

# THE FAMILY BEACH HOUSE

by

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## Prologue

### **The Present**

Craig McQueen breathed deeply. It was mid-morning in July and the air was warm but fresh, not humid or close. He had been walking Ogunquit Beach for over an hour, back and forth, stopping to pick up stones and bits of sea glass that caught his attention (only green; he had never found blue), stopping to watch seagulls whirling over the gentle waves. He loved seagulls. He liked their audacity. The tide was going out, leaving seashells on the damp sand—snails', some occupied, some abandoned; broken razor clam shells; and the shells of surf clams, some as long as eight inches, the clams locals collected for chowder.

The beach was busy and would continue to teem with people—families, young people, leathery skinned sun addicts, day-trippers, and those on weeklong vacations—until around five o'clock, when cool showers and fruity cocktails and dinner and ice cream beckoned. Craig didn't mind the crowds. No one in particular owned Nature. And he wasn't a possessive person in any sense.

Craig's eyes scanned the gentle curve of the beach. The Abenaki Native Americans had it right when they named this place Ogunquit, or "beautiful place by the sea." Supposedly they had summered here in pre-colonial times. Now, hundreds of years later, Ogunquit beach was considered one of the top ten most beautiful beaches in the United

States. Some things never changed, and in this case, Craig thought, it was a good thing.

In the ten years that Craig had lived in Ogunquit year round certain things had, of course, changed—gift and trinket shops had come and gone, as had several restaurants—but, like the beach, other institutions such as Barnacle Billy's remained, their lush, perfectly tended gardens one of the main attractions in Perkins Cove. Reliably, Lex Romane and Joe Riillo were still playing jazz and blues in restaurants and at birthdays and weddings. And down in York Beach, kids were still enjoying the Wild Kingdom Zoo and Amusement Park and the carousel and arcade. Ogunquit's annual Patriot's Day celebration was still alive and well, as was Christmas by the Sea, the mid-December event that marked the official start of the holiday season for residents.

Weeks, months, years. Ten of them. It was hard to believe it had been that long since his family had gathered at Larchmere for the memorial of Charlotte McQueen's death. Charlotte—matriarch, wife of Bill and mother to Adam, Tilda, Hannah, and Craig.

What a strange time that had been! Within two weeks a full-scale drama—could it be called a melodrama?—had unfolded. It was complete with arch villain—that would be his older brother, Adam—and damsel in distress, who would be his sister Tilda, or maybe, thinking more about it, his sister Hannah, Craig supposed.

The thing that had started it all was the stunning news of his father's new romance. Then had followed the panic over the future of Larchmere, the beloved family beach house. Added to this were the private conflicts that, by the weeks' end, had resolved for better or worse, depending upon whose opinion you asked.

If you asked Craig, he would say that things had worked out just fine. As least they had for him. He knew he had never been in serious contention for the ownership of the family house, for Larchmere, and that had in some way made him a spectator to the main events, though he had had his own existential crisis to handle. Existential crisis—was that what it had been? Yes, he thought that it had. He had confronted

his place in the world and had grappled with the question of how to live his life meaningfully. It was a big question deserving, but rarely getting, a lot of thought.

A childish scream of glee erupted to his right and Craig sidestepped a toddler tumbling toward the water, his harried mother right behind him. Craig smiled. He looked at his watch, the one his father had left him when he died the year before, the one Bill had received from his own father so many years ago. The face was round and the band, replaced many times over the years, was brown leather. It was the first watch Craig had ever worn. He liked the way it felt on his wrist. He liked that it had once belonged to his father and grandfather. It made him feel connected to something good, something stable and continuous.

The watch told him that it was eleven o'clock, almost time for lunch. Craig, realizing that he was starved, turned back toward Larchmere, toward home, where Nigel and the other beloved members of his family would be waiting.

## Chapter 1

### **Ten Years Earlier**

#### **Sunday, July 15**

Tilda McQueen O'Connell had gotten to Ogunquit, and to the house, Larchmere, well before noon. She had left South Portland around ten-thirty, hoping to avoid commuter traffic (which was never very bad going south, anyway), made a stop at a farm stand for blueberries and gotten to the house just as her father was leaving for a golf game with his old friend and personal lawyer, Teddy Vikes.

Tilda had noted that her father, Bill McQueen, looked hale and hardy, wearing his favorite blue Oxford shirt and that goofy hat he loved. And he had seemed in a particularly good humor. He had even laughed about the inevitability of his losing to Teddy. Not that Bill was, by nature, a grim or dour man. It was just that Tilda had not seen him quite so upbeat in a long time. It was a bit interesting, given the fact that the family was gathering at Larchmere in the next few days to mark the tenth anniversary of Charlotte McQueen's passing. Well, she would take her father's good mood as a positive sign. He had been widowed for ten years. There was no point in prolonged and unnecessary mourning.

If only she could convince herself of that. Frank, her husband, had been gone for a little over two years now, but the fact, the shock, of his loss still seemed so fresh.

Tilda put her travel bags in her room, the one she had always shared with Frank, and did what she always did upon arriving at Larchmere. She went for a stroll around the house and grounds, noting the familiar and the new, and remembering.

Tilda McQueen O'Connell was built like her mother, Charlotte. She was tall—five feet, nine inches when she wasn't slouching, which she lately had a tendency to do—and thin. Also like her mother, and like her older brother, Adam, her hair was dark brown and her eyes hazel or green, depending on the light and what color blouse she was wearing. She wore her hair in a short, stylish cut that softened her longish face. She used very little makeup and her taste in jewelry was simple and classic. Most of it had come from Frank, including the little emerald studs that made her eyes look very, very green.

That day she was wearing a cream-colored linen blouse she had gotten on sale at Marshalls years ago, and olive-colored chinos that were at least six years old. Tilda couldn't remember the last time she had shopped anywhere but at discount stores and outlets. It wasn't that she was overly penny-pinching or seriously in lack of funds. It was just that she saw no reason to pay full price when there was an option

not to. For that matter, she also could hardly remember the last time she had shopped just for fun. Retail therapy had lost its appeal about the time of Frank's diagnosis.

Poor Frank. He had never understood why Tilda had stopped wearing skirts a few years back. If you had long, slim legs, he would say, why would you want to cover them? Tilda had no good answer to that. But wearing only pants eliminated one little daily decision, so expediency had won out over vanity. Maybe it was an age thing. Tilda was forty-seven—some would say “only” forty-seven—but sometimes she felt much, much older. Even before Frank had gotten sick she had started to feel—redundant.

Tilda walked down the steps of the front porch and viewed the large, well-kept lawn. The air was warm but fresh. A vibrantly yellow butterfly fluttered past and darted into the stand of tall, graceful, ornamental grasses her mother had loved so much. Tilda breathed deeply. She was happy to be “home.” Now, more than ever, Larchmere felt like her refuge, her safe haven. She wished she could spend the entire summer there, and as a high school English teacher she might have been able to but her sister, Hannah, had helped Tilda to get a part-time job as a freelance proofreader at the ad agency where she worked. The summer job would help make ends meet and it would also, maybe more importantly, keep her from feeling too lonely. Frank was gone and the kids, now college-aged, spent more and more time out of the house, as was to be expected. In fact, for the first time ever both Jon and Jane were spending the summer at home in South Portland where each had a job. In past summers they lived at Larchmere with their mother, grandfather, grandmother, and aunt, waiting tables at local restaurants when they were old enough and spending free time with friends. This summer, Tilda was experiencing her own, unique version of the empty nest syndrome.

Tilda walked in the direction of the gazebo. She remembered a particular hot summer night, not long after her wedding, when she and Frank had taken refuge there while a passing thunderstorm drenched

and cooled the air. The storm was magnificent. Frank's arms were strong and loving, his kisses warm. She had wished the rain would go on forever.

But rain wasn't always welcome. The summer before, Tilda remembered as she walked on past the gazebo, had been abysmally rainy, the wettest southern Maine had experienced in many years. Farmers had lost entire crops, business owners had suffered, tourists had grumbled, and locals had gone mad—figuratively and literally. But this summer, Tilda thought, at least so far, was truly perfect in comparison. There had been lots of sunny days, and a romantic amount of morning fog over the water on more humid days.

Because it was July, Ogunquit and the surrounding areas were decorated with masses of orange day lilies (also called tiger lilies) and vibrant red day lilies. Wild daisies, clover, Queen Anne's lace, and buttercups filled the fields and lined the roadsides. Cattails were wildly growing at the edge of marshes and valerian, with its powerful scent, was invading any empty space it could find a hold.

Nature was certainly prolific, not only in its flora but in its fauna, too. Tilda remembered a spring afternoon, a long time ago, when the entire front lawn of Larchmere had been covered with robins, some busily searching for food, others standing immobile, seeming to stare into space. There had to have been a hundred of them. It was as if someone—the Robin King?—and called a meeting or a convention. Where had they all come from? Why had they gathered that particular afternoon? And why on Larchmere's lawn? It was weird and disturbing, all those feathered creatures, a flock of robins, not seen before or since.

Tilda now approached the enormous pine on which she once had seen perched a great blue heron, a massive gray bird swaying in the wind at the very top of the tree. The bird had a cry like a harsh croak, not pleasant to humans, and built its bulky stick nests in trees or bushes. Not far from Larchmere she had once seen a rookery of twenty-three nests. It was an impressive sight. How did birds make

such strong, beautiful nests, with no hands and fingers and opposable thumbs? Tilda shook her head. And humans thought they were so special.

Stepping carefully, Tilda made her way into the woods that edged the back of the lawn behind Larchmere. She was about to pay her first visit in years to the fairy house. She wasn't sure why she wanted to see it. For a moment she felt lost, unsure of where the house stood. It was the only fairy house she knew of on this bit of land. On Mackworth Island and Monhegan Island and at the Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens in Booth Bay where were colonies of fairy houses, magical places that compelled you to speak in a hush and watch carefully for the sign of fairy dust.

The first fairy house Tilda had ever seen was on the grounds of her aunt's friends Kit Ryan and Carrie Boyd, just over the town line of Cape Neddick. She had been a child, maybe about six or seven, and had been immediately enchanted. She had totally believed that fairies — who were, of course — real — made their homes in the little fantastical constructions of twigs and moss and stones.

When Jane was about five, Tilda helped her to build her own fairy house with twigs and moss and interesting little rocks and shells they had collected on the beach. Each evening, when Jane had gone to bed, Frank would sneak out and leave little plastic fairies, tinier plastic animals, and even notes from fairies, written in green ink, on miniscule pieces of paper, in and around the house for Jane to find in the morning. When was it that Jane had finally stopped believing that fairies, the kind in her storybooks, weren't real? Tilda thought it had been around the time when puberty reared its ugly head and life lost a certain sort of magic and became all prosaic.

Larchmere's fairy house had been neglected since Frank got too ill to maintain it. Why he had continued to care for it after Jane had lost interest was anyone's guess. Tilda thought that maybe it was his way of holding on to his little girl. But maybe she was wrong. She had

never asked him why he still cared about the fairy house. She wished she had.

There it was, or, what remained of it. She looked down at the house in ruins. The roof, a large piece of bark, was on the ground, in pieces. A curious animal had long since carried off the little plastic figurine. The bright white shells were now only broken, dirty bits. Tilda felt terribly sad. She turned and walked quickly back to the open and sunny front lawn.

The fairy house was gone. Frank was gone, too, though thoughts of her husband were never far from Tilda's mind. Frank O'Connell had been the physical opposite of his wife, only about five feet, eight inches and always struggling with an extra ten or fifteen pounds. He had been an economics major in college and had gone on to become a small business specialist at Portland's main branch of a large bank. It was a job he loved, helping people with a dream and a passion to get started and eventually achieve results.

At work Frank had liked to dress nattily in classic cut suits and vibrant ties and shiny Oxford style shoes, but on the weekends, and whenever he and Tilda and the kids were in Ogunquit, he had liked to wear knee-length cargo shorts, big T-shirts, and Boston Red Sox baseball caps, of which he had a large collection. Tilda routinely begged him to retire the rattier hats but Frank always refused. A hat was serviceable until it came out of the wash in two pieces. That was pretty much the only issue about which Frank was stubborn. He was a sweetheart of a guy, easygoing, everyone who met him agreed. He was genuine and fun and quite simply, likeable. In fact, Tilda thought, there was nothing wrong with her husband, except for the fact that he was dead.

Tilda blinked hard, as if to will away the dark thoughts. And then she heard the crunch of tires on gravel. Her sister Hannah's car, a Subaru Outback much like her own, was just pulling into the long driveway. Good. She was glad for a distraction as the melancholy she

had been holding at bay all day was threatening to settle like a sticky, black lump in her chest, something that might choke her.

Tilda walked back up to the front porch of the big old house to await Hannah's arrival.

## Chapter 2

"We got a bit of a late start," Hannah was saying as she dropped one of her travel bags on the kitchen floor. "Our downstairs neighbor's parrot got loose in the hallway again and would not go home."

"I finally persuaded her with some sweet talk and a little treat."

"Why can't her owner handle her?" Tilda asked Susan.

Susan rolled her eyes. "Her owner has issues and let's just leave it at that."

"That bird rules the roost," Hannah added. "Polly really should have a trainer."

Tilda laughed. "Polly the parrot?"

"The owner also isn't very creative."

Hannah McQueen and Susan Sirico had been married for almost three years. Frank had been too sick to attend their wedding in Winchester, Massachusetts. Tilda, Hannah's witness, had worked hard to muster the joy she knew her sister deserved, but with her own spouse dying she had not been very successful. Hannah had even offered to postpone the wedding, at great financial loss, but Tilda wouldn't allow the too generous offer. Her sister had waited long enough for the right to legally wed. Nothing should stand in the way of her big day. Frank had agreed and had written a warm letter of congratulations for Tilda to give to the brides.

The entire McQueen family had attended the service and reception, with the exception of Frank, and, of course, Adam, who arrived after the service was over, claiming he had been held up at the office. At the reception he downed several cocktails in rapid speed and then took off, again claiming work as an excuse. His wife at the time, Sarah, had just rolled her eyes behind his back, but Susan had been visibly angry. She saw Adam's behavior as disrespectful of her union with Hannah. But Hannah had put a lighter spin on things, reluctant, Tilda thought, to admit the possibility of her brother's being as unpleasant and selfish person as he in fact was.

"Did we miss lunch?" Hannah asked now. She opened the door to the fridge and peered inside.

Tilda shrugged. "I think everyone is on her own."

Hannah emerged from the fridge with a pound of sliced turkey, a pound of sliced Swiss cheese, and a grin.

Physically, Hannah, now forty-four, was clearly her father's daughter. Her hair was a deep, burnished red, just like his had been before it had gone white. She was about five foot six inches tall and had an average build. Her eyes were a blue green, not the intense blue of her father's, but large and pretty. But where their familial relation really showed was in their mannerisms. Both consistently crossed their legs to the right. Both tapped the tip of their noses with a forefinger when thinking hard. And both liked to eat scrambled eggs with a spoon. Their similarities had been a source of some amusement for Tilda and Craig when they were all growing up, and a source of unexplained annoyance to Charlotte. Adam had never paid much attention to the peculiarities of his family members.

"Here you go." Hannah passed a sandwich to Susan, who eagerly set to her lunch.

Susan was from an Italian-American family who had lived in Falmouth, Maine, for generations. She had dark brown hair and eyes and, in Tilda's opinion, the most enviable skin she had ever seen, even toned and with a natural blush on her cheeks. Susan was a fund-raiser

for a family advocacy group in downtown Portland, a job that required a lot of energy and people skills, both of which she had in abundance. While friendly, she brooked no bad behavior. Often the first to laugh at a good joke, she could also be intensely thoughtful. And she was very protective of those she loved, Hannah most of all.

Hannah was a production manager at the Portland branch of a large Boston-based advertising firm. Together she and Susan lived in Portland's West End in a condo that comprised the top floor of an old, restored Victorian home. That means they had no outdoor space for planting or barbecuing, but otherwise their home was exactly what they wanted it to be. They had plenty of access to the great outdoors at Larchmere, only a forty-five minute drive away.

Hannah put the rest of the turkey and cheese back in the fridge, just as the sound of tires on gravel could be heard. "That's Dad's car."

"He was out playing golf with Teddy," Tilda said.

"Ouch." Susan smiled. "Why does he torture himself like that?"

A few minutes later Bill joined his daughters and Susan in the kitchen. Bill wasn't a very demonstrative man but when it came to Hannah, he could never resist a show of affection. He hugged her warmly.

"How did you do?" Hannah asked, with a grin.

Bill shrugged. "I lost, of course. And no, I'm not telling anyone what I shot."

Bill McQueen was seventy-three years old, a retired Boston businessman. His hair was still thick, though now white, and his eyes were still clear and intensely, piercingly blue. Amazingly his eyesight was still near perfect. The only help he needed he got from the ten-dollar reading glasses he had bought at the pharmacy in town. Bill was just about six feet tall. His taste in clothes was classic, verging on preppy, though Tilda suspected her mother had decided for Bill long ago what he would and would not wear. Tilda doubted her father had bought any articles of clothing since her mother's passing, except maybe socks and underwear. And that dorky hat he liked so much.

Tilda heard the front door open and a moment later her aunt, Ruth McQueen, was in the kitchen. “Greetings all,” she said putting her white, pebbled leather handbag on the table. (Ruth owned approximately one hundred bags of every description.) “I’ve been to the Bureau of Motor Vehicles and am simply parched. Anyone care to join me in a cocktail?”

“Yes, please,” Bill said. “Losing always makes me thirsty for gin.”

Ruth laughed. “So that’s why you play golf”

Like her older brother—she was sixty-four—Ruth was a natural redhead, but unlike Bill, she maintained her original deep, burnished shade professionally. She was smallish, about five feet three inches, and slim and strong. She dressed, to use her own old-fashioned expression, “smartly,” but always with a bit of drama. Though physically unimposing, Ruth exuded strength of character and a definite individuality. Some people, she knew, found her too outspoken and off-putting. Others thought her eccentric. Tilda and Hannah had always been a bit in awe of their aunt.

“So, what’s new and exciting in your lives, girls?” Ruth asked.

Tilda said, “Nothing.”

Hannah said, “Not much.”

Susan said, “I’ve got this very interesting new case. Of course, for the sake of the client’s privacy I can’t give you details, but...”

While Susan told her story, Bill, only half-listening, sipped his drink contentedly. William McQueen was the patriarch of the family. For the past ten years he had been a widower, living alone in the big house except for the company of his sister Ruth, now retired. He liked the quiet life they lived, with their small circle of friends—particularly Teddy Vikes and his wife, Tessa, and Bobby Taylor, a lobsterman. But he liked Larchmere better when the house was filled with the sounds of his extended family—his children, now adults, and grandchildren.

When Charlotte was alive, she and Bill had lived in Larchmere as “joint tenants with rights of survivorship.” Now that Charlotte was

dead, Bill was the sole owner of the house. It had originally belonged to his parents, a plumber and a housewife, who had bought it for a song (relatively speaking) back around 1937. How they had scraped together the money Bill never knew. He did know that the entire undertaking had been for his parents a labor of love. The house was originally only equipped for residence in the summer. Over time, Bill's parents had added a heating system and insulation and electricity. They had replaced the roof and repaired the mortar where necessary and built the guest cottage, which, years later, Bill had renovated.

It was always known that the house would be left to Bill, not to his sister. Bill had eagerly embraced the legacy of Larchmere, continuing the improvements and expansion, spending more and more time there on weekends and vacations, and eventually retiring to the house when he and his wife were in their fifties. He was never sure that Charlotte shared his commitment to Larchmere. He didn't dare to ask her. It would have broken his heart to know that she would have preferred to live elsewhere, some place more cosmopolitan, some place where the population didn't drastically shrink after Labor Day.

Bill seemed to be the only one who had not been sure of Charlotte McQueen's commitment to Larchmere. She had made no bones about her dislike of the long, quiet winters and her disdain for a good many of the locals, people who had lived in the Ogunquit area for generations. Maybe Bill just hadn't heard his wife's complaints and criticisms. Maybe he had heard but had not been able to bear her opinions. If he had been a different sort of man—his sister would have said a tougher sort of man—he might have confronted Charlotte's discontent. As it stood, Charlotte had gotten into the habit of going off to Portland or Boston and sometimes New York, at least once a week, often an overnight, leaving Bill alone with his precious house by the sea.

And over the years that precious house by the sea had been grown and improved so that now, instead of being just a two-season house, it

was an all-year dwelling, complete with the renovated (it now had a full bath) guest cottage, a gazebo large enough for six people to enjoy a meal, and a three-car garage that housed Bill's 2002 Mercedes S430, Ruth's BMW 3 Series convertible, and a 1961 Volvo P1800, which Bill's friend Bobby just couldn't bear to part with.

No one but Teddy Vikes knew the exact contents of Bill's existing will. Frankly, Bill preferred it that way. Larchmere was no one's business but his own—yet. The one person to whom he would happily have confided the contents of his will refused to accept the confidence. Ruth had told him that sometimes not knowing was best. Bill didn't understand her reluctance to know who would eventually inherit the family house. She had always made it clear that she didn't want to be Bill's heir. Ruth loved Larchmere, but not like her brother did. She had absolutely no interest in taking on the responsibility of a rambling, old house, complete with lawns and gardens, and gazebo and guest cottage, especially not at her age.

Ruth had moved into Larchmere with Bill shortly after Charlotte died. She hadn't asked him if she could, she simply showed up one day, and Bill seemed very thankful for the company. Something had been in it for Ruth, too. She was tired. It was time to take a permanent break from her exhausting career as the senior vice-president of a large international cosmetics firm. Besides, Ruth strongly felt that her brother needed the companionship. Bill had been with Charlotte since they were teens. He had never lived alone. He had never done much of anything without Charlotte besides to go the office to make the money that kept her in tennis lessons, diamond jewelry, and spas.

It had been impossible not to see that though Bill was the breadwinner, Charlotte was the actual head of the McQueen household. She was domineering yet indifferent, difficult, if not impossible to please. There had been little love lost between Ruth and her sister-in-law. For Bill's sake alone they had tolerated each other. Ruth found Charlotte to be mean-spirited, controlling, and

parsimonious with her love. Charlotte found Ruth to be vulgar and embarrassing.

Ruth once had found it curious that Charlotte's favorite child was Tilda, a girl so unlike Charlotte herself. By rights, Adam should have been her favorite, self-centered, big-egoed Adam. But then it had dawned on Ruth that Adam could never have provided the near worship that Charlotte required, the near worship that Tilda so readily provided her needy mother. Charlotte must have seen herself in Adam — assuming she was at all self-knowledgeable — and wisely chose her older daughter as acolyte.

Ruth now busied herself with finishing the cocktails and putting out a bowl of mixed nuts (she would fight her brother for the cashews; they had been fighting over cashews since they were children) and a small plate of good olives. She watched Bill chatting with his daughters and daughter-in-law. He was the picture of a contented man.

While some men might have welcomed a solitary existence after so many years with a...determined woman, not Bill. He was the sort of man who needed a woman close at hand; it hardly mattered whether it was a wife, sister, daughter, or a friend. In fact, in Ruth's opinion he had always been putty in women's hands, which, she thought, might partly account for his rather poor relationships with his sons. In her experience men didn't respect other men who allowed women to play them like fiddles. But that was only her opinion. And after all, what did she really know about men? Oh, she had had plenty of romantic relationships and she had worked closely with men for her entire long career, but she had never been married, she had never lived with a man other than her father and now, her brother. And daily life with a man you were sleeping with had to teach you lessons you just couldn't learn otherwise.

The cocktails were ready, gin and tonic for Bill and Ruth, a glass of wine for Tilda, and dry martinis for Hannah and Susan.

"To a happy two weeks at Larchmere," Hannah said, raising her glass.

“To my someday winning a game of golf,” Bill said, reaching into the bowl of nuts and snagging a few cashews.

Tilda raised her own glass. “To Mom.”

“To my brother leaving me a cashew, please.”

“To the McQueens,” Susan said, “a very interesting group of people.”

### Chapter 3

Ruth turned from the sink, where she had been washing salad greens, and reached for a dish towel to dry her hands. Charlotte, with the help of a professional designer, had succeeded in creating a popular room for her family. The kitchen was large and arranged on an open and friendly plan. There was a center island, which included the sink and a cooktop. At the far end of the island the counter was at a higher level, forming a bar top around which were arranged several stools so that a person could have her afternoon tea there, or a glass of wine while she chatted with the person preparing dinner. A small, round table painted bright blue sat in a sunny alcove, a perfect spot for sipping morning coffee and reading the local paper. A larger, scrubbed pine table was often used for lunch and casual weekday dinners. The walls were a creamy lemon yellow and the cabinets were finished with a honey-colored stain. A rectangular ceramic clock painted with sunflowers on a vivid blue background, hung on one wall.

“I’m assuming your father hasn’t told you about his girlfriend,” Ruth said to her nieces and Susan. “He’s never been the most communicative man when it comes to personal matters.”

They were suitably surprised. Susan shook her head and smiled. Hannah’s mouth dropped. Tilda felt as if she had been physically

pushed, so off guard did this news take her. “What?” she said. “Dad has a girlfriend?”

“For the past four months or so now. They met a few years ago when they were both on the zoning board. She was married at the time. I seem to recall his talking a lot about her, though. She’s divorced now, of course.”

“How can you sound so nonchalant?” Hannah asked, her voice rising. “This is a big thing! This is huge!”

Ruth shrugged.

“Who is she?” Tilda pressed. “What does she do? Does she live in Ogunquit? Do we know her? Is she retired?”

*Really, Ruth thought. You would think they’d found out their father was consorting with a terrorist.* “She’s hardly retired. She’s only fifty. She has a small interior design business. I hear it’s successful. What else? Oh, yes, she lives in Portland. I think she has a condo in one of those developments on the pier. When she’s in Ogunquit she stays at a B and B. Rather, she used to. Now she stays here. She has no children.”

“And this has been going on for how long? Four months? And Dad never said a word to me!” Hannah felt hurt. Why hadn’t her father told her about this woman? She had thought they were close. “Wait, what’s her name? Do we know her?”

“Jennifer Fournier,” Ruth told them. “Some people call her Jen, but not your father. I don’t know. You might have met her. She lived in Ogunquit for some time while she was married. Her husband commuted to Boston every day for work. That can’t have helped the marriage, but what do I know.”

Tilda put her hand over her heart. “I’m shocked. Really. I can’t believe I’m hearing this.”

“Why?” her aunt said. “Your father’s not a kid but he’s hardly in the grave. He’s handsome, intelligent, nice, if not the wittiest guy around. Why shouldn’t he have a little fun?”

Susan, who had been silent until now, said, "I think it's great. People shouldn't be alone. And yes, Tilda, I mean everyone, including you. If one of my parents died I would want the other to find a companion, remarry, something. I'm not saying it would be perfectly easy for me to accept it, but I would accept it.

"She would," Hannah said. "But she's not a McQueen. She's well adjusted."

"I'm well adjusted," Tilda protested. "I'm just surprised. That's normal."

Ruth sighed. "Well, I suggest you girls get used to the idea of your father having a girlfriend. I have a feeling this is pretty serious. Okay, I'm going up to change for dinner. I'll see you all later."

When she had gone Tilda and Hannah stood staring at each other. Neither said a word. Neither had any idea of what to say. Bill's relationship with Jennifer was "serious."

Susan cleared her throat. "If I could interrupt the psychological convention here, I'd like to suggest we all go and change for dinner. Hannah?"

Hannah mutely followed Susan from the kitchen. A moment later, Tilda, too, went to her room to change. In the upstairs hall she paused to examine the embroidered sampler hanging on the wall close to the bathroom. Her paternal grandmother had sewn it. On the background of cream-colored linen was depicted a simplified Larchmere as it had looked back around the time of her father's childhood. A rudimentary garden with flowers of faded pink and yellow spread from each side of the house to the borders of the wooden frame. Across the top Grandma Ruth had spelled out "Larchmere" in an elaborate stitch that Tilda couldn't name. (She had only mastered the cross-stitch).

She went into her room and closed the door behind her. Her beloved Larchmere! Before Grandpa Will had bought the house, it had been, as far as anyone knew, without a name. But Grandpa Will had decided to call the house Larchmere for, Tilda supposed, the number of larches, a type of pine, rimming the back edge of the property. She

knew that “mere” meant a small, standing body of water, but as far as she knew there hadn’t been such a thing on the land since before her grandfather’s time. Another meaning for “mere”—and she had looked it up as a child—was boundary. That made a bit more sense. The larch pines themselves formed a sort of boundary, and she knew of the remains of an old stone wall in their depths.

The house, built largely of stone, was composed of two floors and large basement in which Charlotte had installed a small gym and a finished laundry room. On the first floor were the kitchen, a powder room (added by Bill and Charlotte), the dining room, the library, the living room, and a screened in sunroom (also an addition by Bill and Charlotte). Charlotte, a devotee of the sun, had opened up walls wherever possible and added windows, eager to make the big old house as bright as it could be. There was a stone fireplace in the living room, used often in winter, and an iron, wood-burning stove in the library, which gave off a tremendous heat. Across the entire front of the house and around one side ran a covered porch, decorated with wicker chairs and loveseats, painted white, and small tables of varying heights. When Charlotte was alive there had also been an ornate, thronelike wicker rocker, hers especially, but after her death it had been relegated to the basement. Tilda was not sure why, or who had made the decision to remove this very personal piece of furniture from the family’s sight. Maybe her father had not been able to bear the sight of anyone but his wife in it.

On the second floor of the house were the master bedroom and bathroom, facing the front lawn, off which sat a small but lovely deck; a second full bathroom; and four bedrooms of varying size. To accommodate extra guests, the library had a big, brown leather sleeper couch. Craig, used to sleeping in his van, on other people’s beds—indeed, on any horizontal surface he could find—often bunked down in the library, leaving one of the upstairs bedrooms empty. As he was an avid reader, like Tilda, his retreat to the library made a certain sense.

Ruth's bedroom was, interestingly, as she had had a choice, the smallest of the four, and decorated (some would say crammed) with exotica from her travels. There was a swath of watered blue silk, hung from a rod on the wall, that she had picked up in England. On the floor was an antique patterned rug from Iran. On her dresser sat an intricately carved jade box from China, in which she kept her most precious jewelry. Her many handbags were stored floor to ceiling on custom-made shelves. Tilda remembered these details from a permitted visit years earlier. Ruth kept her door locked, though a cat door had been cut out near its base for Percy, her gray and white, five-year-old longhair, to come and go as he pleased.

Tilda sat heavily on the edge of the bed now. Ruth's comment, that she thought her father's relationship was serious, was weighing on her. Serious meant marriage, especially for a man of Bill's generation and disposition. Marriage meant that what was mine was yours and vice versa. Larchmere was Bill's. Would it someday also be Jennifer Fournier's?

Tilda put her head in her hands. She knew she was being dramatic, imagining the worst possible thing that could happen. But she couldn't help herself. With her father romantically involved it felt as if the very foundations of her life were compromised. Larchmere might soon pass out of the family McQueen. And what would happen to her then?

She simply couldn't imagine Larchmere not being home. She simply could not.

The McQueens met for dinner that evening in the dining room, the only somewhat formal room in the house and only used when family or friends were staying at Larchmere. Charlotte had enjoyed collecting fine China, which she displayed in a tall and unusually deep cabinet she had bought at an antique shop in Kennebunkport. She had also enjoyed collecting expensive line table-settings—cloths, runners, placemats, and napkins. These were kept in a large low credenza, on top of which was displayed a Murano glass bowl Charlotte had

purchased while traveling in Italy with an expensive tour group one summer. It had never occurred to Tilda to ask her father for a tablecloth, or vintage milk glass creamer and sugar bowl set, or the set of sterling silver napkin rings her mother had bought in a SoHo gallery in New York, as a memento of her mother. Tilda's own home furnishings were of a much simpler and less fine sort and she felt that her mother's possessions would be very out of place in her own relatively humble South Portland home.

The family gathered around one end of the oval-shaped dining room table, Bill and Ruth, Hannah and Susan, and Tilda. Percy kept a close eye on the meal from the top of the credenza. If it bothered anyone that a very furry cat chose to be in the vicinity of food, no one had the nerve to complain about this to Ruth. (If Charlotte were alive, however, Percy would have long since been banished from the dining room.)

"Look at us," Hannah said. "We could be a print ad for L.L. Bean." It was true. Hannah was wearing chinos, white boat sneakers without the laces, and a coral colored, light-weight cotton sweater. Susan wore a chino skirt, blue boat sneakers, and a striped linen big shirt tied at the waist. Tilda had changed into fairly new, tan chinos and lemon yellow cardigan over a matching T-shirt. Bill wore an Oxford cloth button-down shirt tucked into pressed chinos. Only Ruth looked urban and out of place, in black linen slacks and a crisp, tailored, very white blouse with the starched collar turned up. Around her neck she wore a bold silver disc on a black silk cord. Her flats were also black silk. She could have been off for luncheon at MOMA in New York City.

Ruth reminded them—not that anyone had forgotten—that Adam, his new fiancée, and his children were due to arrive the next day.

"I'm dying to meet Adam's fiancée," Tilda said. "I can't imagine what she'll be like."

Hannah laughed. "Oh, can't you? I've got a pretty good idea. At least, I know she'll be a whole lot younger than Adam."

“There’s nothing necessarily wrong with that,” Ruth commented, with a look to her brother. Bill, busily eating, did not seem very interested in the women’s speculations.

“Of course, not,” Susan agree. “But it won’t be easy on Sarah if Adam marries someone much younger.”

Ruth, who had remained close to her nephew’s ex-wife, shook her head. “I wouldn’t worry about Sarah, if I were you. She’s not the sort who’s easily thrown by such trivia.”

“But,” Tilda said, “she will be concerned about what kind of a person is going to be her children’s stepmother.”

Ruth nodded. “Of course, as well she should be. Still, she won’t be able to prevent Adam from marrying whomever he pleases.”

Hannah, who was feeling impatient with the talk of Adam’s soon-to-be-wife, took it upon herself to move on to the topic she and her sister really wanted to discuss. “So, Dad,” she said, with false casualness,” speaking of relationships, Ruth tells us that you’re seeing someone. Romantically, I mean.”

Bill looked up from his plate and blushed. His embarrassment embarrassed Tilda. But he didn’t seem in the least bit ashamed, and that angered her. Her anger, irrational, further embarrassed her. She reached for her wineglass.

“Well, as a matter of fact I am,” he said.

Now that the subject has been introduced, Hannah didn’t know what else to say. She looked helplessly to her sister. Tilda shook her head. Plenty of thoughts were racing in her mind but none of them was able to emerge as a coherent comment or question.

Susan, who was sitting next to Bill—Ruth was at the head of the table—patted his hand. “Well,” she said, “I think it’s great, Bill. We look forward to meeting her.”

“She’ll be here for the memorial, but you’ll meet her before that. We see each other pretty often, whenever her business allows.”

Tilda was stunned. Her father’s girlfriend would be attending Charlotte McQueen’s memorial? Ruth was right; this relationship was,

indeed, serious. She wondered if Jennifer Fournier enjoyed sailing and then thought: *What a bizarre thing to wonder about!*

Because Charlotte McQueen had died in a sailing accident. She'd been out with a friend and had stumbled over a coil of rope that perhaps should not have been where it was. She had fallen and hit her head and that had been that. She was dead instantly. It was a death vaguely romantic and without obvious mess, something, Hannah thought, befitting the rather snobbish Charlotte. Aware of its harsh character, she, thus far, had only shared her opinions with Susan.

"We're all very happy for you, Bill," Susan was saying now, "Aren't we?"

"Yes," Ruth said emphatically, "We are."

Reluctantly, Tilda and Hannah murmured their assent.

Tilda was sitting at the window of her bedroom. The lights were off in the room, which meant that she could see the designs of the trees in the dark outside, branches long and clawing, trunks turned black against the blue night. She couldn't sleep. She was worried about the uncertain future of her beloved Larchmere. She was worried about her own uncertain future. What would happen to her if her father remarried and the family home ceased to be the family home? It scared her to think of the house being lost to a stranger. But it also scared her to think about the possibility of her father leaving Larchmere to all four McQueen children. There would be absolute chaos! It would be impossible to negotiate with Adam, who always had to be right, and as for Craig, he would just take off and leave the others to pay his share of the upkeep. Tilda loved her younger brother but she wasn't blind to his faults. As for Hannah... Well, Tilda suddenly realized she had absolutely no idea how her sister felt about the possibility of inheriting Larchmere. Hannah and Bill were very close. There was no reason her sister could not be considered a possible sole heir.

And if Hannah were to inherit Larchmere, would she cherish and protect it the way Tilda knew it deserved? Again, she had absolutely no idea. They had never talked about the house and what it meant to them. They had simply taken it for granted.

An owl hooted. Tilda thought he sounded melancholy. She hugged herself tightly. Was there nothing upon which she could rely? Death took loved ones away. It had stolen her mother and her husband. Time and distance could loosen emotional ties. And now, what if her father remarried and as a result, even Larchmere, her beloved home, was stolen from her?

Life was loss. She knew that. And she had been as prepared as anyone could be for the impending death of a loved one. She had read books and articles in magazines and online. She had bought a copy of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's classic book, *On Death and Dying*, and dutifully read it through.

She knew all about the five stages of grief. First there would be denial. That would be followed by anger, and then by bargaining. Next would come depression and finally, at long last, there would come acceptance.

She also knew that the stages of grief were not distinct. She knew that they sometimes overlapped and nipped at each other's heels. She was prepared to feel numb. She was prepared for the deep yearnings for Frank that would threaten to overwhelm her. She was prepared for the bouts of awful sadness, for the tears, for the withdrawing from friends and family.

She was prepared as it was possible to be, which meant that when Frank finally died she was hardly prepared at all.

On the AARP Web site (she had turned everywhere for help) she had been told that grief, like life, doesn't proceed in an orderly fashion. "Mourning," they had said, cannot happen without your participation." Too bad, she thought. Because mourning was exhausting and surprising, no matter how prepared you thought you were.

She was tired now. She got up from her seat by the window and crawled into the bed. She still slept on the right side though she could have slept on the left or diagonally, or right in the middle of the bed if she chose. But she didn't choose.

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