



PROLOGUE

MARIA HALLETT

CAPE COD, AUGUST 1717

THERE WAS A PERILOUS STORM last night, with gusts of wind that tore through Eastham like a scourge. The violence of the driving rain had matched my own rage, a pain so bone deep I wondered how I would survive it.

That's what grief had become for me, a boiling pot of emotions that kept me teetering on the edge. My love was everything to me—my North Star, my protector, and my deliverer. But now all that was left of him was this interminable rain that drove his coffin deeper into its watery grave.

I placed my shawl on the wet sand and sat down, glaring at the ocean as if I could resurrect him at will. My legs itched from the rough fabric of my homespun skirt bunched up above my ankles. I picked up a fist-

ful of the cool sand, let it sift through my fingers, and smelled the musty, brackish air. As I undid the pins of my white cap, my hair billowed like a sail in the breeze.

The noonday sun had long been hidden behind dark, gray clouds—the last remnants of that dreadful weather. A much worse storm had already laid its mark on this place just four months ago. The devil had a hand in that horrible night, I'm sure of it. At low tide, I could still see the planked shell of his ship like the bones of a beached whale.

I was afraid my little cottage just above those cliff dunes would be torn apart, so I hid out in my uncle's barn not but a quarter mile from here. The lashing rain and howling wind woke me in the middle of the night, giving me a jittery feeling, and I knew something had gone terribly wrong. I pulled my blanket up to my neck and burrowed deep in the hay, but sleep did not come.

The townspeople said I was a witch, but I swear on the Lord's Holy Bible that was a lie. I admit to having a knowing, just like I knew a storm was brewing long before the wind picked up and the sky turned pitch-black.

I must humbly confess, for as long as I could remember, I had this feeling about certain things, like a seed that had been planted deep inside me. But I don't cast spells or cavort with the devil. And I can't see the future.

My knowing's neither good nor evil...it just is.



CHAPTER 1

MADELINE HUNTER

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Deep calls to deep.

— *Psalm 42*

WE PILED ALL OUR THINGS into Dad's rickety old van: boxes filled to the brim with household items, suitcases, an antique lamp (my mother's favorite), an oriental carpet, a few plants, and, of course, lots of books. In the early morning hours, we left our home in Winsted, a small town in the northwestern side of the state. I imagined we were gypsies on a wild adventure. But after an hour on the road, I grew tired and irritable.

By the time we arrived in Penbrook, it was eight thirty in the morning. While my friends at home were

in class, Mom drove me to the nearest beach to cheer me up. I flung myself out of the van and ran through the parking lot. At the entrance of the small boardwalk that led to the beach, I took off my sneakers and socks in one fell swoop and pulled off my sweatshirt, letting it land near the dunes. But as I stepped across the wooden planks, my pace slowed and my breath halted. This wasn't the first time I'd been to the beach, but something felt different. The sights and sounds of the waves tumbling onto the shoreline overwhelmed me. When my bare feet touched the warm sand, I ran straight to the water's edge.

By the time Mom caught up with me, I was enjoying the sensation of the water pooling at my feet while the tide rose and receded, only to rise again until my hot temper drifted away, replaced by a peace and calm I hadn't known for many months. I imagined myself sailing beyond that thin line on the horizon. And, in that moment, I understood the raw power of the sea, whose vastness could either swallow me whole or soothe my tired wounds, reminding me of my tiny place in the universe.

A crab scuttled around my foot and dove headfirst into the sand as the water receded, leaving tiny air bubbles in its wake. I took a deep breath and let the sea-salt air wash over me as I tilted my head like a flower toward the sun.

At thirteen years old, I was almost as tall as my mom, who stood by my side with her arm wrapped around my waist. I inhaled her comforting Burberry

perfume mingled with the fresh-airy scent of the ocean.

“We’re home,” I humbly whispered.

She smiled, tucked a wisp of blonde hair behind her ear, and gave me a gentle squeeze. “Yes, we are, Madeline. This is our new beginning.”

I closed my eyes and envisioned my dad standing with us...the glassy sheen in his eyes, fingernails blotchy with paint, the smell of smoke mixed with turpentine. I could see him raising his thumbs up as if to frame this scene as a picture in his mind’s eye. He would’ve said the sky was azure, his favorite color. While I felt him float away, I pushed down the lump in my throat. Silent tears dotted my eyes. His death, just three months ago, had left a deep cavern inside me.

I knew Mom felt the pain of his loss too, but in a different way, one that made her want to escape, leave our home, and put the past behind her for good. Even the slightest mention of Dad would cause her to frown and turn away.

So, that’s why we’d packed up and headed to the coast. Mom said it was time to be near her side of the family for a change, which was a funny way to phrase it because there wasn’t a whole side, just one person—her sister, my Aunt Phoebe, who lived in Penbrook.

This surprised me because my aunt was the exact opposite of my mom, who often complained about her sister’s “new age” lifestyle. After being married to my dad, an artist who drank alcohol just as much as he painted, Mother had a disdain for creative “hippie”

types and, according to her, my aunt fit that category to a *T*.

I moved farther out into the water, letting my feet sink deeper into the sand, when out of nowhere a rogue wave hit me hard in the knees. I had the sudden urge to dive in headfirst but stopped short when I spotted something odd just a few feet away. It was the color that caught my eye—pinkish pearl mingled with turquoise green, a shiny dance of color and light at play under the water.

I looked over at my mom. When she stepped closer and leaned in to get a better look, her eyes grew wide.

“Oh my, it looks luminescent,” she whispered.

I wasn’t sure what that meant, but I knew we were seeing something rare and special.

Then a huge tail splashed, causing us to jump back in surprise. When I grabbed Mom’s waist for support, I could have sworn a long mane of reddish, wavy hair rushed past me as it glided out to sea.



Twenty-two years later: August 2, 2018

I waited at a corner table in front of tall glass windows overlooking the ocean at Fish Tales, my favorite restaurant.

My hand twitched while I tried in vain to resist checking my cell phone again. My friend, Chelsea, was sixteen-plus minutes late, which was typical for her but a lesson in patience for me.

I've known Chelsea since we were in high school, and even after all these years, I'm still not sure what binds us together. She's the exact opposite of me, a lively extrovert who lives to socialize. My head spins when she shows me her calendar because she has events or parties scheduled nearly every night. As a true introvert, I've always hated the mindless chatter of cocktail parties, preferring to relax on the couch in my fluffy robe with a good book and my black cat, Poe, snuggled up beside me. But, in a weird way, Chelsea and I balance each other out. I'm reserved, a perfectionist with a critical eye for detail, while Chelsea is wild, flamboyant, and easily distracted, hence always late.

While I scanned the emails on my cell, I glanced up and spotted an older man sitting at a small table a few feet away. His clothes caught my attention because he wore a burgundy sweater, which was odd for mid-August. With his ruddy, weather-beaten complexion, he looked like a sailor who had spent too many years at sea. He had a stocky build and a reddish beard peppered with gray. He must have been at least seventy, maybe older. I noticed the end of a slim white pipe sticking out from his breast pocket as he sipped his beer and recalled from our local museum that those clay pipes had been used over a century ago. *How odd.*

I felt drawn to speak to him, so I debated whether to walk over and introduce myself, but just then my stomach growled so loud I could have sworn the

people sitting nearby could hear it. *Oh dammit, I'm starving.*

Embarrassed, I flagged down Maggie, the server, and asked her to bring a basket of cheese biscuits along with a bottle of chardonnay, Chelsea's favorite. I used to babysit for Maggie when she was just a kid, and now she was taller than me. This is what I enjoyed about living in a small town, seeing familiar faces like Maggie's. Even though Penbrook had grown a lot since my mom and I moved here, it was still a close-knit community.

I glanced at a picture of the crab bisque featured on the menu, one of Fish Tale's signature dishes. The savory cream with a hint of sherry and meaty chunks of fresh crab meat got me every time. I was conjuring up the taste when Chelsea walked up behind me, her sing-song voice breaking my thoughts.

"So sorry I'm late, Madeline. The nutty client I told you about insists on having a call every Friday afternoon at four thirty, and tonight he kept rambling on and on. I couldn't get him to quit." Chelsea worked as an account executive for Bradford & Clarke Public Relations, the largest PR firm in town.

"No problem," my voice squeaked, trying to hide my lie.

Holding a Kate Spade purse in one hand and her cell phone in the other, Chelsea sat down across from me just as Maggie walked over with the basket and bottle of chardonnay.

Chelsea started speaking in that rapid-fire way of hers.

I pretended to listen while glancing over to where the old man sat. But he was gone. The table had been cleared, and there was no sign of him. I could have sworn he'd had a full beer just a minute or two ago.

My friend paused midsentence and frowned. "What's up with your hair?"

I put my hands in my messy bun and felt around for a pen, thinking I might have left it there when I was working at the front desk of my store, but my fingers came up empty. "What do you mean?"

"Well, for one thing, it looks like a hornet's nest."

I pulled out a compact mirror from my purse, wishing I had taken the time to check my reflection before leaving the shop. In a quick motion, I smoothed my fingers through my hair and redid the bun, which was still messy but I no longer looked like Medusa.

Chelsea continued to size me up. "And look at your hands?"

My fingers were laced with speckles of paint. "Oh, it's just some leftover residue. I finished renovating that cabinet I told you about, the one that's part of my latest collection of beach-style furniture."

A look of horror spread over her face as she strummed the table with her perfectly manicured, pale pink nails. When she shook her head in indignation, her red-tasseled earrings mesmerized me, swinging back and forth in unison with her movement.

I had always admired my friend's artful style. With her long blonde hair and pale blue eyes, heads turned everywhere she went, not just because of her fashion sense but her model-like beauty. I gravitated toward

the same palette—gray, black, and navy. I couldn't remember the last time I had gone to the nail salon or even the hairdresser. My business consumed most of my time and energy. I braced myself, waiting for one of Chelsea's fashion critiques, but, to her credit, she changed the subject.

"Did you get the text I sent you?" she asked.

"You mean the one with the link to another dating app? How many dating sites are out there?"

"You'd be surprised." She smiled and took a sip of wine. "But this one is different. It's for Mensa-types, bookworms just like you."

"Really," I huffed. "That's even worse than the previous one you sent me with the cowboys."

"They're farmers. You know, men who make a good living off the land, not riding horses in a rodeo. There are plenty of farmers in Connecticut."

"Penbrook may not be a big city, but it's not exactly farm country either," I replied, feeling both defensive and self-righteous at the same time. "I don't know why we're having this conversation, since you know I have no desire to date."

"I'm worried you're becoming a hermit," she declared a bit too loud. "You need to get out more."

I rolled my eyes. "Oh, come on. Just because I don't like to go out every night doesn't make me a hermit."

"Uh huh?" She picked out a cheese biscuit from the basket, took a bite, and gave me a dubious look, oblivious to the crumbs that scattered across her small plate and onto the table.

I bit back the urge to gather up the crumbs with my napkin.

“When was the last time you went to a party or even just a dinner with friends?” she whispered, as if my lack of social life was some big, dark secret.

My spine stiffened. I paused for a moment, searching my memory. Had it really been that long? Dating had been off the table since my last relationship disaster. Other than Chelsea, I hadn’t gone out with friends in months. I had even lost touch with my college buddies at Hartford. After an endless minute, I blurted out, “Just last Friday I went to an estate sale with Aunt Phoebe.” My cheeks reddened in embarrassment. I knew this was lame, but it was all I had.

Chelsea pointed her finger at me. “That was for work, and you know it.”

I struggled to find something to save face. I had gone to a few restaurants but to pick up my usual takeout. Last Tuesday it was Chinese, and the previous Friday, spaghetti and meatballs from a small Italian restaurant around the corner. Maybe Chelsea was right. Maybe I had become too much of a recluse.

“I guess a trip to the library doesn’t count?” I murmured.

Chelsea slapped her hands down on the table. “I rest my case.”

“Okay, I get your point.” I waved my hands in the air in mock surrender. “But I’m not like you, Ms. Extrovert. I don’t need to be the life of the party, and I enjoy being alone. My store is making a profit, so

I'm not stressed for a change. Trust me, I'm in a good place."

Chelsea crossed her arms over her chest, leaning forward. "I still think you should start dating ag—"

I couldn't stop myself from narrowing my eyes and cocking my head at her.

"Oh no, don't give me that look. It's been over three years since you jilted Andrew."

"He *cheated* on me!" I blurted out as the heat rose to my face.

Chelsea's eyebrow quirked. "Oh yeah, hmm...he did. And if my memory serves me right, you were planning to break up with him anyway. Even you must admit, his cheating was a convenient excuse. It gave you an easy out."

"I still felt betrayed. After all, he didn't know what I was planning."

"Oh please, we both know Andrew is not worth all this drama." Chelsea slapped her napkin over her lap. "You and I are going out next Saturday night, and I won't take no for an answer. I'll pick you up at eight."

Just the thought of going to a bar while Chelsea tried to fix me up made my stomach churn. I took a long sip of wine and turned to stare out the window. The full moon cast a pale bloom over the sea, reflecting pinpricks of light like tiny stars against an inky cobalt sky. The view had a calming effect on me, which helped drown out Chelsea's demand. The ocean was even more mysterious at night, making me wonder how many secrets lay beneath those watery depths.



CHAPTER 2

BY THE TIME WE PAID the check, I patted my full and very satisfied belly. Chelsea offered to drive me home, but I wanted to walk since I only lived a mile from the restaurant. Although Penbrook was bustling with tourists during the day, a peace came over the town at night, like a gentle stillness that rose from the mist swept in from the sea.

I walked Chelsea to her car and hugged her goodbye. Feeling tipsy from my third glass of wine, I crossed the street and nearly crashed into a streetlamp while glancing at the texts on my cell. That sobered me up fast.

I strolled past several art galleries and stopped to peer in Maritime Antique's window, my attention drawn to a ship's lantern from the early twentieth century. Made of copper with a Fresnel lens and solid brass handle, these "towing" lights were mounted so they could pivot to remain horizontal in rolling seas. I tried to imagine what it would be like to be a captain navigating rough seas on a rainy, moonless night

with nothing but these lights shining a pathway into the harbor.

After Penbrook was established as a small fishing village in 1686, it had become known as a safe harbor for ships to weather a storm or gather needed supplies on their journey. They say it had something to do with the lowland, because it was flat and not as rocky, but I think it had more to do with the people. To this day, the residents of Penbrook have had a reputation for being open and friendly, especially to visitors. They've always been proud of their heritage, which was why so many shops carried nautical antiques.

When I passed Deja Brews Cafe, a crackle of thunder startled me. My skin felt damp, sticky in the August humidity. The air seemed charged with electrical currents. As thick droplets of rain pelted the sidewalk, I picked up my pace. Glad I always keep an umbrella in the side pocket of my purse, I pulled it out and opened it up. With a swoosh, it turned inside out just as the wind picked up, flinging me forward until I almost tripped. I threw it in a trash can and lifted my purse over my head. Sheets of rain started pouring down in slants, causing me to sprint. When I turned the corner onto Poplar Street, a speeding car hit a bump in the road and sprayed me with a sheet of water.

What the hell?

I finally reached the door to my store, feeling winded but relieved. I shuffled several items around in my purse until I found my skeleton key tied to a purple ribbon. The bell tinkled when I opened

the door. I flipped on the light switch, paused for a moment, and took a deep breath.

There was something about the smell of antiques that always brought me comfort. Maybe it was the ever-present dust or the age of all those possessions that held so many memories, but something about their timelessness centered me, a reminder of my mortality.

My store was named Ella's Attic in honor of my mother, who had died from breast cancer two years earlier. I'd filled the space with vintage items I repurposed over the course of a very long and tireless year, collecting them piece by piece from estate and garage sales, auctions, and even online from eBay and Craig's List. The used furniture was weather-beaten and nicked here and there from the daily use of life. But they were made from actual wood, not particle board, and whether the piece was Victorian, art deco, or midcentury, each item had its own unique story.

When I first took over this space, I'd made it into a workshop and purchased paints, brushes, a power sander, rags, primer, and other such items. I'd had even less of a social life back then, ordering takeout for every meal. But I loved stripping chairs, tables, and dressers down to the bare wood, filling in the cracks and nicks, and adding just enough pressure with my handy power sander. I finished them with touches of color or, in some cases, fabric to create a new sense of style. Some would call this "shabby chic," but there's nothing shabby about vintage furniture. I loved choosing paint colors with names like

Honied White, Polished Pearl, and Chenille Spread. Time passed quickly, which had a healing effect on me. It had taken my mind off my mother's death while I breathed new life into each piece.

As I grabbed a hand towel from behind the front desk and dried my face and hair, I glanced around the store to view my work on full display. Sets of dresser drawers painted in a soft color palette of beige, mint, and teal lined the wall. A group of large decorative frames I'd repainted in shades of white and ivory were propped up on a display bench.

Each week, Aunt Phoebe and I arranged fresh flowers in nineteenth-century sterling silver teapots placed around the room. A variety of hand mirrors hung on the wall with the delicately painted backsides on full display. We placed soy candles in colorful jars on the tables, along with piles of lace, silk, and cotton fabrics sprinkled between antiques and vintage decor.

The smell also reminded me of the first time I had visited an antique store with my mother. From the first moment, that very first sniff, I'd been hooked. At eight and with childlike wonder, I had run my small fingers over the old wind-up toys, wooden tops, and the miniature elephant on wheels with its bright blue and white paint chipped in various places.

I know this might sound strange, but the toy elephant gave me a tingling sensation. I can't explain it, but I could feel the essence of the child who'd played with the toy so many years before. This had happened again and again until it felt natural. But as I'd grown older, I realized I was unique because when

I questioned the other kids about their experiences, I didn't like the looks they gave me, like I had two heads. Afraid people would think I was weird, I spent years trying to ignore that side of myself. My mother would have approved of me denying my abilities had she known.

The day Mom died of breast cancer, a thin streak of silvery-white hair suddenly appeared from root to tip, framing my face. I was only thirty-three years old, and my hair had always been dark chocolate brown. You can imagine how shocked I was to see this odd streak in the mirror. But I chose not to dye it, so it had become part of my signature look.

My mother would not have approved.