

CHAPTER 1

When Thea Connor drove across the Cape Cod Canal on the Sagamore Bridge, all of the tension eased out of her body. She looked far down at the water, where toy-sized boats churned up fluffy white wakes.

She stuck her hand back between the bucket seats and tickled Emily's knee. "Hey, giggle girl, where are we?"

"Home," her four-year-old sang out, as she did every time they crossed the bridge.

They drove by Hannah's favorite Christmas Tree Shop, stoking Thea's grief. If only her mother was still with them. Why did she have to die right before she saw Thea pass the bar and return home to practice law on the Cape?

Hannah had been so proud of Thea's accomplishments. That pride had helped support her through the hard times. How could Emily understand the loss of her grandmother, who had been an integral part of her life since the day she was born? Hannah had loved them both so dearly. Thea blinked her eyes against the tears.

It took another thirty minutes to arrive at their cottage. She woke Emily, unbuckled her from her car seat, and lifted her to the ground.

Before she was fully awake, Emily began to talk. "Mommy, what's growing in my garden now?" Then she skipped toward the back yard, where her garden was planted, without waiting for an answer.

Thea stood looking after her until she remembered Star. "Oops. Sorry, girl." She walked around and opened the back of the car where Star—the German shepherd whom Emily had adored enough to wheedle away from Hannah—waited patiently in the way-back. Star flew out of the car and ran across the freshly cut lawn to the woods. Who mowed the lawn? Thea wondered as she headed to the back yard.

"Mommy, look."

Thea knelt beside her as Emily pointed out the nubs of herbs pushing out of the rich brown soil. "Nana said the grass has enough room to grow in the lawn and it's not allowed in the garden," she said, pulling out each blade of grass that had begun to creep around the periphery of her garden. She hugged Emily's shoulders, left her daughter to it, and walked back around to the front of the cottage.

She gazed at the quintessential Cape Cod cottage with its cedar shingles, hydrangea blue shutters, and white picket fence. An arbor, laden with soon to bloom New Dawn roses arched

over the front door. A worn plaque next to it, placed by the original owner before street numbers existed, said Knoll Cottage. It was charming, but she saw the curl and split of the cedar shingles, mossy where the sun missed them, in need of replacement. The front door was desperate for a coat of paint; the chimney, leaning so far to one side, Thea couldn't imagine what was keeping it up.

As she stepped onto the farmer's porch and pulled the key from her pocket, she heard Star's yelps of joy and saw her running flat out. She got the door open in time for Star to run right inside, and kept it open for Emily, a few steps behind her. Star continued barking as she raced through the kitchen, slipping and sliding as she turned down the hall. Emily followed her, bubbling with laughter.

Thea grinned as she pushed open the kitchen windows, freeing the lace curtains to dance in the breeze. *Home.*

Later, Thea sat in the old rocking chair on the sun porch, her flower-child mother's *sacred space*, waiting as Emily, bathed and in her nightie, pulled book after book from a shelf.

"Emily, please choose only one."

"But Nana reads me three." She held up two fingers and her thumb. "I want three books."

"Let's compromise. How about two?"

Emily pressed her full lips into a pout. Too cute for words, making Thea work to hold her ground.

"When's Nana coming back? I want her to read to me."

"Sweetie." Thea leaned forward and ran her hand over Emily's curls. "Remember Nana isn't here anymore. She's gone to live with the angels," Thea said, feeling the pain of her words.

A frown briefly clouded Emily's face. She tilted her head to the side and looked around the sun porch. Her eyes seemed unfocused, as if she was listening to music. She blinked, then turned to look at her mother and giggled. "Nana's here, Mommy," she said, as she scooped up the pile of her chosen books. She climbed on Thea's lap, listened to her read the *three* books, sometimes pointing her index finger uncannily on the sentence.

Thea knew this joy would be their permanent new life soon. At the thought, a pang of guilt shot through her. She'd been so busy the last three years that loving moments like this had been rare. But soon she would finish her last class, move away from the chaos of busy Boston and return to the serenity of the Cape. Almost there. Almost done.

Katherine Anderson was so absorbed watching the dance studio's pianist, she missed her little girl's fall. Only the sounds of worried, frightened voices alerted her.

She turned and saw Madison's inert body lying on the floor, and felt all the strength drain from her own body. She cried out, "Madison!" as she stumbled from her chair and scooped her pale, unconscious child into her arms. All around her subdued voices asked each other what was wrong with the child.

"Should we call someone?" The ballet teacher said, shaking her hands as if to cast off drips. "Should I call an ambulance?"

Madison stirred in Katherine's arms. Her light blue eyes flickered open and she looked around.

"Oh, thank goodness," the teacher said. "Are you feeling better, Madison? She must have fainted. Do you think she fainted?" the dance teacher now asked Katherine.

But she couldn't answer. She'd turned icy cold. She gave her daughter a few sips from the glass of water one of the other mothers brought over. "Feel better, darling?"

Her daughter only nodded, as if she was too exhausted to speak.

Madison rested her head on Katherine's shoulder as she carried her to the car. She would go home and call the doctor the minute Madison fell asleep.

Maddy loved rock music. Katherine turned on the radio full blast for the ride home. Through the rear view mirror she watched Madison in her car seat, bobbing her head to the beat. Katherine held in the sobs that crowded together at the back of her throat. Something this terrible couldn't be happening to her daughter. These things happened to other people. Strangers. There had to be some mistake. But there wasn't. The doctor had warned her.

That afternoon, Doctor Thompson's expression, after he had examined Madison, told Katherine he suspected the worst, though he'd tried to sound encouraging. Madison's screams, when they took blood for the tests he ordered, were echoed in her mother's mind. The results showed time was running out.