go inside before Birdie’s big death scene. She likes to use all the ketchup for blood.” She opened the screen door and, right on cue, they could hear Bird’s melodramatic wailing from the living room. Meredith could just see her splayed out on the floor, fake sword hovering over her chest.

The smile faded when she looked back at her brother, who was now regarding her seriously. She waited for him to say something about the funeral, about her missing it, and felt every muscle in her body tense.

But what she felt from him, in waves, was simple grief. Grief for himself and for her. “I’m sorry about Danny,” he said quietly and she peered at him.

He was sorry for her loss. Her loss.

After a long moment, Meredith looked outside, into the garden, the woods. “Val.”

“Yeah?”

She took a deep breath. “How did it happen?”

Constance took her time unloading the groceries in the kitchen, wondering if now was a good time to rearrange the cabinets.

She had just decided against it, had decided cooking a meal big enough for twenty people would have to suffice in keeping her distracted for the day, when a male voice spoke up from the doorway behind her. “Need a hand?”

Henry's voice, her brother's. Still, she gave herself a second to close her hand over a can of tuna and gripped it so hard that her knuckles turned white. "Sure." Her voice sounded strange. When would everything stop seeming so strange? When would her own body feel like her own again?

"What's for dinner?"

"Spaghetti and meatballs." She glanced up at her brother as he stood across from her, pulling things out of the brown paper bags lined up on the counter between them. He moved slowly, first one whole bag and then the next, and, finally, she was able to latch onto something familiar, something unchanged.

For the last five years, her brother Henry had worn his thick, brown hair the same way, though it was growing more gray than it should for a man of forty, and he had a thick beard that he kept neatly trimmed. Given both his seriousness and his affection for tweed, it was always a great surprise to people when they learned that Val, not Henry, was the professor in the family.

Constance watched him regard a can of pearl onions before setting it down without comment. He was so much like their father, she thought. He regarded change carefully, analyzed things to death, and moved with a methodical slowness that sometimes drove strangers to distraction. When he had been prepared to marry Issie, Constance had warned her never to let him do the food shopping or there'd be a riot at the checkout line.

"Meredith's here."

Constance's hand, now clutching a head of broccoli, froze in midair, if only for a second. "Oh." She grabbed an armful of things to put them in the refrigerator, turning and closing her eyes briefly at the blast of cold air. It was getting warmer outside and she had yet to turn on the air conditioning. Danny liked to wait until July to turn it on, thinking the kids should experience a hot house for a few weeks, that it was part of summer and growing up. They complained about it, the rest of them, every single year.

It would never have occurred to her to turn it on now but, for the last few weeks, it had been more difficult to breathe in the house than usual.

Constance turned back to the counter, to the waiting piles of food, where Henry had finished unpacking and was now carefully folding the brown bags and laying them flat on the counter. "You don't have to do dinner tonight," he said.

"It's my month," she countered automatically and made a mental note to keep the things she would need for dinner out on the counter. "So, when did she get here?" The effort to keep her voice sounding neutral made it sound a bit like Constance was being strangled, which was not far from how she felt.

"A little while ago. She's been to see Dad."

She nodded and hefted a can of tomato sauce. "She's over at Val's now, I take it."

"Yes."

They sat in the garden, side by side on a stone bench that faced a short wall of cheerful flowers.

“He was heading home from the store and he was on the turnpike. It was late, one of the street lights was out, the one right by the high school. He was making a left turn and the car didn’t see him.”

“Which car was he driving?”

“The Jeep. The other car, it was a truck, it hit the car in the back right wheel and was going fast enough that it flipped it over.”

Meredith had heard this before, on the yacht phone when she had called her father two weeks ago. But it felt like the first time she was hearing it, deep in her gut. She was home now and there were clouds overhead and the air was thick and heavy and her brother was staring out into the air. “The other driver?”

“A guy in his forties. It was his third strike.”

“Third?”

“Yeah. Went right to jail, directly to jail. Do not pass Go.”

“Val-”

He cleared his throat, his eyes unreadable. “He didn’t have a scratch on him.”

*The bastard was drunk*, were her father’s words. He had sounded so cold, so ripped with anger that, for a second, Meredith had wondered if she’d called someone else by mistake, a wrong number. It was all just a big mistake.

“The police showed up.” This was the part that her father hadn’t told her. He’d told her what she had to hear and nothing else. *He didn’t make it. He died, Meredith. He died.*

Her brother swallowed. “Mer-”

“Val.” She looked at him plainly, her eyes the same as his in color and size and dry as the air around them. “Please.”

“You could just look-” he waved a hand. He looked pained.

Meredith nodded. “I’m know. I’m sorry.” She was being selfish, making him tell her, making him recount it. It would be so easy for her to see it, so easy. But she needed to hear it, she knew she did.

“If you don’t want to see her-”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“If you don’t want to see her, we’ll understand,” Henry finished. He took a seat at the stool. “Nobody would blame you for needing more time.”

Danny had been pinned in the car. It had taken the EMTs almost forty-five minutes to pull him out. He was awake the whole time, aware. He spoke to Constance and all of his children on the phone right before they cut into the car and the metal screamed. He couldn't move his legs. He wanted to talk to his family, he did not want to wait.

"He lost consciousness in the ambulance."

"I don't want to see her."

Henry and Constance looked up at Ally who had stepped into the kitchen. Her chin was up and though she was trying to look mature, at the moment, all Constance could see was how young her daughter looked.

Young and angry. "I don't want to see her," she repeated, looking first at her mother and then at her uncle.

Henry hesitated. "Ally-"

"If she comes, I'll go somewhere else." She looked at her mother and their eyes met. Ally was breathing hard. She had an expression on her face that Constance knew well. She would welcome a fight. As a toddler she had done this. She'd throw something to the floor, with her eyes on her mother's, waiting for a fight.

Constance went back to putting things away. "I can't ask her not to come, Ally." She stared into the dark cabinet, which was crowded with food. Too much food. "She's my sister. I can't do that."

"I'm your daughter."

She said the words like a slap. Constance winced but was certain to remove any uncertainty from her voice as she turned back around. "I know."

"He was in a coma for thirteen hours after the surgery. And then he woke up. But it turned out to be just for a few minutes."

"He saw them then?" Meredith asked. She was trying not to imagine it, trying to collect the facts separately from the scene of it, from Danny in a hospital bed, from everyone surrounding him. But her imagination was too good.

Val nodded and though his voice remained steady, his lean face had gone white. "The doctor talked to Constance, told her the situation, that the damage was too much, that everything was shutting down. He told her to say good-bye. So we did."

Meredith grabbed his arm. He wasn't looking at her but out into the air, into the trees.

“It happened a few hours later. Constance was there. Gillian took the kids back to the house.” She let go of his hand and shot to her feet. She could not sit there for a moment longer. “Meredith-”

“I’m all right.” She would not lose it here, she told herself. She avoided Val’s eyes and looked over her shoulder into the woods. “Thank you for telling me.”

“Meredith-”

“I need to take a walk now. Ok?”

She looked down at him finally and saw his eyes were wet. Selfish, selfish. He nodded. “Ok.”

Meredith didn’t breathe again until she’d stepped away, until she’d disappeared into the cover of the woods.

“Aren’t you angry?”

Constance avoided Henry’s gaze and focused on her daughter’s question instead. She considered the answer carefully and looked into her baby’s eyes, that were so much like her father’s. “It’s complicated.”

“You’re angry, I know you are,” Ally accused. “Why won’t you just say it?”

“I said, it’s complicated,” Constance snapped back. “And I’m not going to explain it to my sixteen-year-old daughter. Not when she’s talking to me with that tone of voice.”

“He asked for her.” Ally’s voice broke, just for a second, and Constance’s anger disappeared like smoke. “He asked for her and she wasn’t there. She never came.”

“Yes.” Constance closed her eyes for a second. She straightened up and looked at Ally. “You don’t have to come tonight if you don’t want to.” She grabbed a nearby dishcloth and mindlessly wiped her hands though they were dry. “I forgot garlic.” She looked at Henry and then Ally again. “I need to go back to the store. I’ll be back.” She pushed past them both. “Ally, watch the kids, please.”

Constance grabbed her bag. She didn’t stop moving until she’d made it to the car out front, until she’d sat down in the hot, humid car and was alone, at last.

Overhead, the clouds darkened and rolled as Constance left herself for the moment, swallowed whole by the past.

She had too much champagne and it took her over at once, the noise and the lights in the reception hall suddenly overwhelming. Put was asleep in his grandfather’s arms and the other children were fading fast. She’d stepped out into the hallway of the hotel to find Danny, to tell him they should go up to their room, and heard his voice coming from down the stairs.

He was standing by himself as she made it down the stairs, careful not to step on the hem of her pale blue bridesmaid dress, and Constance looked up in time to see a similar color flashing out the door. She looked into her husband's face, her cheer fading fast. "Meredith?"

Danny was wearing his best suit, the gray one, though there was a new stain on the sleeve. He glanced at her, his handsome face unreadable, his light brown hair cut too short. They had cut it too short at the barber's that morning and she'd said so. She liked it longer. It was too short now. "Yeah. She's gone."

Constance felt a trickle of fear grip her. It always gripped her when he looked like this, when he looked so separate from her. So other. "Is she going back to the house?"

"I said she's gone, Connie." He turned around and walked back to the stairs.

"What happened? Did something happen? Danny."

He looked back at her angrily and she felt chastened before her own anger rose. She was his wife, after all. Didn't she have a right to ask? She was about to say so when he sighed, pausing on the stairs.

"Let's go back up." Danny looked at her plainly. He reached out a hand and she hesitated, a part of her wanting to press. She told herself that if he needed to tell her, he would. It was what she always told herself.

A memory that was over before it really began. Constance stared dully out the car window, trying not to remember the rest of the night, dancing to one last song, carrying the kids to the elevator, Ally twirling in the dress that matched her mother's, that quiet, long moment as they waited for the elevator doors to open. She tried not to remember the rest.

Tommy found his wife frowning over the laundry. He winced. "I know."

She pushed a lock of red hair from her eyes, exasperated. "I mean."

"I know."

"It's *ridiculous*." She nudged one of the three full laundry baskets with her foot. "I was gone one day." She put her hands on her hips, eyeing him balefully. "You did this on purpose."

Tommy rubbed a hand over his mouth. "I don't know what you mean."

"Oh my God, you did." She walked over and smacked him in the arm. "You never want to watch them on your own ever again so you're torturing me."

"Gillian. Really." He put on his sternest face and crossed his arms over his chest. They were a mismatched pair from the outset, with her small and feminine prettiness, her fairy princess hair, and him with his tattoos and barrel chest. "You really think I would purposefully dirty everything the twins own just to avoid-"

“Right. So innocent. That’s why there’s spaghetti sauce all over the walls in the kitchen. You’re toast, Gallagher.” She eyed him over an armful of stained t-shirts. “Was it really that bad?”

“No.” He grimaced. “I mean, I’ve been in bar fights that were worse. Ok, one bar fight.” He laughed, ducking as she swatted at him again. Then, her grin faded. “What is it?”

Gillian ran a hand through her hair. “Annie told me she saw Meredith.”

“What? She did?” Tommy scowled. “Where? When?”

She told him about the woods, her leaving his father’s house and heading to Val’s. “Well, okay. Fine then. She’s home. About damn time.”

“Tommy-”

“It’s fine.” He turned back just as he lost the internal struggle. His wife was gazing at him with concern. “You’re going to tell me to let it go, aren’t you.”

She bit her lip. “It’s just, well.” She sighed. “There’s going to be a lot of people who are angry with her. People,” she added gently, “who have more reason to be angry than you.”

“Right.” He rubbed at his stomach. “Right.” As if it could hear him, the tattoo on his palm prickled, like an itch but deeper. He jammed his hands into his pockets and made his way down the hall.

She needed water. But the beach was out of the question.

Meredith had walked the woods that wrapped around the family property since she was seven and now, standing in a cluster of trees, the humidity bearing down on her, she wondered if she could still find her way.

She stepped over a fallen trunk and saw a small puddle in a narrow clearing. She moved toward it and glanced up at the trees that surrounded it, as if guarding it. They towered over her in tall, straight lines. The ground was soft, the air still. It would do.

It was silent there. It was quiet enough so that she could just make out the Sound on the other side of the trees and she’d lived beside it long enough to know the water was especially rough today. She slipped off her sneakers, her favorites, and settled down on the ground beside the puddle, her jeans caking with mud.

The puddle was small, carrying the width of her two hands laid side by side, but it looked deep enough. She could see her reflection there. That was all she needed, really.

Meredith said the words she needed to say. The strange combination of consonants tripped over in her mind easily enough. She dug her left hand into the mud beside the puddle and gripped the earth, the cool mud seeping through her fingers. She felt slight tremors in her hand.

Her right hand hovered over the dark, murky water. When the words in her mind slipped into a comfortable rhythm, she dropped her finger into the water and moved it in a circle.

The water responded immediately, so quickly in fact that it startled her, almost breaking her concentration. The hand that gripped the earth trembled. Had there always been so much power there?

Though her eyes were closed, she knew by the way the air shifted and changed around her that it was time to look. She withdrew her hand from the water. The water rippled and swirled of its own accord and she made her request, whispered it like a prayer.

The image slipped into the water like someone slid a photograph into the puddle and, though it wavered and shimmered, it did not break.

*“I’ll hold the rope and you climb!”*

*“No way! You climb!”*

*Meredith Gallagher was in the second grade and no one told her what to do. Ever. Except her mother. And her brother Henry. And Constance sometimes but they were older. This boy wasn’t older and they were in her woods. This was her territory. She clamped her hands on her waist and glared at the boy she’d been stupid enough to invite over to her house, her woods. But he just glared back.*

*What had started in a simple game of Climb Up the Dangerous Rocks and Touch the Top immediately turned into a staring contest. The girl with messy, black ponytail, torn T-shirt and her brother’s old shorts stood at the base of the rock and stared down the boy with his too-short, buzzed brown hair and fancy pants, his fancy collared shirt. The rope on the grass lay forgotten.*

*Neither of them blinked or moved an inch but Meredith knew she could smoke him. She knew Danny St. James was an only child which she figured put her at the advantage for just about everything. Thanks to her brothers, she could run, she could climb and she could hit back hard. Everyone knew the “oldest and only” kids were soft. Mama’s pet. Teacher’s pet. She almost felt sorry for stupid Danny St. James.*

*He wasn’t going to back down. He had screwed up his face and was taunting her, trying to make her break. He had just managed to get his tongue out and was twisting it towards his ear when she felt her resolve start to slip, she felt her lips quiver.*

*Immediately, she reached out with her right foot and laced it around his ankle. One tug and he was down. He fell hard on his butt. “Cheater!” He scowled up at her, rubbing his elbow.*

*She grinned down at him. “Yeah.”*

*Cheerfully, she picked up the rope and held it out to him. “Ok, you win. I’ll climb.” She dropped it on his lap.*

*“I win?”*

*She shrugged. "Yeah."*

*He looked at the rope and then up at her like she was nuts. "You know you're crazy, right?"*

*The last time a kid from school had said something like that, everybody had laughed. She had told herself it didn't matter but her insides had hurt anyway.*

*Meredith lifted her chin and her hands went back to her hips, a pint-sized Peter Pan in her sister's old sneakers. "Bonkers."*

*Danny eyed her from his spot on the ground and looked at the rope. He shrugged. "Fine. I'll climb." He scrambled up toward the rocks, missing her relieved grin, and glanced over his shoulder warily.*

*"You're not going to pull me off the rock or anything, are you?"*

*She let out a sigh. "Well, not now." And she grinned again as he shook his head and climbed up the tall rock.*

Meredith pulled herself back to the present and the water in the puddle turned clear and still once more.

Mere feet from where Meredith lay, the earth trembled. The air, the wind, left the place at once. The birds fled. The ants and beetles scattered. The tips of the tallest trees pulled away from the spot, from where the circle formed in the earth.

The lines had crossed in the dirt unbidden. They formed of their own accord. They circled one another until their ends touched. The wind came back then, a foreign wind, in a hot rush, bringing with it whispered words, an incantation long forgotten.

The circle began to move with life. The earth began to pulse.

*Thank you so much for reading this preview of *The Witches Sib!**

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