

BASEMENT SUPPORT

by

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A Thesis
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A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University.

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Master of Arts in Writing
Coastal Carolina University, 2013

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DEDICATION

To you.

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This novel would not be possible if I never stumbled upon the writing of Hemingway. In a more realistic acknowledgement, the Mason MFA has been a wonderful support system for my writing and me. To the amazing MFA community and my wonderful fellow writers, thank you so much for your feedback and guidance along the way. To my director, Susan Shreve, and readers, Steve G. and Tim D., thank you. To the CCU MA in Writing program, Constance would not be here if it was not for my time with all of you brilliant people. To my family, thank you for always believing in me. And lastly, to my love, you make me a better writer.

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ABSTRACT

BASEMENT SUPPORT

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George Mason University, 2016

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This novel follows main character, Constance, a recently abandoned housewife, and her interactions with the people who live in her neighborhood. After marrying Jake and moving to a fictional neighborhood on the coast of South Carolina, Halfmoon Harbor, Constance finds herself unhappy with herself, her life, and her marriage to Jake. After Jake packs up and leaves their life behind, Constance, being the only single person in the entire neighborhood, struggles to make connections with the women around her, the men who enter her life, and herself. Through her part-time job at the neighborhood marina, promiscuity with strange men, and her creation of a support group for women who want to leave their husbands, Constance slowly begins to understand what she never understood in the past and what she will need to do to be happy.

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CHAPTER ONE

Sunday, The Departure

Constance sat on the front porch and watched Jake's car leave the driveway. She imagined him grasping tight to the steering wheel the way he would sometimes when he drove while stressed. That was a thing she used to make fun of him about, turning in the front seat and tilting her head to one side as she whispered, "Don't stress and drive." Constance would laugh at her own joke. She was just that type. Jake would not laugh because he never heard her when he would be stress driving. Those memories hadn't happened in years and Constance surprised herself by thinking of them as he left her.

For a brief second she thought she saw the reflection of his knuckles clinching onto the steering wheel through the side mirror, but he turned left onto Ocean Blvd. before she could bring her wet eyes into focus. She denied this later on in life, but she walked down the street to the corner of Halfmoon Dr. and Ocean Blvd. to get a better look at his taillights disappearing. As they became smaller and smaller until she could only see a dot in the distance, she realized three things:

One. She couldn't feel her body. It was numb. Or dead. She thought maybe it was numb from the cold, but it wasn't very cold in South Carolina in September. The numbing was unlike anything she had ever felt before—a pain both inside and outside of herself. She was, in her mind, both inside and outside of herself. On the one hand, all of

her was aching. On the other hand, she had imagined looking at herself and touching her chest. She imagined watching her skin fall off one piece at a time, revealing her insides in a way that nobody living in Halfmoon Harbor would like. So maybe it wasn't so much a numb feeling but more of the dead feeling. A dead skin feeling. A feeling the other women living in Halfmoon Harbor wouldn't understand. They would definitely call the homeowners association and request an immediate street sweep if they looked out of their windows and saw her disappearing with the falling sun.

"Look at that pile of skin," they would say. Or, "There is a skinless human standing on the side of Halfmoon Dr. and Ocean Blvd," they would report to the police as they hurried along to their basements and locked themselves there until the problem had been fixed. Of course, they wouldn't know it was Constance because she would be skinless, but Constance wondered if they would help her if they did know it was her. She wondered if they would even care that she could not feel her body. They hadn't cared up until that point about her so why would they start then.

Two. She knew she would be alone from then on out. He was not coming back and she knew that. The departure of one of them had been a long time coming. Their marriage hadn't been a happy one after their first year. Five years later it was an ending one. Ending and unhappy. Constance thought it was interesting that she could only remember the good times, though, as it was coming to an end. People always seem to revert to the good times when things end.

Dusk was just settling into the salty fall air. It seemed like all of the sounds were fading with the light, making her more aware of her aloneness by the minute. She stood

on the corner and stared into the distance. The ocean that could be heard miles away on a quiet night was not even willing to keep her company in the street. She listened for the crashing waves but heard nothing. Shaking her head as if erasing an etch-a-sketch, she tried once more to hear the ocean. Nothing. She was alone.

She pictured the ocean following Jake like a child picking a parent in a divorce. It would descend from the beach and follow him up the coast to D.C. That made sense to Constance because it explained why the ocean was not making any sounds. It had left Halfmoon Harbor with her youth and her husband.

The ocean was probably giving Jake a pep talk as he stopped for gas on 17 and tried to decide whether or not he would go back home and apologize or call or anything. Naturally, having already left the Harbor, the ocean would convince Jake to keep going.

Three. She would have to walk back to her driveway and into her house before the night was over. She knew when she did that she would not open her door back up to Jake ever again—even if he did come back to apologize—even if he did call. The five years of marriage and three years of dating before the marriage were over and she was alone. Most of her had disappeared when his headlights disappeared from her sight. This didn't happen because she loved him with all of her, but because she had lost herself over the years. She was a stranger to herself, a child again. Jake had taken everything she had known and it was time for her to meet herself again.

CHAPTER TWO

The Monday After

Constance woke up the next morning and went about her regular daily routine as if Jake was simply on a business trip. The routine she normally followed every previous Monday when Jake was still there. She didn't know what else to do. As she lay in bed sobbing the night before, she kept telling herself it was just another business trip. She told herself that so many times that she started to believe it. Just as she started to believe it she dozed off to sleep.

She sat in the kitchen that Monday morning and made a list in her head of the things she wanted to accomplish that day.

Coffee

Laundry

Lunch

Check the mail

Check my email

Clean the bathroom

Clean the kitchen

Dinner

The lists helped her organize her day post Jake's departure so she didn't know how to not make them. That first Monday they helped her to not think about Jake. They helped her to not think about the puffy eyes she had from crying all night. The lists were her distraction. The simple and demanding acts of crossing things out and adding things distracted her. For example, she crossed out "lunch" and replaced it with "don't eat lunch" when she sat down and realized she could not eat. At one point her list got so jumbled that she couldn't remember what was on it. She wasn't used to that kind of freedom. She wasn't used to not *needing* to get things done by 5.

When Jake lived there she had to adhere to her lists because she was a stay-at-home wife. The lists would not be in her head then either. She would have actual paper lists that she would have to work her way through each and every day before Jake would get home from work. When they married they both decided that she would stay home to take care of things around the house. In the early stages of their marriage they wanted children so they both thought Constance trying to find a job would be pointless. As the years went by the desire for children decreased and the complacency of stay-at-home wifing increased. It was a full time job and Jake expected nothing less.

In a way Constance felt liberated with her new head lists that Monday. They were something new and different. She didn't *have* to get any of it done and once she realized that she started laughing. She laughed and laughed, sitting on her kitchen floor, until she began to cry. Once it started it didn't let up for days. Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. Sobs. It was a different kind of cry than the type that Sunday. She couldn't convince herself he was just on a business trip anymore. That Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday cry

was harder, deeper. She deep cried in every room of the house. The walls saw her in a different way. She made sounds she had never heard herself make before and felt her body ache in ways she didn't know were possible.

The thing was, Constance didn't have anyone after Jake was gone. Her parents died before she ever had the chance to rekindle her relationship with them. She regretted that only after Jake was gone. They didn't like Jake. Their Washington D.C. opinions were strong enough to make her choose Jake over them. They found him controlling and sketchy, whatever that meant. When Constance first brought him home to meet them he barely spoke, walked away to talk on his phone often, and insulted their city by saying it was dirty, boring, and the buildings weren't tall. None of this bothered Constance because she loved Jake. She loved him with everything that she had inside of her and it was as simple as that. When they married, they ran away to elope and she never looked back again.

Constance loved Jake through the fights and through the business trips. She loved him when he wanted to "try out new things" in bed. She even loved him when he began to alienate her from everyone after years of being pretty open to her going out and doing her own thing. It seemed to happen overnight. It happened so fast that Constance didn't even realize it happened. Even after she realized it happened, she blamed it on everyone else but Jake and herself. There was no more trips home to D.C. because he needed her there to take care of him. When her younger sister, Camden, got pregnant and delivered a baby, she had to sneak away for the day to see her niece and sister because she knew Jake

wouldn't approve. She didn't think there was anything wrong with that. He had certain demands and she didn't want to disappoint him.

When Jake found out about her one-day trip to D.C., he pushed her into the sliding glass door. It was the first time he had actually put his hands on her. She spend days soaking in a tub and crying. After that there were no more long phone calls with her sister, Camden. There was no more Constance, just a version of a woman that Jake had always wanted.

On the day Constance's dad died Jake was flying back from a work trip and needed her on call for when his plane landed. If she wasn't there to pick him up then he was going to get his secretary, Jessica, to do it. Jessica was everything she wasn't in every sexy way imaginable and Jake reminded her of that often. Constance sent her condolences from South Carolina and promised to get home soon. She hadn't seen her parents in years at that point. They were a part of her life that she was no longer familiar with. She grieved on her own, when Jake was at work, and moved on. The same thing happened when Constance's mom died twenty-two months later. Camden called and begged her to come. She sobbed and said she couldn't do it all by herself. She said if it was because of Jake then she could get her help. Constance did not go home. She grieved again, alone at home once Jake went to work, and stopped speaking to her sister.

The thing was, Constance and Jake had not been happy for years. She stayed because she had lost herself somewhere along the way and his voice was all she heard. She stayed because she was afraid of leaving. She stayed because she didn't have anywhere else to go anymore. She stayed because once, a few years after her parents

died, she tried to leave and go live with her sister. She called her up and asked her if she could help her leave him. Camden, who hadn't heard from her in years agreed. She moved Nicole into her room so Constance would have her own room. She bought groceries and cleaned her house. She lined up a job for Constance and scheduled a dinner with her D.C. friends so Constance's time would be occupied. She told all this to Constance the day she was supposed to leave. When it came down to it, she couldn't leave and she went back to hearing only Jake's voice.

CHAPTER THREE

That Day She Tried to Leave, Two Years Prior

Constance woke up one Tuesday morning in the fall, two or so years before the day Jake left her, on the blue and white tiled bathroom floor Jake picked out, wearing nothing but a vomit covered white towel and a watch that stopped working at 4:06 that morning. She tried to lift herself off of the floor while still keeping her towel wrapped around her, but just as the towel dropped Jake opened the bathroom door to check on her. She tried to look at him confidently. She tried to recognize something about him she fell in love with long before. She couldn't. Her body ached from his hands and her eyes were heavy from not sleeping.

"Feeling any better, honey?"

"A little bit. I don't know what's wrong. I'm guessing I have a stomach bug or something," Constance said as she wrapped the damp towel back around her body, covering the marks Jake seemed to forget her left on her, and headed for the bed.

Constance and Jake had been married for a few years at that point, and on that morning—that Tuesday morning—after he left for work, she was finally going to leave him and Halfmoon Harbor for good. She had it all planned out with her sister, Camden. She was going to leave while Jake was at work and head to D.C. They plans with Camden had been happening in secret for weeks. She wasn't allowed to talk to her sister

on the phone. It made Jake jealous so she knew she had to make her escape before he received the phone bill that month.

“Well, maybe tonight we can stay in and have a movie night since you still don’t feel great,” Jake said as he wrapped his muscular, yet awkwardly effeminate, arms around her vomit waist and kissed her cheek. She knew what was going to happen. She knew they weren’t going to have a relaxing movie night. They never did. And she especially knew it this time because she would be long gone in D.C. with her sister who she missed with every ouch of herself she had left.

“Okay, a movie night sounds great.”

She lied.

Constance sat on the bed and watched Jake slide into his dress pants. She traced the outline of his body with her eyes. The way she used to when he turned her on. She tried desperately to find something about him that would make staying worth it. She couldn’t. As he tied his tie in front of the mirror, she pointed out that he was running late. Jake turned around slowly, smiled, and said, “What would I do without you?”

“I don’t know,” she said. And she didn’t know. All she knew was that he was about to find out what life would be like without her there. Without her there to cook and clean. Without her there to tell him he is brilliant. Without her there to hold him. Ha. Hold him.

He lied.

Jake squirted on his cologne and made his way down the stairs to the front door. Like a small dog following its master, Constance followed behind him closely. She

wanted him to say something. Something to make her want to stay. He didn't. Not yet. He turned and hugged his wife. For the first time in months Constance grabbed on to Jake and hugged back. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes as she tried to capture the moment. She imagined what they looked like from the outside looking in. She imagined what a picture would look like if it was taken right now, outside of their opened glass door, outside in the neighborhood that she hated because she didn't fit in. What would a picture of them gently embracing one another look like? A lie, probably. It wouldn't be a happy picture. Or maybe it would be. She hadn't thought about it until just then. She guessed that people looking in would see it as a happy picture. Either way, she took that hypothetical picture and put it in a special place in her mind. She wanted to remember that very moment forever.

“Have a good day, sweetie, and think about what movie you want to watch tonight.”

“Okay. I will. Have a lovely day at work.” And Constance slowly shut the door behind Jake and ran down the hall and up the stairs eagerly.

She started with the big suitcase. The suitcase she and Jake bought for their honeymoon to Paris. Back when they traveled together. It was perfect because it had a separator right down the middle, which made it easy for them to pack their clothes separately but together. Jake liked that. Constance slowly unzipped it and began to pack. She was on a time limit. She looked down at her watch, but remembered it broke at 4 that morning. The time on her nightstand said 9:14 so she still had a full day to get what she needed and get the hell out.

She started with shirts and dresses. Red shirts and dresses. She had the most red shirts. She acquired them over time. Her other shirts were not nearly as numerous as her red shirts. She couldn't understand why she had so many red shirts. She never really noticed until then. She didn't like the color much. He liked her in it. He always bought her red. Every time he fucked her he made her wear red in some capacity. He liked the way her dark hair looked upon the red shirts. It turned him on. This had to be why he bought her these red things. A realization she felt dumb for just then noticing.

She moved on to her other colors. She put her red shirts and dresses on one side of the suitcase and as much of her other colored things on the other. When there was no more room she closed the suitcase and zipped it up. She took a deep breath, but her head became clouded with images of the red in her shirts and dresses getting loose somehow and bleeding onto her other clothes. She couldn't help but think that this would happen. What would she do then? She would have randomly colored clothes and there would be nothing left of the red. She knew this wasn't possible but the images wouldn't leave. They took over.

"Uggghhhh. Fine. I'll change it," she screamed as she unzipped the haunting suitcase and took her red things out.

"You guys probably want your own suitcase anyway. No...I'm throwing you away," she screamed. And she ran downstairs and threw every single red shirt and dress in the garbage.

"Fuck you!" she yelled again at the trashcan.

Constance went upstairs and looked under the bed for the small suitcase they bought for their trip to Boston on their first anniversary. After she packed her jeans and pants in the small suitcase, she decided to put all of her socks and underwear in the left side of the partitioned suitcase. She left a lot of things in the dresser drawers. The things that meant more to her than she could handle in her next life. The Hawaiian-style shirt she bought for their first date (which happened to be a Hawaiian-themed party) could stay. She didn't have much use for that memory. The baggy sweatshirt with the letters "Clemson" on it could stay. That wasn't even her college—it was Jake's. She wouldn't need that memory either. She scanned the room and thought about the things she would need to take with her.

"Passport," she said. "I will need that." Constance knew that she wanted to begin traveling again. She missed that young girl who traveled the world, who lived in Spain for a summer, who spent weeks in Peru on a whim. She missed her and she would get her back. Nothing else in the room felt important enough to her to take. She was content parting with all of the other things that had built up their house over the years. She didn't need her piles of shoes. She didn't need the jewelry box full of ugly jewelry that Jake would bring back for her after being on a trip longer than he should have. She had just enough. She had just exactly the same amount of things she had when she and Jake met: a clothes and a passport.

Four suitcases later and she felt she had all of the clothes she would need. The rest could remain in Halfmoon Harbor with the life she would leave behind. She carried each suitcase downstairs and stacked them from biggest to smallest next to the front door. She

then sat on the steps and stared at her suitcase masterpiece. A tower of power. She liked that. The power. She thought about what would happen if Jake came home right then and saw that tower. She thought about how bad the night before was. How sick she had been about leaving. She thought that that day—that Thursday—would finally be the day she would leave, but like every other time she tried in the last two months, she knew it wasn't going to happen.

Something about the stacked suitcases reminded her of a memory from a time when she was happy. She smiled a smile that warmed her cheeks and made her second guess her decision. The same smile she had when she first met Jake in that bar in Charleston. His dark charm made her rethink everything she had ever known. The butterflies in her stomach were relentless and moved in waves. His hand in hers felt right. She felt like she was exactly where she was supposed to be then. If she had it once then she could have it again, right?

After walking back upstairs and sitting on the bed that she and Jake had built their entire life around, the bed that he fucked her in those horrible red things, she decided it was time to unpack. Just like the last few times she tried to leave she couldn't go through with it. She couldn't let go. She couldn't leave once more. So she carried each suitcase back upstairs, put the clothes away, and placed the suitcases strategically back under the bed, where they were when Jake left for work that morning. She dragged the trashcan up the stairs. With each step that the bottom of the can hit she let out a sob. Her tears fell steady as she took every red fucking piece of clothing out of the trash, sprayed them with

Fabreeze, folded them, and put them in their drawer. There were still spaghetti stains on some from the bottom of the trashcan, but that didn't matter.

Just as she sat on the bed her phone rang. It was Camden.

"Hello?"

"Hey," Camden said in a calm, motherly voice. "Have you packed yet?"

"No. Not yet. Well, yes. I can't do it. I put everything back."

"Constance! What do you mean you can't? I have done so much to prepare for this. You need to come. It will be the best thing you ever do."

"Not today. I can't today. We're having a movie night." Constance said these things knowing she was in denial. She knew she sounded ridiculous. There was just something about leaving that made her want to stay. The memories—the good memories that came back to her while packing were enough to keep her there. All she could hear in the back of her head was Jake and all she thought about was how things would get better.

"Constance! Snap the hell out of it! This is crazy...do you know how hard it is to not hear from you in years, not even when mom and dad died? Do you know how hard it was to answer your call two weeks ago? I dropped everything to help you leave that piece of shit. Do you know how hard it is to love someone so much, even after they basically abandoned you? You called me for help. I am trying to help even though I shouldn't even care. Despite what you have done to this family, I do think you deserve to be get out of that horrible relationship."

"I'm happy! It isn't horrible. Don't you dare talk about my husband that way. You know, he is right. You only care about yourself."

She lied.

“You’re not happy and you need help.”

And just like that Camden hung up the phone. Her sister was right and she knew she was. She wasn’t happy, but how dare she attack their relationship. It wasn’t hers to judge. Camden barely even knew Constance. That’s what Jake would always say when Constance would bring her sister up. He would say, “She is a stranger. Just let her go.” Deep down she knew Jake was wrong and Camden was right. She knew she abandoned her family, but she couldn’t leave.

Later that night, when Constance was in the kitchen cooking dinner, she heard the front door open and Jake come in.

“Hey!” Jake yelled, running up the stairs and loosening his tie.

Constance smiled a pretend smile and then went through the motions of being a wife.

“How are you? How was work?” she asked.

Jake said he was great and work was busy. He walked over to Constance, wrapped his arms around her lower waist, and kissed the back of her neck like he always did.

Constance didn’t move or show one reaction to Jake’s acts of love. She kept stirring the batter for the pancakes for dinner she was making—almost as if he never came home. She cringed from his touch, but he probably thought it was from his beard.

She took a deep breath and reminded herself that he was the only person who really ever cared about her.

Jake noticed that something wasn't right with Constance as they ate their dinner. She didn't make eye contact with him, her dark hair was not washed from the night before, and she had deep black bags under her eyes. He looked down at her 4 a.m., glassless watch and Constance saw him remembering the night before. She could see him feeling regret and feeling sad. She watched him as he began to cry, sob. She knew he felt bad for putting his hand on her and breaking her watch.

"Don't worry about it, Jake. It's fine."

She lied.

"Constance, I am so sorry about last night. You know I love you so much and you know I need you."

"I said don't worry about it."

As he cried and reached for her hands, she replayed the conversation with Camden in her head and wondered what Jake would think if she told him that she and Camden had been talking on the phone. Maybe if she told him in that moment he wouldn't mind. Maybe if she told him while he was vulnerable and weak he would be nice about it and would forgive her for hiding her two-week relationship with her sister. She decided not to mention it. Not so much because she was scared, but because she knew it didn't matter. She knew it would come up when he saw the phone bill and she knew it would be best to wait. Constance really didn't have the energy to care anymore. She would explain herself. She would say it was because of her niece or it was some type

of emergency. He would get mad and jealous and then they would both move on.

Constance, at the time, didn't realize that two years, almost to the day, after that he would be the one leaving her.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Tuesday After

Constance never wanted to move to Halfmoon Harbor to begin with. She only did it because that's where Jake wanted to go and she had a bad habit when she was younger of following men wherever they wanted to go, especially him. He was the worst kind of drug you could imagine to her. That Tuesday, two days after Jake left, she realized something about herself. She realized that she was slightly middle-aged and alone. She realized that she didn't really know her house without Jake in it. She realized that she actually really liked the house without Jake. The house itself wasn't all that bad. In fact, Constance had grown quite fond of the house over the years, but didn't really notice the fondness until that Tuesday after he left. It stood tall in the neighborhood, towering over the other houses. The one thing she didn't like was the fact that it blocked the wind from the ocean. That made for loud nights and broken shutters more times than none. Another thing she didn't notice until Jake left.

Constance grew to like her new freedom routine just about as much as she grew into liking the house in those two day. When Jake still lived there the days, weeks, and months were mapped out in ways most people would find odd. She cooked the same thing for dinner on the same day every week. Monday: meatloaf, Tuesday: cobb salad with grilled shrimp, Wednesday: lasagna with ground turkey, Thursday: poker night with

Jake's coworkers so she would not cook, Friday: Jake worked late so she would make a grilled cheese sandwich for herself, and Saturday and Sundays were free days. Every week was the same for about a year and then she would change it up. This didn't start for any particular reason. She simply started cooking these things and Jake seemed to like them so she kept cooking. When she would introduce new dishes, she would watch him to see if he liked them or not. If he did, she would replace an old dish with a new one, and if he didn't, she would keep the original dish.

Since Jake left, Constance decided she was no longer going to make those same meals. She mostly decided this because the thought of eating made her sick. She decided she should begin her own routines—her own Constance routines. On Tuesdays, she decided she would wake up and make her breakfast that she knew she wouldn't eat: two eggs, wheat toast, and yogurt. She would then take her breakfast and set up shop in the attic so she could see all of the surrounding houses. Tuesday's were going to be great days to spy on the neighbors. She had never done that before, but she wanted to see what they were up to. Jake would always talk about making lives up for people he would see and she always thought it was dumb, but she wanted to try it out.

As she sat in the attic, in front of the breakfast she wasn't going to eat, she watched the Samson's argue in their front yard over which car Mr. Samson would be taking to work that day. The argument ended with him hopping in the Infinity and driving off. Constance made up what she thought they were saying through her attic window. It was entertaining to her. She whispered to herself as she pretended to eat her eggs, "I

should be able to take any car I want to work,” in a high-pitched voice, mocking Mr. Samson.

“I need the big car for the kids.”

“No you don’t.”

“Yes I do, you asshole.”

Constance really liked calling Mr. Sampson an asshole. She said it several times in a row. Like a director of a movie, Constance then turned her chair to the Wright’s house. She thought this was so weird that none of the lights in the house were on because it was nearly 10 o’clock in the morning. Given Mrs. Wright’s unusual behavior in the past towards Constance, she wanted desperately to find something wrong with Mrs. Wright’s life so she went and grabbed her binoculars to get a better look.

“He will leave her soon. I just know it. Or maybe she will leave him. If that happened then I wouldn’t be the only single lady in the neighborhood. Maybe then we will have something in common. Maybe then we could hang out. Somebody isn’t happy over there,” Constance mumbled as she put down her binoculars, picked up her plate, and headed back downstairs, laughing about her spying adventures. She remembered in that moment that the neighborhood women went on walks on Tuesdays. She would always see them around 11 o’clock walking through the neighborhood. At that point she had about twenty minutes until the clan of women would go on their walk so she wanted to be sure she could position herself in time. She wished she had discovered this before. Then her days wouldn’t have been so boring before Jake left.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Wednesday After

On Wednesday Constance decided she would work on one thing inside of the house. She realized in the middle of the night that her house reflected her none. It was all Jake. She wasn't too sure how she could make the house look more "like her" because she wasn't even sure what she liked anymore. She, however, made a promise to herself to begin changing one thing a week on Wednesdays. She thought she would begin with the downstairs bathroom. She was going to repaint it, but she didn't know what colors she liked. Jake always made those decisions. She was going to become a regular at the paint shop in town, however. A handy-woman regular.

She walked into the paint shop in town and the young man who worked there greeted her.

"Hey there, lady. How are ya?" he asked in a flirty tone. She thought he was a little *too* friendly but it made her feel a way she hadn't felt in a long time.

"Why hello there. Just here to try out a new color on my bathroom," Constance said, pretending not to notice him trying to look at her dead in the eye. Looking around at nails, which she knew she didn't need, Constance continued, "I think I want to try yellow. I think I like yellow."

"Yellow? You think. Okay. We have yellow."

“Yellow is a good color for a bathroom, right?”

“Ha. Ha. Yellow just might be hard to cover up a dark color if that’s what was on the walls before, but I like yellow.”

“Oh. Yes. I’ll take the white, too, to cover up the dark color, right?” Constance asked as she quickly picked a yellow shade and a white and walked up to the front to pay.

When Constance got home that Wednesday, before opening the paint, she decided to plan out the rest of the week. She noticed that keeping herself busy kept her mind off of Jake so she wanted to make sure she had a list for herself to follow. This list would be different than her lists for Jake, though. This list would be for her and only her.

Thursday, she was going to learn something new about one of the neighbors. Something she hadn’t previously known. She would do this by selecting a neighbor. She would then wait for them to leave their house and go peep into one of their windows. She wanted to get to know them because she wanted to fit in now that Jake was gone. When the time was right she would meet them in the street during their walks and bring up the new thing she learned and they would think she was really intuitive. At least, that’s the scenario she played in her head.

That Thursday she woke up and followed her list. She learned, from spying, that Krissy, the neighbor she found herself the fondest of over the years, and her husband do not sleep in the same bed. Constance discovered this by looking in their living room window and seeing the pull-out couch out with pillows and a blanket. *Must be sleeping apart*, she thought to herself. For some reason this news made her happy. Krissy was

never that bad. She had met her several times and she always seemed very nice. Constance thought Krissy had gentle eyes and a beautiful nose. Krissy was the only person who told Constance to call her by her first name out of the neighborhood women. Constance thought that over the years they would have warmed up to her, but only Krissy did. She wasn't a friend of Krissy's by any means. Krissy was just like the other women—they had their own clan in which Constance didn't belong. Krissy's husband, Phil, was a jerk and Constance was happy to see that Krissy was realizing that. At the Annual Collard Cook Off that Halfmoon Harbor had the previous May, Phil came up to Constance and grabbed her ass. She didn't tell anyone about that, but she knew he was trouble.

That Friday to Monday, the first weekend without Jake, Constance hadn't quite established a routine. She couldn't think of anything to add to her list. With only being single in Halfmoon Harbor for a few days, she figured the routines would slowly begin to fall into place. She would look forward to Tuesday's, Wednesday's, and Thursdays and the rest would just happen. Most of the weekend was spent sleeping. She slept like she used to when she was a teenager, only waking to eat, or, attempt to eat. Saturday she cried that deep cry again. Keeping her mind occupied didn't work as well when she had nothing to do. Every TV show reminded her of her sadness. Everything in the house held a memory that she hadn't thought about since the memory actually happened. She woke up at 4 o'clock in the morning and decided to check the mail. This was something she usually only did on Monday's, Wednesday's, and Friday's. That was usually the way Jake liked it—that way they weren't bombarded with mail 6 days a week. When she

walked back in, wet from the drizzle of rain outside, she saw an envelope with her name on it. The handwriting looked like Jake's. She immediately began to panic. There was no return address and the envelope was slightly damp, but it was definitely from Jake. Before opening the envelope she turned on every light in the house and got comfortable on the couch. She unfolded it and saw that it was a letter and at the end of the letter was Jake's signature. She took a deep breath and started to read.

Constance,

When I got to where I was going I realized something that I never before shared with you. I spent my entire drive trying to figure out if I made the right decision. When I was in the car I thought about something and it was so clear to me then so I am going to try to explain it to you now.

One Tuesday, probably twenty years ago, I took this old man named Frank to the park. Frank held on to my right arm with a grip that I had never felt from another human before. It was the first time anyone had ever held on to me like that. It felt like how a puppy would latch on your shirt the first time you picked her up. That was Frank. Kind of like how you used to do in your sleep when you had a bad dream or something. You would latch. Frank latched. The difference was he always made me think about death. Not like, death—the kind that people obsess about, though. Just regular death. Getting old and dying death. My life. Death. It was the first time I had really thought about death.

Anyway, I remember that the city was particularly quiet that day and we both knew what that meant, even if we didn't say it. I don't remember now what it meant, but I

remembered then and that's all that matters. There was an after Christmas lull in the air that happened in D.C. in January. You know that lull. I'm sure the silence of the city was as loud to everyone else as it was to us. The shadows of the buildings erased whatever feeling of warmth we felt from the park and even if we were on the sunny side of the street I don't think we would have warmed up. It's like that here now, which is why I was reminded of this.

"What are you thinking about, Frank?" I asked him this expecting no response and that's exactly what I got—nothing. "I wonder when it's going to start getting warm?"

"Yeah. I don't know," I followed up my question with an answer like I always do.

Frank was old and getting older with every slide of his slipper on the brick sidewalk. I wondered what he thought about death all the time. I wondered if he even noticed the woman in the park earlier that day as we walked home. Later I would learn that he did notice her, but I didn't know or not then so I didn't say much more about her. I wondered what he thought about me—the kid (young man) coming to his room every other Tuesday to take him to the park. That was back when I volunteered at the old people home to get a better looking resume for school. He probably didn't think much about me now that I think about it. But that one particular day I remember thinking he thought about all of these crazy things. There was this lady that we saw in the park earlier in the day and I couldn't stop thinking about her so I assumed her couldn't, and that is how it started.

At that point I had shifted to the limbo between getting paid to take care of Frank and not getting paid because the home he lived in was out of money. I still tried to go see

him because I knew I needed more selfless work on my resume. I don't know. Maybe I was trying to find some kind of answers in his silenced life at the same time. When the dust settled and they told me they couldn't pay me anymore, I guess I just didn't feel satisfied with leaving yet. I guess you could say the same for us. Me and you, I mean. It isn't paying off anymore but I just can't bring myself to give up yet. That's why I think I just need a break. I never said I was leaving forever. We just said that would be a break—time for us to think.

So, anyway, let me finish this story about Frank because I have never been able to get it down on paper. That day Frank and I walked down to cross the street. We made a hard right at Macy's. I looked to the right and saw our reflections in the store glass. Me, a child in the shadow of Frank who was blinded by the glare of the sun. Frank, though, I could see clearer than ever. He was weak and wrinkled. His glasses rested softly, or were grown into, his oversized nose and gray eyebrows. People passing on the street would probably think I was his grandson. This didn't bother me to think about because I never knew my grandfather. If anything it made me feel safe.

"Frank," I said. "You think these people are thinking I'm your grandkid or something?" It was something along those lines, at least.

Frank didn't answer but I knew he heard me. I always knew when he heard me because his ears would perk up like a little dog and he would squeeze my wrist harder than I ever thought an old man could squeeze. I never had any experience with old man squeezes—don't get me wrong. I didn't, like, go around testing out old man wrist

squeezes so I guess that's an unfair comparison, but you know what I mean. In any fantasy I could have about a squeeze, Frank's squeeze seemed harder than that.

"Yeah. They probably do," I said, following up again. "They probably think I'm the sweetest little grandkid or some shit like that—walking her grandfather through the streets of the city. They probably go home and say to their husbands or wives, 'I saw the sweetest young man walking his grandfather today,' and then they all probably eat dinner and smile because of us. Don't you think, Frank?" Frank squeezed hard again and perked and just as the wind whipped around the building we were turning into the entrance of the nursing home. I know you've never been to the city, but when it's windy and you turn a corner you get punched in the face with the wind. It took everything I had to hold myself up let alone little old Frank.

In a lot of ways I think I needed him as much as he needed me—if he needed me at all. Sometimes we pretended we didn't need each other, though. Sometimes I forgot to go see him and sometimes he forgot who I was altogether. I liked pretending he was my grandfather. I would imagine those were things that would happen with real grandfather's—forgetting to go see him, him forgetting who I was just long enough to stare in a non-threatening way. From the lack of pictures in his room, I didn't think Frank had any kids or anything so I think that's why he liked me working there. That's probably why I kept going to see him after I stopped getting paid—he needed me. Just like you need me. And don't say you don't because I know it. I know you do.

So Frank slid his slippers through the door, fighting the war with the wind, and I showed him to his room. I remember it like it was yesterday. When I got him to the bed

we were both exhausted and wind-burned. I helped him up the small hump of the corner of the bed but just as I went to pull away he grabbed my hand harder than ever before.

“She wasn’t sad,” he said. I had never heard Frank speak before. Not one time in the two years I had been hanging with him on Thursday’s has he said a peep of a word.

“What?”

“The tall woman today at the park. She wasn’t sad. She was happy.”

I didn’t know what he meant by happy. She was clearly crying so she wasn’t happy. I mean I don’t know much but I know when an old woman is crying that she isn’t happy. Happy crying is for those romantic movies when everything is happily ever after. Frank leaned back in his bed and slowly crossed his legs. The fluorescent lights were off, but the sun was bright and shining in between the cracks of the window shades. The light and dark lines looked like Frank was behind bars. These bars flooded out everything except his face.

I didn’t understand how Frank could think she was happy. Happy people don’t cry. At least none I know. I started thinking Frank knew something about life that I didn’t. Like he was trying to tell me more than just the words, but then I realized he was just some old man trying to keep me around so he could grab some more or something.

“Maybe so,” I said as he slipped away into a slumber that had been waiting for him since we arrived back at the home. I waited for a few minutes and then gathered my bag and left. I kissed his cheek on the way out and felt his leather skin on my lips.

“Bye, Frank,” I said.

When I walked home I felt like I was constantly on the lookout for someone. Maybe the tall woman from the park from earlier that day. Maybe someone else. I'm not really sure who I was looking for, but I couldn't stop making eye contact with everyone as they passed me. That's the same day we met for the first time. You and I. Don't worry, you weren't the old lady in the park. I'll get to that part soon. So I turned left instead of right to look some more, but I finally gave up and headed back to my apartment.

When I got home that day I went straight to bathroom and hovered over the sink to look into the mirror. My face was different than I remembered—older. Fuck. This is the best I'm ever going to look, I thought. I was right to think that because that day was probably the best I ever looked. In between the toothpaste splatters (yes, twenty years ago I still had toothpaste splatters on the mirror) and flickering lights I recognized a piece of the lady from the park earlier that day in me. When I stood three to five feet from the sink I looked happy, but when I stepped closer—really close—my eyes were on the verge of tears. Then that made me think about Frank and what he said. As far as I was concerned I was happy. I had just started that new job and things were going really well for me. I thought, why in the hell did I look so sad up close? What did Frank know that I didn't? I understand it all now.

The woman in the park? I'm getting there. So earlier that day this really tall lady (and I mean tall) walked down York Street to what I assumed at the time was her lover's house. Back then I still liked to invent stories for people's lives and that's the one I invented for her as I watched her walk. Let's be honest, the only time someone should wear a feather sticking out of their hat is when they are trying to impress their lover. In

my mind this was not the first time she made this trip and her steps made it very evident. Her legs walked as if they had memorized the path ahead of it—she never looked up once to see if her legs were guiding her the right way or not. It wasn't this that caught my eye, though. It was the way she was dressed. For such a tall woman she should not have had that feather sticking so high out of her hat. I told Frank that, too. I looked over at him on the bench next to me and nudged his little old-man arm and told him that that women over there should not have that feather on top of her head. It was the strangest thing. The feather was not even the same color as her hat either. Her hat, a chocolate brown. Her feather, gray—dirty white, maybe. The feather was stuck in between a string that was wrapped around the base of her hat. The hat was a mix between a cowboy hat and a hunting hat. You know, the kind the African safari hunters wear?

So Frank and I looked at her hat for so long that we forgot to notice her face until she was turning to walk into her lover's house (I was guessing). I learned later that Frank was probably paying more attention to her face, but I couldn't stop looking at that awful feather. An orange sun could have risen in front of her and shined on her face day after day and I probably still wouldn't have noticed her face if it wasn't for her hat falling off briefly from the wind that day. Frank had just started to drift off to sleep when I nudged him again and he jumped in fright. I told Frank to look at that feather again but I guess he wasn't amused.

The lady was just about to walk into her lover's house when she stopped and sat down on the stoop outside of his door. This is when I noticed the front of her hat. She had

something embroidered on it and whatever it was, her shirt had the same thing embroidered across it.

“Frank, what does that woman’s hat and shirt say?” Frank didn’t answer. He was probably still sleeping but I didn’t look to see. I squinted my eyes as far shut as they could go without closing but I still couldn’t make out what they said. At this point I had become so distracted by her embroidered hat with the feather and shirt that I still didn’t even notice that she was crying. I had never seen a person cry in that way. She sobbed and sobbed to the point of absolute insanity and her feather bobbed as her head bounced up and down from the sobs. I had to tell myself to stop looking at that feather so I could focus on her crying. You know I get easily distracted. I thought it was really unusual that she was crying so hard and I asked Frank if he thought it was unusual but Frank must have still been asleep.

I thought maybe if I got a little closer I would be able to see what her hat and shirt said. When I looked over at Frank I saw that he was slouched over and still sleeping. He looked like a bag of rotten potatoes. The one’s that grow the warts on the side. That was Frank, a rotten potato—but the good kind. I didn’t have to take the old bastard back to the nursing home for another half an hour so I figured I would leave him there and try to make out the hat and shirt and maybe figure out why she was crying.

“Frank, stay here,” I screamed, but he didn’t move.

When I started walking toward the tall lady with the feather hat I started to notice just how old she was. When she walked earlier she walked with youth—a light trot much like a young horse or small child. I took her for a woman in her 30’s—if that. But, no.

This woman was older. More like Frank's age. She hid her age under the hat and orange spray-on tan I am assuming she bought from CVS. Or maybe it was her lover that kept her young. She continued to cry—sob, but I couldn't get over how old she was. Here this old woman was, crying on the stoop of a house she probably didn't own, wearing CVS spray-on tan and a hat with an over-sized feather in it. I just couldn't understand.

I went and hid behind a tree for a few minutes before crossing the street and getting closer to the stoop she was sitting on. I casually walked by the lady slowly as I stared at her shirt and hat. "Johnathan." That's what they were embroidered to say. Johnathan, I thought. What the hell. It wasn't even good—it was probably her lovers name or something, I thought. She probably stole that shirt and hat.

I walked back by again, walking slower than ever. I tried to focus on her face that time and she definitely was crying that's why I was so confused about Frank saying that she was happy. I turned to look back at Frank and he was still slouched over like potatoes. I wanted him to wake up so I could tell him about the lady crying but I guess he already knew. When I got back to the bench I called out his name.

"Frank," I said. "Wake up—it's time to head back." His wrinkled green jacket looked like a green trash bag in the fall. It was as loud as a trash bag too, which I'm assuming was from years of wear and tear. His gentle eyes opened as I stood over him. He jerked up again and said "huh" like he was frightened.

"Frank, lets get back." My shadow was almost like an eclipse over his body. He got up and I held his arm as we walked back to the home.

You see, Constance, I never understood it until now. My whole life I thought she was sad and crying because of her lover or something, but now I get what Frank meant. Packing up my stuff Sunday was when I realized it. Here we are, broken and drifting away from our life together, but it's the only thing that can happen right now. We both know that. I cried when I packed and I cried when we said goodbye, but it isn't really because I'm sad. Yes, I'm still sad, don't get me wrong. But you and I have been fucked up for longer than we haven't been and we both know this is the best. I see a lot of myself in that woman from the park and in Frank and I need to try to find whatever it was Frank found in his lifetime.

This isn't a hard goodbye, but it's a "lets both move on." You can stay in the house for as long as you want. I will pay the bills still. I will send you money until you no longer need money, but I have to get away. I have to go find something else. I don't even know if I want to be a lawyer anymore, but for now I am going to take this position with the law firm up here I told you about.

After that day I had forgotten about Frank and that old lady. I met you and I got distracted over time and we, the two of us, turned into something that I never wanted us to be. I keep thinking about dying and I can't help but think that neither one of us would be thankful for the other one if one of us died. We aren't happy. I want to have a life filled with fond memories and my life now is filled with work and fights and work. I can't live there anymore. I know I have hurt you in the past and you have certainly hurt me.

Please forgive me,

Jake

When Constance finished the letter she felt even more confused than she had been all week. She didn't understand what any of it meant. She didn't get Jake's point. He wrote a long letter about an old man and an old woman and only mentioned their life a few times. Constance was angry and her face turned blood red. When she opened the envelope back up to put the letter in it she saw a wad of money stuffed in the bottom with a Post-It note stuck on it. *This will help you out for a little bit*, is what the note said. Constance lay down on the couch and placed the money and the letter on her chest. She watched them both rise and fall with every inhale and exhale she took. She tried to imagine Jake and the old man. She tried to imagine Jake in D.C. on that very night. She told herself over and over again that it was still just a business trip and he would probably be back. She wasn't sure if she wanted him to be back anymore or not, but telling herself that helped her to drift off to sleep that night.

CHAPTER SIX

The Sunday After

The thin fall air suffocated Constance as she stepped outside of her house. Deep breaths, she told herself. Deep breaths to catch the air. It didn't matter to her if she could inhale and hold the cold air in or not. The rhythm of doing so mattered more. She wanted to feel it. She wanted to feel her chest expand and the air enter her mouth. She wanted to hear the sound.

She wasn't sure if the neighbors knew what happened or not. She was sure they did. She was sure they saw him pack his car up. She was sure they saw her standing in the road sobbing like a weakened woman. They wouldn't care even if they did know. The neighbors of Halfmoon Harbor never really took to her and it was no secret. That could have been another reason why Jake left. He tried too hard to get involved in the Harbor. Jake would host poker nights and set up brunch dates with the surrounding house owners, but the two of them never really fit in. They didn't have kids. They didn't decorate for the holidays. They didn't enter that annual chili cook-off, collard cook-off, or any of the other cook-offs. They didn't pitch in when the neighbor's kids were doing fundraisers. The move to Halfmoon Harbor, to Jake, was more for the way it looked to his coworkers at the law firm. Jake and Constance would often have Jake's coworkers over and Constance was sure the neighbors didn't like feeling left out. They would do holiday

parties, vacations, etc. with Jake's work and not with the neighbors. That just wasn't how Halfmoon Harbor operated, therefore, they were the outsiders. At that point, being the only single woman living in the neighborhood, Constance knew she couldn't seek help from the other ladies. She couldn't seek help from Jake's law firm. She couldn't seek help from her sister. She was alone.

Closing the door behind her, she walked. The houses were especially quiet on that Sunday morning. Nobody was outside. No lights were on. Maybe everyone left. Went to visit family or see a movie. Maybe they all had somewhere to be at the exact same time that Constance was taking that walk. Maybe they were all kneeling in front of their windows with popcorn and the lights off watching Constance suffer through her heartbreak or whatever it was. Usually the neighborhood ladies would be walking. Maybe their walking times were flexible on Sunday's.

There was nowhere really for Constance to go. Maybe she would walk down to the store on Ocean Boulevard and get a coffee if the store was open. Mr. Andy kept quite strange hours in the off-season so it probably would not be open. Maybe she would walk down to the beach and watch the waves ache for the shore as much as the shore ached for them. That is if the water was still there. She vaguely remembered thinking the ocean had left with Jake last Sunday. It didn't matter to her, the waves or the shore—which one needed the other more. Which one was even there. It wasn't important. It was fall in Halfmoon Harbor and there was nothing to do and no one to see. It was the first weekend since Jake left and it was sad. Lonely. Soundless.

The dead leaves appeared under her feet with every step she made toward nothing and away from the things and people that didn't matter. She could never understand why the leaves never fell on the beach. Just on the ground. There were trees around the beach in Halfmoon Harbor, but never any leaves. She had tried to avoid crushing the dead, wet leaves but she couldn't because they were everywhere on the street. If the leaves had been snow, there would be a zig-zag trail behind her reminding her of her uncertain destination. She hadn't seen snow since she lived in D.C.

She felt the weight of the slouching trees as the wind blew through her body. They hugged the path down to the beach, arched themselves over her like they were protecting her from the sun that could have been setting or rising. It looked exactly the same. A few leaves hung onto the limbs, but most had fallen. Most had died. The path ahead was covered in sand from the wind slinging it onto the dirt and the trees were buried up to their halfway points as she approached the beach. When she turned the corner the sand started slapping her in the face. It was relentless. She thought about turning back and going home, but there was really nothing there.

As she walked onto the beach that harbored so much of Halfmoon Harbor, she saw an unfamiliar man. He was something out of a book or a movie. The kind of book or movie that always ends happily. His khaki pants were rolled up to his knees, but the water hit his pants anyway. She knew he had to be cold. The roll did nothing but illuminate his calves. His blue button down fit him tightly and his hands were holding a piece of paper. A letter maybe, she thought. From where she stood she could only see one page. A one-page letter maybe. From who? His lover. His mom. His daughter. Maybe he

found it on the ground. Maybe he spent his mornings searching beaches for letters. Lost letters. Maybe he was looking for something and hadn't found it yet. She still couldn't see his face. The back of his head and his body mimicked Jake's in a way. She knew it wasn't him, though.

The way his eyes read and read, over and over, made her knees weak. She trembled—from the wind or him, she couldn't tell. She followed him as he continued down the beach—slowly and determined. He would sometimes lift his head and drop his hands and the letter to his waist in disbelief. When he would do that she would imagine the person who wrote the letter wrote something sad or funny maybe.

The man walked on without noticing her. To allow him to gain a few extra feet she stopped and took off her shoes and socks. With her socks tucked nicely into her shoes, she held them in her right hand with her pointer finger and middle finger hooking them. She walked slow and steady while maintaining a firm balance between keeping her distance and making sure she didn't lose sight of him. The sand was cold beneath her feet. She trembled again.

Constance walked along the shore with him for what felt like miles. He would occasionally look down at the letter, but he mainly looked forward. He seemed to be heading for the condos down on Yukka, Constance thought. He didn't turn around once. She never saw his face. She followed him all the way down the beach until she reached the jetties and then decided that it was a lost cause. He was probably from out of town. Probably here trying to clear his head. Probably not even real. She sat where she was, next to the jetties, and put her socks back on for the walk home. Her feet were covered in

sand but it didn't bother her much. The man was disappearing into the distance when she stood and headed back for her house.

Before she went onto the path back out to the road she turned back to see if he turned at Yukka. He was gone, but she didn't see where he turned. You could always tell where Yukka was because it had the porta-pottys. Constance figured he must have turned before Yukka. Just as she turned she noticed the walking clan of Halfmoon Harbor women passing her. They didn't try to soften the voices as they stomped past Constance.

"Shhh. She's turning," one of the women said.

"He is good looking—I don't blame her," another voice said as they eyed her down and headed straight down toward where the man had headed.

"You think he's in town for business or pleasure," another woman said as all five of the women laughed and laughed, one pulling out binoculars, one cupping her hand to her eyes to see if there was any trace of the man.

The entire walk back Constance couldn't help but smile about the commentary of the five women. She wasn't sure if it was their voices that made her feel sane or if it was the fact that they were also following the man that made her feel normal. She fantasized about what it would be like if she had been a part of their Sunday walks. Would she be the leader? Would they all go out every Sunday and try to find handsome men to follow? What would happen if they approached the handsome men? Would any of them act on their desires?

Constance wasn't really sure how the whole group worked. She remembered as a young girl her and Camden would follow boys around and talk about how cute they were.

Well, Camden would talk about how cute boys were. She remembered Camden talking about her first kiss and her first time having sex. Those memories were all very fond to Constance, but she was an adult now and somehow along the way she had forgotten what that felt like. She wondered if she could be a part of that group. If she could somehow work her way into befriending them. They would never befriend her if they thought Jake left her. Maybe if she went and talked to them and told them that she kicked him out they would respect her more. Maybe she could apologize for never being around and never participating and she could blame Jake. Constance used to be good at sucking up. She felt she could get good at it again. If she did that they would probably all think she was strong and willing to commit to their neighborhood after all. She could make them think she was fighting to be their friends all along.

Constance took the long way home unintentionally. Thinking about being a part of the neighborhood distracted her. She passed her street and headed south toward the Halfmoon Harbor marina. Across the one-lane road she could see the marina as it reflected what little sunlight came through the cloudy fall day. She could see the fishermen standing around drinking coffee outside of the marina. The scruff on their faces was thick and graying. If Constance focused she could smell the fish they had in the buckets next to them. There were three of them. All of them were around the same age. They were laughing and sipping and laughing and sipping. The only time Constance had been into the marina was when she and Jake first moved to the neighborhood and they wanted to check it out. It wasn't really Jake's style so they never had a reason to go back. Constance walked over to the men slowly as if she was on a mission.

“Shop’s closed,” the man on the far right with a blue baseball cap on said.

“Pardon?” Constance said as she stopped and looked around to be sure he was talking to her.

“It isn’t open. Fall hours. The tourists leave and we shut down.”

“Oh. I didn’t realize...I’m not looking for anything...I’m sorry. I’ll be going.”

The men looked at each other and smiled, which mad Constance even more nervous. She could tell they knew she had no real purpose in being there.

“I’m the owner. Is there something I can help you with, Darlin’?”

“No, thank you. I am just on a walk. I live right over in those houses so I am just exploring the area.”

“Ah, I see. Just movin’ in?”

“No, no. I’ve lived here for years. I just never really had the chance to explore.”

“Well that’s a shame, sweetheart,” the owner with the hat said. Constance watched as the other two men walked around to the back of the shop as the owner stood firm. Constance nodded her head, unsure if she should end the conversation or stand there and wait for him to speak again. She could feel her cheeks and ears burning from the awkwardness.

“So do you live in Halfmoon Harbor or in that other uppity neighborhood?”

Constance smiled, “Halfmoon Harbor.”

“Maybe you can help me out then. I’m looking for a few kids to help me out around here this winter. While we are shut down I need some help with a few things. Do you know if any of the neighborhood kids are looking for jobs? My help is shipping off

to Key West for a few months and I don't want to guilt them into staying," the man stretched his neck toward the other men behind the building and screamed, "Eventhough I could!"

"What all do you need help with?" Constance asked, not because she was truly curious, but because she didn't want this conversation to end. It felt good to talk to someone other than grocery store employees, gardeners, and Jake's coworkers.

"I just need someone to help do inventory on all the clothes and gear inside and help clean up the shop real nice before next season."

"Does it have to be a kid? I'm free. I'm good at cleaning if you're interested. I could really use something to keep me occupied?" Constance said this before she even realized what she said. She didn't even recognize her voice. She hadn't worked in years—seven years—but the thought of working excited here, regardless of what she was doing.

"You serious?"

"Yes sir. I really need something to do."

"Okay, little lady. You've got yourself a job. I'll pay you under-the-table and the hours can be pretty flexible."

"That sounds great!" Constance said. "I'm Constance, by the way."

"Oh yeah. How rude of me. I'm Jason. Nice to meet you."

"You as well."

“Well, looky here. I have a bunch to get done the next few days before those two fellas head south. Why don’t you meet me here on tomorrow morning and I’ll go over everything with you.”

Not only did this excite Constance, but also made a little piece of her soul feel alive again. She was going to have a job and she was going to earn her own money. She wouldn’t have to even accept the cash that Jake promised to send. She would be independent. Monday morning was going to be the beginning of something new and the start of a new Monday routine.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A Sunday Night Dream

Constance was able to drift right off to sleep on Sunday night. She was excited about the new job and even more excited that she felt happy. When she woke up on Monday morning she sat up in bed with a memory of her sister, Camden. She had dreamt of her in the night and the memory scared her because it was something she hadn't before remembered. She and Camden were kids, laying on Constance's bed talking.

"What's your favorite color?" Camden asked as she rubbed the right arm of her older sister. "I don't think I know what your favorite color is. I know mom's is orange and dad's is blue. I don't know what yours is," Camden said as she continued to rub Constance's arm. This was something Camden often did when she couldn't sleep. She would jump out of bed and tiptoe to her bedroom door. She would peek out of the half-opened door to make sure her parents weren't paying attention, and then bolt to Constance's room. Constance was only older by 9 months and to Camden they were the same age.

"I don't really know what my favorite color is. I can't ever decide."

"What do you mean you can't decide? It's your favorite color," Camden said as she flipped her entire body around and faced her sister. Constance was different than her in so many ways. She was quiet and had very few friends at school. Camden was the

class clown, had just been voted the eighth grade class president, and had more friends than she could count on one hand.

“I guess I like yellow. I have always liked yellow.”

“Yellow?”

“Yes.”

“Yellow is like the worst color to like,” Camden said as she lay on her stomach and made funny faces at Constance.

“Ok.”

“Pick another color.”

“I like red I guess.”

“Red is such a better color than yellow.”

“Ok,” Constance said.

Camden knew that Constance was a different kind of person than her. She had been that way their entire lives. Camden thought often that Constance didn’t really fit in with their family. One of Camden’s friends at school, Lucy, found out a few months before that she was adopted. Camden thought that Constance was probably adopted as well. She didn’t really like the things the family liked. She didn’t like to gossip about her life, she didn’t like to eat dinner with everyone, she didn’t even tell her mom when she started her period because she kept to herself so much. The only reason Camden knew that she started her period was because she saw a pad hanging out of Constance’s book bag last year.

Camden was the complete opposite. Camden would manipulate the entire dinner talking about her life at school and the boys she liked. She would tell her parents everything from the boys who kissed her at the bus stop to the girls who had done drugs in her class. Camden spent at least five minutes everyday talking to her mom about when she would start her period.

As Camden rubbed Constance's arm she looked up at her sister and wondered if she was adopted or not.

"Do you think you are more like mom or dad?"

"I don't know," Constance said as she continued to look up at the stars on her bedroom ceiling.

"You don't know who you think you are more like?"

"No. Who do you think I am more like?"

"I think you are more like dad. Dad likes to read and so do you. And dad doesn't really talk a lot. Oh! But then again, mom started her period at twelve and you were twelve when you started yours."

"How do you know that?"

"I just know those things," Camden said as she smiled up at her sister. She could tell Constance was getting uncomfortable by the way her face turned a dark red. Her face would always turn red when she was uncomfortable.

"I think I am more like dad," Constance said as she gently pushed Camden's hand off of her own arm and sat up on the bed.

"Where are you going?"

“I need to get ready for bed, Cam. Go back into your room.”

Camden rolled her eyes and went to head back to her bedroom, but first she reached for Constance’s sweatpants and yanked them down, showing her outdated panties.

“Ha! I got you!”

“Get out, Camden! Now.”

At breakfast the next morning Camden asked her parents if Constance was adopted. Constance, who was not at the breakfast table, but getting ready in the hall bathroom, heard this question and leaned into the door to hear her parents answer.

“Of course not,” her mother said.

“She just fits in differently,” her father said as Constance stopped listening and closed the bathroom door. *Fits in differently*, she thought to herself. Constance didn’t understand how she fit in differently. She had never been more aware of herself until that very moment in the bathroom as her family ate breakfast and talked about her. She didn’t realize she fit in differently. She always thought she was simply her own person. At thirteen, crying in her bathroom, was the first time Constance ever felt rejected.

As the years went by she had forgotten about that. When she replayed the dream and the memory in her head that Monday, she thought that maybe that incident taught her that if she wanted to be a part of something she had to be someone other than herself.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Next Monday

After getting out of bed, Constance realized that Monday morning was one of the most perfect mornings she had ever seen at Halfmoon Harbor. It was one of those mornings that confused South Carolina citizens because it felt like spring even though it wasn't even winter yet. If you closed your eyes you wouldn't be able to tell if it was fall or spring. In the shower, washing herself, Constance cried. She wasn't sure if she was crying because she was happy or sad. The windows in the bathroom were opened and the light morning breeze hit the areas of her body that weren't under water. The tears were chilly on her cheek. She was starting something new and leaving her old self behind. She was going to fit in if her life depended on it.

The walk to the marina was slow. Constance's stomach was filled with jitters and butterflies and nerves. She took her time and told herself that she had to remember everything from the walk. She stopped and noted in her head the pink reflections of the sun on the buildings across the street. She mimicked the bird's chirps with soft hums and laughed at how off her hums were. The last time she started a new job was over fifteen years ago. What would she say and do upon arrival? What if Jason wasn't there?

"Hi. I'm Constance. Today is my first day."

"Hi. I'm here to work."

"Good morning."

“Here to help!”

Constance played the conversation in her head over and over again until she settled on just waiting until she got there to see. After all, it wasn't like Jason would tell her to come and then not be there. He didn't seem like that type of man. *That type of man*, Constance thought. *Since when do I know anything about types of men?*

As she finished the fifteen-minute trek to the marina, her nerves became even more intense. Her fingers shook uncontrollably and her tight chest made it hard to breathe. When she turned the corner by the cluster of palm trees she saw Jason hauling a cooler up from the docks. She took a deep breath and shouted out to him.

“Howdy!” *Howdy. Oh my goodness. Why did I just say howdy?*

Jason looked up from the ground, squinting from the sun, and nodded his head as he kept hauling the cooler.

He doesn't remember offering me the job.

He has no idea who I am.

Why didn't I just stay home?

This was a big fucking mistake.

Constance remained still in the same place by the cluster of palm trees and followed Jason with her eyes. Like a deer in headlights or a kid caught doing what they shouldn't be doing, she couldn't seem to unfreeze herself. Jason put down the cooler on the front porch of the marina and walked over to her.

“I would shake your hand but I've been cutting up fish all day.”

“Oh.”

“It’s all a part of the job I suppose.”

“Yes.”

“You shouldn’t have worn your nice clothes, darlin’, they’re just going to get messy today,” Jason said as he looked down at Constance’s black slacks and orange blouse.

“Oh. These? These aren’t nice. I am ready to get messy,” Constance said as she smiled at how ridiculous she sounded.

“Alrighty then. I’ll get you started then. Now just so you know,” Jason said as he signaled for Constance to follow him into the marina, “I’m going to pay you ten an hour under-the-table.”

“Ok. That works for me.”

“I’ll pay you at the end of everyday you work in cash so we don’t have any kind of discrepancies and once you’re finished up in a few weeks I will give you a 10% discount at the marina store. Does that work for you?”

“Yes. It works just fine.”

“Great. Come over here and I’ll explain what all I want you to do.”

Jason walked Constance into a room filled with piles of sweatshirts, t-shirts, bathing suites, and hats. The room was in the back of the building and only had one window allowing for light to enter. The rest of the light came from a fisherman lamp. The fisherman stood tall in a yellow rain suite with the light bulb attached to his net. It was unlike anything Constance had ever seen before and she stared for quite some time. The walls were wood-paneled and old and the room itself smelled like mildew.

“So what you’ll have to do is count up every size in every shirt and write it down on this paper here,” Jason held up an inventory paper with his callused hands. “And then I want you to organize the shirts by size so we can put them on display out front.”

“Okay. That seems easy enough.”

“Good. Now I will be out around the marina doing some things if you need me.”

Jason walked out of the room and left Constance to herself. With the piles towering she didn’t know where to start. There were at least seven different colors and many sizes. The hats were jumbled and some were ripped. It was a nightmare of clothing if she’d ever seen one, but she got started and time passed a lot faster than she thought.

Constance had been at it for almost two hours when she heard someone walk into the marina door. Assuming it was Jason or one of his helpers, she didn’t budge from her spot to check.

“Hello,” a woman’s voice yelled from the front of the building. “Jas, where are you?”

Constance sat as still as possible thinking about who it could be. *His wife? He didn’t have a wedding ring. A customer? Should I go greet them?*

“Hello,” the voice said again as she walked to the back room. Constance turned and looked only to find it was Krissy who was walking toward her. Constance was confused as to what Krissy was doing walking into the shop like she owned it. She

looked up to meet her eyes and before she could say anything Krissy let out a soft “oh” and stopped walking.

“Hi, Krissy.”

“Hi...Constance”

“I am just helping out a little bit.”

“I see,” Krissy said as her voice shook with an uncomfortable tone.

“Are you looking for Jason?”

“Yes. Have you seen him?”

“I haven’t in a few hours but he said he would be around the marina. How do you know him?”

“Jason is my brother.”

Constance didn’t know how to respond to this. She didn’t know if she liked the fact that Krissy was related to a good-ole’ country fisherman or if she hated the fact that she had to be in the room with her under these uncomfortable circumstances. Krissy had always been nice to Constance, but she seemed so put off by her working there that it made Constance second guess her interpretation of Krissy in the past.

Constance watched Krissy as she stood. It felt like ten minutes of pure silence, but it was more like thirty seconds.

“That’s really nice. Do you work here too?” Constance asked, thinking she had to say something in response.

“No, no, no. I don’t work here. I just help out every once in a while. But I’m going to go find Jason. Good seeing you.”

Constance followed Krissy down the hall with her eyes and then stood once she heard the bell on the door ring, knowing Krissy was outside. She walked over to the one round window and peeked her eyes just far enough over the ledge to continue watching Krissy. She was beautiful and Constance found herself tracing her body from top to bottom. Krissy represented everything she wanted to be but couldn't. She watched as Krissy walked down to the docks and disappeared past Constance's view.

The inventory duty become quite tiresome after awhile and Constance's back began to tighten up as she sat on the hard floor. It had been almost five hours when Jason walked in and told Constance she could call it quits for the day.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, darlin', I'm sure."

"Okay. I will be back tomorrow morning at the same time," she said as she stood up slowly and went to walk down the hall. She could feel Jason's eyes following her and she didn't know if this made her happy or not.

"A few of us are going to go grab a drink down the road on the inlet if you care to join?"

"A drink?"

"Yeah. A drink. What you don't drink?"

"I drink. I've just never been down to that part of the inlet before."

"Oh, well then you have to come. Plus, I still have to pay you."

"Okay. I'll come," Constance said with very little hesitation. The last time she went out for drinks with people was before she and Jake got married. She didn't even

have a bachelorette party before the wedding because she lost a lot of her friends from following Jake around everywhere. The thought of going out made her jittery and smile. She felt wanted and welcomed into the marina family. She felt a part of something.

The bar was like something out of the movies. It was a hole in the wall with a plastic cover. The back deck opened up to the water and if she looked to the far right she could see Halfmoon Harbor across the inlet. The pictures behind the bar were of local fishermen and the fish they had caught over the years. The bartender knew everyone's name but hers and smiled at the notice of a new face. As they sat down on the barstools, Constance looked around and noticed that everyone seemed to know everyone. There were small circles of conversation at every corner of the bar. The sun was slowly setting over the inlet and shining into the bar, making for one of the most mesmerizing sunsets she had ever seen. Constance kept scanning the bar until she stopped at the image of Krissy walking in. She hurried and looked away, but assumed Krissy saw her staring.

"Is this seat taken?"

"No. Not at all. Please, sit down," Constance said as Krissy took the chair.

"I've never seen you here before."

"I've actually never been here before. In all of the years I have lived in Halfmoon Harbor I have never been down this way."

"That doesn't surprise me. You guys don't get out of that house much."

Constance was caught off guard by Krissy's comment. The way she said it made it seem like she didn't know Jake left. She looked away and then looked back as Jason slammed two mugs of beer down in front of his sister and Constance.

"No, no. We didn't get out too much. But I think I will start now..."

"That's good. It will be nice to have another female around the marina."

"I didn't realize you hung out with all of them. From seeing you around the neighborhood you don't seem like the type to...I don't know..."

"Slum it with the guys," Krissy said with a smile.

"Yes! Slum it with the guys. I like that."

"It does seem like I live two separate lives. The life in the neighborhood, which I do mainly for my husband, and the life I live here, which is the way I grew up."

"You grew up here?"

"I grew up in that old run-down house across from the marina. That was long before those neighborhoods went up. It was just the house and the old marina back then."

Constance felt instantly close to Krissy as she talked. The softness in her eyes that she had always noticed was still there. She talked like she cared about Constance and the way she opened up made Constance feel welcomed into Krissy's life.

"So how did you end up in Halfmoon Harbor then?"

"I met my husband here after the neighborhoods started popping up. He was from old southern money and wanted to be close to the water so I convinced him to buy in the Harbor. The rest is history. What about you?"

“We moved down for Jake’s work,” Constance said as she sipped her beer and tried to avoid the question she knew was coming.

“Where has he been?”

“We...uh...well, we actually split up.”

“Oh. I’m so sorry to hear that.”

“It’s okay. It is for the best. It just didn’t seem right anymore so I decided to kick him out.”

Constance said this without even blinking or hesitating. She lied and it felt so good to have the control. *I decided to kick him out.* There was something in the way she said that that made her feel powerful for the first time in her entire life. *I decided.* She kept repeating this in her head to and smiling. Krissy didn’t say anything back for several minutes. The two of them sat in the bar in silence and looked around.

There was a man sitting directly across from them who Constance kept making eye contact with. He looked familiar in a way that she couldn’t quite understand. She was sure her newfound power was making her appealing to him. He sat across the bar from her, occupying the blue captain’s chair style barstool, practicing his smiles. At least that’s what he had to be doing because every time Constance looked over at him he was smiling a different way. Some of the smiles were creepy, too. The bar was dimly lit, and in the far corner there was a band beginning to set up who thought they were accomplished enough to bring their own light show to this “venue.” Constance scanned the area between the band and the man as Krissy appeared to be doing the same thing.

“What do you think is the purpose of them bringing their own light show?”

Constance asked Krissy as another beer showed up in front of them. “Do bands always bring their own light shows to this bar?”

“Not many of them do, but some of them have been known to. I guess it just makes them feel more in their element,” Krissy said as she watched Constance stare at the man across the bar.

“Are you going to go over and talk to him?” she asked Constance.

“What?”

“Are you going to go talk to the guy you keep looking at?” Krissy asked again. “I mean, you are single now. Plus he is handsome. You should go talk to him.”

Constance turned a hundred shades of red as Krissy spoke. She hadn’t talked about guys in this way since she and Camden would lay awake at night. And even then it was Camden who did most of the talking. Constance imagined what she would be like if she was like Camden. She often imagined herself as flirty and witty and talking to men.

“God no! I can’t go over there.” Constance said.

“See—I knew you were staring at him. Go talk to him. It’ll be good for you. You’re lucky that you are single. You can talk to whomever you choose.”

Constance knew Krissy was right. She could do whatever she wanted now. She could be as free as she wanted. The only problem was she didn’t know how to be free.

“I can’t go over there. I’ve...I’ve never been very good at talking to men,” Constance said and immediately regretted it. She had just demonstrated how strong of a woman she was to Krissy and now she was saying that she isn’t good at

talking to me. She couldn't tell Krissy that. She had to keep up appearances. "He does have a breathtaking smile, though, doesn't he?" Constance followed up with asking.

"Ha! Yes! I'm sure you are good at talking to men. You have just been out of the game. Here, I have an idea," Krissy waved her hand to the bartender.

"Two shots of tequila, Kurt."

"Shots?"

"Yes. Shots. It'll loosen you up and you'll be able to go talk to that handsome man. You want to know what his name is, by the way?"

"You know his name," Constance shouted like a little girl with a crush.

"Yes."

"Actually, no. Just let me enjoy this," Constance whispered as she touched shot glasses with Krissy and wondered about the unfamiliar man across the bar.

"Enjoy what?"

"The moment before you actually get to know someone. The moment when they can be whoever you want them to be. The moment before disappointment sets in. The moment you invent them," Constance barely recognized herself saying this, but it felt right. As she said these words she realized that she actually believed what she was saying. Since Jake left she hadn't believed anything she had been saying to herself.

It was mutual.

I think we just grew apart.

We are still friends.

I will be fine.

We are both looking forward to seeing other people.

Then.

I don't think he is coming back.

I still love him.

I fucking hate him.

He will regret this.

I should have never spent the past five years trying to leave him.

Krissy ordered two more shots of chilled tequila and then paid her tab. Constance watched her do this and felt sad because she didn't want her to leave. This was the first time in months Constance had been drunk with someone else and the first time in years she actually connected with someone other than her husband.

"I have to get home to Phil or he will be mad. Jason and the boys will take good care of you. I've had a lot of fun talking with you. You will have to let me know about that man tomorrow," Krissy said as she smiled and walked over to hug her brother goodbye.

That hour or so with Krissy made Constance realize that she liked being around other people. It also made her realize that she could reinvent herself to be whoever she wanted. She grabbed her mug of beer, and without breaking eye-contact with him the entire time, she passed fourteen bar stools and plopped down right beside the handsome man—right beside the band.

"Heineken," she said in the most definitive and monotone voice as she handed him the other shot. This was not something she was used to doing. She still thought of

Jake more than she should have. His face was everywhere. Even there. Every man that passed. Every song that played. Every red shirt she saw. It all reminded her of him. When she would drink she would begin to smile at the thought of the red shirts. Sure, she used to hate that they turned him on so much, but now she missed that hate she felt. She should have just let him fuck her in the red shirts like he wanted. These thoughts were not normal for her to think, but the tequila was getting to her so she tried desperately hard to stop.

“No,” the man said. “I’m actually okay on beer, but that’s the first time a woman has tried to buy me a beer,” he said as she smiled back at him. She found herself trying to mimic his ridiculous smiles. He would make a face and she would pretend she was a mirror. She felt like she was in an episode of Bewitched. Her nose seemed to be the only thing following directions on her face.

“Are you okay?”

Constance stopped wiggling her nose and making new smiles. “No. No. I’m not trying to buy you a beer. I’m telling you that for the rest of the time that we are here that’s what I’ll be calling you because I don’t know your name and that’s what you’re drinking,” she said as she tapped her mug with the man’s beer, but before she took a drink she leaned in very close to his ear and whispered, “And then later, when you take me home, I’m still going to call you that.”

It made Constance’s heart pound when she spoke those words. She hadn’t felt that alive in years. Her heart sunk deep into her stomach as the man made a few more smiles.

Then Constance realized that he might have a nervous smiling twitch and she should probably stop mimicking him.

Constance really could never understand it, but she never really had a way with men like Camden did. She tried but it never worked. She wanted to work on being better with that. She wanted to be more like Camden was when they were younger. She wanted to make guys believe anything she said—lies mostly, but they would still believe her. She had never been able to do that and it always worked with Camden. She felt flushed and uncomfortable, but she felt like her sister for the first time.

The man turned and looked at her, “Does this work on all the guys you try it with?”

“Most of the time, yes. Although, you’re the first one drinking Heineken—so you have that going for you.”

“And what’s your name, Krissy’s friend?”

“You can call me that, sure.”

“Well, it is nice to meet you, Krissy’s friend.”

“You too, Heineken.”

The next morning, Constance found herself in an unfamiliar house next to an almost unfamiliar man. She had remembered him a little from the night before. There were flashes of the bar, the walk to his house, the sex. Just passing memories, deluded by the alcohol she consumed. One week after Jake left and she slept with someone new. *Was that normal? How long do people wait? It’s not like I was that upset that he decided to*

leave. But I was upset. How could I do this if I am still upset? I was planning on leaving him eventually, right? Constance's heart was pounding as she crawled over the sleeping man. After taking one last glance at the slightly unfamiliar man, Constance gently lifted herself off of his bed and put her clothes on. They were harder to get on than they were to take off. There was an aching deep within her bones that made every movement slower than normal. Between the pounding in her chest and the pain she felt from the night before, she snuck out of this man's house and began walking down Ocean Boulevard to Halfmoon Harbor. She knew exactly where she was. She was only a few streets down from the entrance of Halfmoon Harbor, Yukka. When she saw where she was she thought that he may have been the man she saw on the beach that Sunday. It made sense that it was the same man. Maybe it wasn't, though. She would probably never really know.

She walked down the street as the sun began to rise. She hoped none of the neighbors would see her, but even if they did, they would probably just think she was on a morning walk. Each foot fell harder and harder on the ground as she walked back home. When she got home she sat her sore body down in her bathtub and cried. She didn't want to be that person. She wasn't that person. Images of Jake flashed through her head as she lay back in the tub and massage her arms the way Camden used to do. She had to be at the marina in an hour and she planned to stay right where she was until then.

As she soaked her body she replayed the conversation with Krissy in her head. She replayed her action of spying in on Krissy and Phil's house. Burnt in her head was the face Krissy made when Constance told her she kicked Jake out. It was a face of hope. Constance didn't notice it much at the time, but she noticed it now after going back

through the night before. Krissy probably wanted to leave Phil and Constance thought that it was her duty to help her. She could help her leave her husband and then Krissy would be single with Constance. If Krissy were single then maybe the other women in the neighborhood would look at Constance in a different way. Maybe they were all secretly unhappy and maybe Constance was put on the planet to help them all leave their husband. Constance fantasized about all of the neighborhood women being single like her. She imagined the all-woman community thriving. She smiled as she envisioned dinner parties and wine nights. Girl's night out and one-night stands. Constance knew if she could just get Krissy to realize how easy it was to kick someone out then the rest of the women would follow. As she imagined all of these things she began to believe that she did, in fact, kick Jake out. She believed that she was in power. She believed that Halfmoon Harbor would soon be much different.

CHAPTER NINE

The Next Tuesday

When Constance got home she decided she was going to sit down and write Jake a note back. On her walk she realized that not writing back made her look weak. She sat down at the kitchen table with a pen and a piece of paper and began to write. She didn't want to do what Jake did and just write a bunch of nonsense. She knew she wanted to write about something that was important to both of them. Something that would make Jake remember something good about them. She didn't want to do this because she wanted him to come back. She simply just wanted to prove his point about having no good memories wrong.

Jake,

Remember when we had been married for a few years and we decided to fly to Santiago, Chili on a whim? We had a long weekend off and you had just received your bonus. If spontaneous was ever a word to be used for our relationship, that last minute trip would have been the time to use it. You came home from work with the deposit slip in your hand and two plane tickets. You had just received ten thousand dollars and you wanted to spend it all in a foreign country. I remember how happy you looked as you rushed through the door and kissed me. I can't remember another time you were ever that happy so I went along with it. I went along with it even though we should have used

that money for something else. I wouldn't have dared to tell you that then. I went along with it even though we were a hundred thousand dollars in debt from your law school. I went along with it because I didn't know how else to make you happy.

We took the red-eye out of D.C., spent ten hours in the sky, got in at 6AM, explored Santiago for twenty-four hours, stayed in that Crowne Plaza hotel outside of the city, and flew the ten-hour red-eye back to make it home for work on Tuesday. Do you remember that trip? I keep replaying every second of the trip in my head for some reason. It's like a song on repeat or something. It is frustrating and I need you to know that I still think about that weekend. That is a good memory for me. It's nostalgic and makes me smile every time I think about it.

That was the first time I learned that just because it can be summer in North America does not mean it's summer in South America. I didn't know that. Or maybe I just never really thought about it. I had never been out of the country before and I had no idea what to expect. I was just happy that you were happy. That was probably the first time I started thinking that you were more important to me than I was to myself. Yes, now that I think about it, that's when it all began.

If you would have told me that it was going to be fifty degrees and raining in South America then maybe I would have packed warm clothes. See, you always did that. You would always worry about yourself and never anyone else. I would always put you first and you would never put me first. I am just now noticing that. I remember you packed warm clothes and looked at me like I was crazy for packing shorts and flip-flops.

It was the hottest summer D.C. had ever seen. Why wouldn't I pack for hot weather? Why wouldn't you tell me?

Remember after standing outside in the rain for an hour waiting for a cab from the airport you finally gave me your jacket? One hour it took you. I never mentioned that before because I guess I had forgotten all about that. You are a real jerk for that. When the cab dropped us in the city-center of Santiago twenty minutes later I was still shivering and soaking wet. You didn't seem to mind. We didn't have any cell phone reception and hadn't thought about the different plug situation. This was highly unlike you to not think of everything since you are the smartest man alive. You were always such a planner so for you to be in a situation where you were disconnected from the world was extremely uncharacteristic of you.

The barking dogs hovered over every street corner as we walked aimlessly around the city. Even after twelve blocks of walking I still jumped every time a dog would bark at the passing cars. It was like a scene from a movie. The sky was gray, the cars were dated, and the stray city dogs guarded each corner like it was their city—they owned it.

I remember you grabbed my hand—my hip, too—in a way you hadn't done since before we started dating. You held me close, away from the dogs and the outdated Nissan Sentra's that were older than us and disguised as cabs. I think that moment is what made me forget about how much of a jerk you were to me.

We went into the first place we saw, a small café with Chilean beer and a heater to dry my clothes. Your clothes were still pretty dry, but at the time I didn't care to notice because you were touching me in ways you hadn't in years.

“Qué puedo conseguirte,” the waiter said with urgency as he greeted our table. I looked at you and waited for you to order for me in Spanish because I barely knew how to say hello in Spanish. You ordered two beers and then four and before we knew it we were wasted—completely hammered—in Santiago with nowhere to go, nowhere to be, and no way to contact anyone back home. I fell in love with you all over again in that city. You brainwashed me all over again while we were there.

We stumbled around the city for a while. We kissed a few times as the Sentra’s beeped their horns and the dogs barked. We touched each other in ways that we hadn’t in a long time. We went into a Chilean thrift store and you bought me a jacket, a hat, two scarves, and boots. The two of us alone in a foreign country together was the best thing our relationship had seen. Too bad it only lasted twenty-four hours.

The next bar didn’t ask us what we wanted. The bartender simply place two champagne glasses full of a pink liquid in front of us.

“Pisco Sour,” the man said.

“Gracias,” you said.

The Pisco Sour was the best thing I had ever tasted. It was sweet and sour with a tequila type of aftertaste. Do you remember those? I don’t think we ever had them again since that trip.

“Dos mas,” we said as we downed it like a shot. You could do that with Pisco Sour’s. Down them like shots because the glasses were so small. We didn’t know it at the time, but the glasses were so small because the alcohol content was through the roof.

The drink was made with lime juice, simple syrup, egg whites, and Pisco if I remember correctly. I think I might make one this week after I get off of work. That's right. Work. I have a job now down at the marina and I have a lot of new friends.

Anyway, remember we had ended up at that Irish Pub with two Santiago locals? They wanted to know as much about us as we wanted to know about them. We sipped whatever beer was the cheapest with a Pisco Sour on the side. We watched the men tell us about the history of Santiago and we told them about America and all that we knew. We told them about living in D.C. and about our jobs. We told them about us and how long we had been together. I would often look out of the Irish Pub and onto the Chilean street as the Sentra's drove by honking. I would sometimes touch your leg under the bar and you would sometimes touch mine. On our walk home you took me into that park and made love to me. Do you remember that? Well I just want you to know that that night was the last time I ever felt truly happy with you. You may have been the one who left but I wanted to leave many times. There, I said it.

The morning after Santiago came fast and it was time to board the flight home. We got one more Pisco Sour at the airport as we waited. I looked at you and smiled as our glasses clinked in a "cheers." I wasn't smiling out of pity or habit. I was smiling because, for the first time in a long time, and for the last time, I was happy. I was satisfied. When the plane landed back home, the Pisco had worn off and the entire drive home from the airport was silent. I should have kept my bags packed and left once we got back to the apartment. I should have been honest with you and told you that I needed that happiness more often. Instead, we got home and went straight to bed. You went to work a

few hours after that and I called in sick. That day when I called in sick I thought about leaving you while you were at work. I didn't realize how unhappy we were until we were happy again. I just want you to know that I wanted to leave you long before you ever left me.

All the best,

Constance

When Constance finished and signed the letter she felt like a new person. She remembered things she never even thought about before. She couldn't wait to send it to Jake and the thought of him reading it and remembering all of those memories just like she had excited her. She even thought about telling him that she slept with someone else, but she didn't think it was the right time. It wasn't until she folded the letter, put it in an envelope, and licked the sticky part that she realized she did not have his address in D.C. How could she send him the letter if she didn't have the address? She decided to put the letter aside until she figured out his address. He was sure to send more money. Maybe she could track the money. Maybe she could go to the library one day and get online and look for the new firm he would begin working for. He would get that letter—she was sure of it.

CHAPTER TEN

Basement Support for Women Who Want to Kick Out Their Husbands

Constance continued to sort clothes and clean the inside of the marina store that entire week. On occasion, maybe once a day, Krissy would come in and sit down next to Constance as she worked. Constance never mentioned anything about the man and Krissy only asked in passing. She figured it would come out eventually so nothing was pushed too much. At the end of the week Krissy came into the store and sat down next to Constance.

“How did you do it?”

“Do what?”

“How did you kick him out? Did you just say get out?”

“Oh.”

“I’m sorry,” Krissy said. “I am just so darn frustrated with Phil. You know what—forget I said anything.”

“No, I don’t mind telling you about that day. Honestly, I just got fed up with our marriage and one day, while he was at work, I packed his things and when he got home I told him to leave.”

“He didn’t fight you?”

“No,” Constance said as she folded the shirts and sorted them by color. It felt weird for her to lie, but the connection she felt with Krissy in that moment was more

meaningful than anything she had felt up until that point. She figured a small white lie wouldn't hurt anyone. She continued, "He has called me a few times and has written a few letters, but at the time he did not fight me. I think we both knew it was over."

"Were you sad?"

"Of course I was sad. I cried as I watched him leave, but it was the best decision I ever made."

Krissy's eyes began to fill up with tears and that excited Constance. She knew it was wrong to be excited about Krissy's pain, but she could see her plan coming together and she tried hard not to let her smile out.

"I shouldn't have listened to the girls for all these years," Krissy said as she stood to grab a tissue.

"Listened to who?"

"The girls in the neighborhood. They always talk me out of leaving. But they aren't always the happiest either."

When Constance heard this it was like music to her ears. *They aren't always happy*, she thought to herself. *This could work. They aren't happy.*

"You're really close to the women, right?"

"I am as close as you would think in a neighborhood I suppose."

"Listen, I understand I haven't been as...involved...as everyone else, but you should see if they want to come over to my house tomorrow night," Constance said this with a confidence similar to the confidence she had at the bar the previous Monday.

“I don’t know, Constance. They have their set plans every week. They aren’t like me. They like to do cosmo nights on Fridays. I’ll come over, but I don’t know if I could get them to.”

“Oh. Ok.”

“It doesn’t have to do with you. They just aren’t always the nicest with new people.”

“But I’m not new,” Constance said trying to believe herself.

“That makes it even worse. You’ve lived here for years and never tried to be a part of the group.”

“Ok.”

Krissy got up and threw her tissues away. Constance followed her out of the marina with her eyes, defeated, and hoping she would turn around. She didn’t.

The next morning, on her way to the marina, Constance saw Krissy walking with the other women of the neighborhood. She wasn’t sure if she should say hi or not. She wasn’t sure if Krissy acknowledged their relationship outside of the marina. Constance made eye contact in quick motions with each of the women. She smiled, but none of them looked back. Not even Krissy. This made Constance angry to the point of tears and a red face and when she showed up at the marina Jason asked her what was wrong. She answered dismissively and walked in to finish up organizing. *Why wouldn’t she just look at me? Why wouldn’t she smile? Why was she such a different person around them? Bitch. Fucking bitch.*

“Hey,” Krissy said as she walked in an hour after Constance began work. Constance looked up and made eye contact, but did not speak. She continued to organize and fidget with the clothes until Krissy spoke again.

“I talked to them,” Krissy said, inching closer to Constance. As Constance continued to ignore her words, Krissy moved closer to her. She grabbed Constance by her arm gently. “They agreed to go to your house.”

“What?” Constance turned, only looking at Krissy’s hand on her arm.

“They agreed to go to your house on Sunday afternoon. It took some convincing. They all feel you didn’t make an effort over the years. To be honest I had to bribe them to come, but they agreed as long as you have cocktails and lunch.”

Constance smiled and forgot all about Krissy ignoring her earlier in the day. She knew that this was going to be her calling. She didn’t want to seem too excited even though her insides were on the verge of exploding.

“I can do cocktails and lunch Sunday.”

“Noon,” Krissy said as she left the marina.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Day One of Basement Support

That Sunday morning around noon Constance sat out on her front porch and waited patiently for the women to start walking down the street toward her house. Her finished basement, which was barely ever used in the years she and Jake lived in that house, was filled with lunch and alcohol. Constance dedicated the entire Saturday before to prepping the basement for her visitors. The reason she wanted the women to gather in the basement was because she thought it would be an intimate space for them to chat. She had always watched those movies of people having basement parties so she thought the basement gathering would make it seem like she knew what she was doing. She didn't. For lunch she made all of the meals she used to make with Jake. Those were the only recipes she had burnt into the back of her brain. It was a lot of food for just five women.

Pot roast.

Lasagna.

Meatloaf.

Salad.

Jake had the tendency of keeping all of his empty liquor bottles in the basement like a college kid. His drink of choice was a Grey Goose on the rocks. Every time he would finish a bottle of Grey Goose, which was on average once a week, he would keep the empty bottle downstairs on display. Constance never understood this about him. She

wondered about the purpose of keeping the empty bottles. Was it to show off? To keep track? She had no idea, but was thankful when she stumbled across them while cleaning the basement. She had spent all of the cash from the marina on the food and had very little money of Jake's left. She thought it perfectly reasonable to go to the liquor store and buy the cheap vodka. The vodka that costs around seven dollars. If she did that then she could just pour the cheap vodka into the Grey Goose bottles. Which is exactly what she did. Not only did Constance think that was the best idea she had ever had, but she thought the women would like her more for having nice vodka. She heard they liked cosmos from Krissy so the vodka was exactly what Constance needed to have at her party.

Constance watched all of the women leave Krissy's house and head down the street. As she watched them walk her heart raced. They all looked so angry, including Krissy. Maybe angry was the wrong word. Confident. They all looked so confident. It reminded Constance of when she was back in high school and the popular girls would walk down the hallway in their groups. Camden would always be in that group and they would always look right through Constance as if she was invisible. The only difference in that moment was these girls were walking to Constance's house to hang out.

They walked in and were immediately greeted with a large, nervous smile from Constance.

"Hello, everyone," Constance said in such a low voice that she wasn't even sure anyone heard her. Krissy motioned for the clan to squeeze into the foyer as Constance stood in her nervousness. Constance wanted to speak, but couldn't. She was frozen in time. Frozen in the moment. She opened her mouth to talk and nothing came out. Silence.

“Well, that journey sure was long, huh,” Constance finally said to the five women squeezed into her 5’x5’ tiled foyer. The women shifted their eyes toward Krissy awaiting a response. Krissy, shifting her eyes toward Constance and back to the other women, let out a tiny giggle. It wasn’t much like Constance to joke so she wasn’t sure why she decided that day would be the day to begin. Either way, she pointed downstairs and the women, following Krissy, headed down to the basement.

The basement was only half finished. A wall blocked off the half that wasn’t finished. Jake built the wall himself. He never seemed to get around to finishing the other half so he decided to just cover it up, Constance assumed. The half of the basement that was finished had dark brown hardwood floors, a couch, a loveseat, a TV, and an unstocked bar. To the right of the steps sat the bar, which wasn’t really that great of a bar. Constance would often call it a pop-up bar when referring to it since it could easily be moved, stolen, or tipped over. To the left of the stairs were the couches and TV. Normally they made the perfect square in the corner, but on that Sunday Constance moved all of them against the wall to make room for the fold-down chairs she rented from the man at the hardware store. When Constance went to rent the six chairs from the hardware store the man laughed at her.

“You really need six chairs?” he asked.

“Yes. I need six for a lunch party I am having.”

“You don’t have six places for your party guests to sit?” the man, who Constance always thought was so nice, said with an attitude.

“No. And you should be so nosey,” Constance said and the man charged her for the six rented chairs, loaded, them in her car, and walked back inside.

Constance was the last one down the basement stairs. She unwrapped the pans that were placed on the edge of the bar as the women stood awkwardly in the center of the circled chairs. The food smelled delicious, Constance thought, as she prepared everything the women would need to feast.

“I hope you all are hungry. I have pot roast, meatloaf, lasagna, and salad.”

“That’s a lot of different things,” Krissy said from the circle of women.

“Yes, I just wasn’t sure what everyone liked.”

“Sandwiches,” Mrs. Wright said as she giggled. The other women laughed as well, but Constance thought it was just because Mrs. Wright’s joke was funnier than she originally thought.

“Finger foods would have been good too,” Mrs. Sampson said as they all continued to laugh.

Constance realized that they may have been laughing at her, but she just thought about how miserable their lives were and it made her feel better. She told herself that they were just being mean because they hated their lives and were jealous of her single life.

“Y’all help yourselves and I will make us some cosmos. Is Grey Goose okay?” Constance asked, immediately regretting her decision to say “y’all.” There had never been one time Constance could remember ever saying that. It was a southern word and she didn’t feel it was her place to use it. Maybe she was using it to fit in. Maybe it had

finally sunk in that she did, in fact, live in the south. Either way, she used it and it sounded very uncharacteristic of her.

With the plates full and the cosmos made, Constance wanted to start the lunch. She wasn't sure how, but she was going to try to get the women to like her. The only way she had ever been able to get women to like her, with the exception of Krissy, was to listen to their problems. She decided that that day she was going to get them to talk about their problems. If she could get them to do that then they would all realize they liked her and she would be a part of the neighborhood group. She even thought that if she could get them to talk about their problems, she could get them to leave their unhappy marriages. This excited Constance so much, because then they would be a group of five, six, single women living in Halfmoon Harbor. Constance's heart raced and face turned red as she planned out her meeting with the woman.

"Okay, ladies," carrying the bottle of Grey Goose to the circle for refills, "take your seats," Constance said as her voice took over the five chattering women in the room. The women sat down and looked at Krissy suspiciously.

"I am glad you all came. I thought this would be a good place for us to get together and vent to each other. Just us women," Constance said.

"I'm sorry?" Mrs. Wright asked. "Vent about what? We have never even spent more than a few hours with you."

Mrs. Sampson, Krissy, and Mrs. Johnson looked at Mrs. Wright as she stated this fact. Constance stayed calm and still, closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and opened her eyes again to find Krissy staring at her. Her eyes met Constance's for the first time that

entire morning. Her eyes were filled with sympathy and questions. Constance stared back and continued to speak.

“I understand that I have never been a part of your group, but I’d like to be now that I kicked Jake out of the house. You see—he was always holding me back from you women. Now that I have been single I have been noticing some things about each of you.”

“What things?” Mrs. Johnson said.

“That’s creepy, Constance,” Krissy said.

“I just mean that you all seem unhappy and I thought maybe I could help.”

Krissy looked over at Constance and mouthed the words “what are you doing?” as Constance continued to talk. At that point there was no return. She just kept at it and tried to get her point across, hoping one of them would snag the line that she had thrown out.

“Mrs. Sampson, can I call you Danielle?” Constance asked and Danielle nodded. “Danielle, I know that you and your husband fight every single morning. I know this because you do it in your drive-way.”

“Constance, this is out of line,” Mrs. Wright said.

“Mrs. Wright...Jessica, I know that you don’t wake up or turn any lights on in your house until after noon almost every day.” Mrs. Wright sat still and looked around at the other women.

“How does she know any of this about us? This is crazy. We should leave,” Mrs. Johnson said.

“That’s fine if you all want to leave. I understand. I am only saying this because I want you all to know that I was there once. I was unhappy and miserable in my marriage. I ended it and it was the best decision I have ever made. I wanted to have you over so I could share my story with you and help you all leave your husbands.” Constance paused and looked around at the uncomfortable faces. Before time got away from her she continued talking. “Well, ladies, I thought about kicking Jake out every day while he was away at work. When I finally did kick him out, it was the best thing that ever happened to me and you all will see that too.”

“Constance, we aren’t planning on kicking our husbands out,” Krissy said as she stood up from the rented chairs. “Listen, we thank you for having us, but this isn’t what we were expecting.”

The women stood awkwardly and walked upstairs to leave. Constance stayed seated as the women left the basement. Before following the women, Krissy walked back over to Constance and sat next to her.

“What were you thinking?” Krissy asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Were you thinking that this would make them want to be your friends? I told them that you wanted them to come over so you could get to know everyone better and then you turn it into a very uncomfortable situation for everyone.”

“Uncomfortable? I was helping everyone.”

“Helping? That isn’t helping. Anyways, we don’t need help, Constance. I did this as a favor and now I regret it completely,” Krissy said as she stood up to leave. The

things Krissy said didn't bother Constance. In fact, she wasn't even thinking about them. She assumed there would be some resistance at first and she was sure at the next meeting they would loosen up. Constance thought about what would happen if the husbands had found out about this Sunday group just as she used to think about what would happen if Jake found out about her packing every day to leave him. She drew up some fantasy in her head about the men coming to her house and banging on the door demanding answers. *What are you doing to our wives? This is brainwash*, the men would yell and then they would probably go home and pack their things and leave their wives. This would be ideal because then she would have the women all to herself. They wouldn't have to leave and go home to their husbands and Constance wouldn't be the only single women. Constance wondered if it would be funny to send a newsletter with updates about the group to the women's houses that night. In big bold letters the newsletter would say, "THIS WEEK MAY BE THE WEEK TO LEAVE YOUR HUSBAND!" She figured that would be the perfect way to tip the men off. This thought made Constance laugh.

"Why do you think this is funny?" Krissy asked before walking upstairs to meet the others.

"Huh? I don't think it's funny. I just thought you were different is all."

"You thought I was different? We have only hung out one time really. How could you have thought I was different?"

"I know you're unhappy, Krissy. I know that you sleep on the couch. I know those bags under your eyes are from crying. I am just trying to help."

"You are insane," Krissy said as went upstairs and left with the other five women.

Constance knew it would take time. She wasn't expecting them to be open to the group right away. Overall she thought the meeting went well. She figured they would go home and think about what she said and then they would come back the following Sunday ready to talk. She lined up the rented chairs so they made a chair-bed and lay down gently with a notepad and pen. On the notepad she jotted down talking points for the following Sunday.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Day After Basement Support

Constance spent the entire day Monday at the marina. The guys had already left and Jason was out running errands all day so it was just her in the shop. A part of her thought Krissy would show up to talk, but she never did. Constance thought this had to be because she was busy or still in denial.

“She’ll come around,” she said to herself. “They will all come around.”

Constance thought it would be a good idea to see if Krissy wanted to come over and have some tea after work. On her walk home from work, she stopped by Krissy’s and slid the note she wrote before she left the marina under her front door. The note said:

Come over for tea in 30 min. Please.

Constance was sure she would get the note and she was sure she would come. There was something about Krissy that screamed dedication. She just couldn’t turn down an invitation. Constance only guessed this about her, but she could tell that’s how she was. She was sure that Krissy would get the invitation, gather her things, and head over to her house. And that was exactly what she did because thirty minutes later there was a knock on Constance’s door.

Constance looked at herself in the bathroom mirror one more time before opening the door.

“Perfect,” she said as she patted down her frizzed hair and checked her teeth. She knew that she had to look perfect for her. She knew that Krissy would have a breakthrough during the meeting and she had to be perfect to pick up the pieces and help her with the next steps. Constance walked over to front door and opened it as professionally as possible. It was a part of her she hadn’t recognized before. A confident part that was lost years before.

“Kristina. Thank you for seeing me. Come in, come in.”

“My name is Krissy, Constance, not Kristina.”

“Oh. I thought Krissy was short for Kristina. I knew a Krissy back in high school and her full name was Kristina so I just assumed.”

“No. It’s just Krissy.”

“Ok. Ok. Krissy, come in and sit down,” Constance said as she help Krissy by the elbow and walked over to the living room like a dog.

“Have a seat here,” Constance said as she forced Krissy into her seat. “I am going to go make us some tea. I will be right back.”

Constance walked into the kitchen before she realized that she couldn’t remember how to make hot tea. She knew she must boil the water but she couldn’t remember if she should put the teabags in before, during, or after the water was boiling. She stood still for a moment before deciding to just microwave a mug and place the teabag in after the water was hot. “I. Am. Brilliant,” she said softly to her suddenly new confident self as she fixed up the tea and headed back for the living room.

“The reason I asked you to come was because you seemed a little irritated with me last night, Krissy, and I want you to know that this is a safe place and my intentions are not to irritate you. So tell me what happened.”

“Constance, irritated is not even the word to describe it. You were out of line. I just don’t understand where all of this is coming from. I thought you wanted to have that lunch to get to know the women a little better and try to join the neighborhood group. I had no idea you were going to insult everyone and tell them they needed to kick their husbands out. Who does that? You can’t just say that to people,” Krissy said as she reached for the microwaved mug and burned her hand.

“Shit,” she yelled as she dropped the mug and spilled the hot water on the coffee table. “Did you microwave this?!”

“Oh no, I should have warned you.”

Constance ran into the kitchen and grabbed a bag of ice and a dry rag for Krissy’s hand. As she held the bag to Krissy’s hand she felt a tingling in her body. Krissy’s hand was soft and hot all at once. It was smaller than Constance’s and rested just perfectly in her hand. The tingling increased the longer she held the ice onto her palm. In the silence Constance and Krissy locked eyes and stared for what seemed like hours. Constance hadn’t felt this way since she was a child and Camden would come into her room and lay with her. She hadn’t been close to another woman after Camden. The feeling was wonderful.

“It’s fine now, thank you,” Krissy said as she took her hand from Constance’s and sat back in her chair. “None of us want to kick our husbands out, Constance. None of us want to be single. We get together to talk about our lives and have fun, not to man-bash.”

“Man-bash? Man-bash? That’s what you that was? Man-bashing? You think I wanted you to invite those women over so I could get all of you to man-bash?” Constance knew that Krissy was right, but she stuck to her guns and followed through with her argument. “Look, if that’s the way you feel then I don’t think you understand the purpose of me inviting you and everyone else over.”

“Then what was the purpose?”

Constance smiled the entire time she spoke or listened. She never broke her smile, which was something she learned from being married to Jake. Smiling makes them more angry. *Smile. Smile. Smile.*

“You are just insecure in your marriage, Krissy. It must be hard. Phil is gone all day. You’re all alone. Just wanting some attention. I get it. That’s why I am here. You even said yourself that you weren’t happy at the marina last week,” Constance said this as she pushed all of her bodyweight forward in her chair, using her heels to scoot the old chair forward, and placing her hand on Krissy’s leg. She wasn’t trying to console her. She just wanted to make sure she knew that she could be trusted. “Drink your tea and lets focus on your marriage alone together. Be careful, though, it’s hot!”

“There is nothing to focus on! And I didn’t say I was unhappy last week. I was just upset because Phil and I got in a fight. I was not in the right mind at the time. That

doesn't mean I wanted to leave him. Not everyone wants to leave their husbands like you."

Constance didn't take offense to Krissy's words. She didn't even really seem to budge from them. She just agreed by nodding and stood up to see Krissy out. It was clear that she wasn't ready to come to terms with it yet. Constance thought that they made progress and was sure that the following Sunday would be the breakthrough day.

"Constance, I really think you should get some help or something. You aren't going to make any friends by trying to come in between their marriages. Maybe you should talk to somebody. You and Jake were married for a long time. Being alone can be hard," Krissy said as she turned to leave the house.

"Okay," Constance said, "See you tomorrow."

After Krissy's silhouette in the streetlights disappeared Constance grabbed her tea and headed up to the attic to see if she could see into Krissy's house. Constance sat up there in her chair and squinted as she tried to make out what Krissy and Phil were talking about. When Krissy arrived home she turned on the light that illuminated their big bay window and their lives. Phil was sitting in his recliner and Krissy was pacing, probably trying to get him to notice her. Constance laughed to herself. "He doesn't love her," she said louder than she had said anything all night. Her voice scared her into a laughter that was uncontrollable. "She better leave him," she said as she stopped laughing. "She will. Sunday is the day."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The End of the Beginning

The sun rose over the ocean that Tuesday in a way that the residents of Halfmoon Harbor hadn't quite seen before. It wasn't that it was new or unseen in the past. The sunrise just casted a certain light on the houses that made everything seem so happy. Things weren't happy, though. It was winter in a tourist town and the marina had been closed down for two weeks due to the cold.

Constance woke up with the sun. It raged through her window with a purpose, falling on her mirror, and then reflected onto her bed where she sat thinking about the day's support group agenda. "Today we will practice our acting skills," she said to her lifeless room.

Constance went into the office, across from her bedroom, and wrote up a few scenes for the women to act out the following Sunday. All of the scenes were about them practicing their leaving strategies. At the top of each scene she wrote:

Pack his clothes

Approach him

Tell him to leave

Force him out

She thought it was smart and funny and the neighborhood women would appreciate the steps.

On her morning walk she thought she'd go over to the marina and check things out. She knew Jason was going to be out of town from that Tuesday to Friday so she thought it would be nice if she popped in and made sure no funny business was going on. She thought Jason would really appreciate that she was stopping by. When she walked up and saw a man sitting there on the front porch of the marina she was startled and curious. The closer she got to the front door, the more the man looked like Heineken. Squinting her eyes, and walking with her chest first, she realized it was, in-fact, Heineken.

"What are you doing here?" she asked as she noticed who it was. The words came out before she realized they sounded a little rude.

"Well hello to you too."

"I just thought I'd come check on the place," Constance said this with a certain obligation and authority so Heineken would think she was a very important member of the marina family.

"I'm just sleeping her for a few nights while Jason is gone. They are doing some plumbing nonsense at the house and I really couldn't afford a hotel all week. Jason said I could crash here while he was gone," Heineken said this with no sense of emotion whatsoever.

"I didn't know you were friends with him," Constance said.

"With Jason?"

"Yes."

"We have lived in the same town for years. Of course we know each other."

“Well, I have lived here for years and I didn’t know either of you,” Constance said as she walked over and sat down on the bench in front of the marina door. “So living in the same town for years doesn’t really mean much to me. Plus, you didn’t speak to him last week at the bar.”

“You didn’t know anyone because you chose not to know anyone. And I did speak to him at the bar. Maybe you just didn’t see it.”

“Are you sure he said you could stay here?”

“He did. He also told me to keep an eye out for his new shop girl, Constance. Constance wouldn’t happen to be your name, would it?” Heineken said as smiled and walked over to sit next to her. Constance took a deep breath in when he brushed her hand when he sat. She felt her whole body tingle like it did the night she went home with him. The only difference that time was she was sober.

“I am Constance, yes.”

“Don’t you want to know my name?” Heineken asked as he scooted closer to Constance and placed his hand on her leg. Constance jumped up and started to walk away. She knew it wasn’t the right thing to do. She felt awkward about just getting up and leaving, but she really didn’t want to know his name. He was a moment and she wanted him to remain a moment.

“Where are you going, Constance?” Heineken shouted as she stopped and turned.

“I would let you stay with me but you can’t. I have people coming into town.”

This was a lie. Constance didn’t have people coming into town and they both knew it.

Constance never had real visitors until Sunday when the women came over. It felt strange for her to even say she had people coming into town.

Heineken didn't say a word. He stayed seated on the bench as she stood in the parking lot of the marina. To Constance, he looked different that morning. Different from the way he looked in the bar and different from the way he looked asleep in his bed. He wasn't smiling those different smiles he did the first night and his face didn't have lines on it from sleeping too rough. On that morning, standing outside of the marina, he reminded her of Jake in a way, run down and worn with messy hair and black coffee. Constance didn't want to feel that way about Heineken. She didn't even like him. He was someone she did just to feel something and she wanted to never see him again.

"Take a walk with me," Heineken said as he stood, walked towards her, and lightly grabbed her wrist. Constance didn't answer. She allowed him to lightly touch her wrist. It reminded her of the night they were together. She closed her eyes and allowed herself to breathe him in. His coffee breath smelled like Jake's. She decided to take him up on his offer.

They walked parallel to the inlet. The ocean was on the other side of the houses, but they could still hear the crashing waves. Constance liked walked along the inlet instead of the ocean for many reasons. Less wind. Less people. More privacy. The only thing blocking the calm inlet water from hitting land was a rotting-wood sea wall that had been put in by Jason's grandfather himself.

"I love days like this. Days when the sun creeps out of the clouds and the ocean is a dark blue," Heineken said.

“I’ve never noticed it before,” Constance said even though she knew it was a lie. She lived for days like that. Those days were her favorite days.

“No. No. It’s true. You have to admit it. Look how great it is.”

Constance didn’t look. She purposely looked away from the sun and at her feet. They were in the same rhythm as Heineken’s so she shuffled a bit so they wouldn’t be. She really didn’t like him and never wanted to like him.

“I have to go,” she said as she turned and started walking the opposite way back to her house.

“Wait!” Heineken shouted. “Why do you always leave so abruptly?”

Constance just didn’t want to stand next to him anymore. She didn’t want to stand next to him so much that she never even heard what he said.

“I have to go get ready for company. See you around.”

Constance went home and started planning for the following Sunday. She was preparing for the women whose lives she was sure she was going to change.

She still had to buy the cheap vodka and pour the vodka into the Grey Goose bottles. She thought for a second about calling the marina to see if Heineken would pick up. They could sit in front of the fireplace the way she and Jake used to do. They could have dinner and wine and laugh long into the night. Constance knew it would be a bad idea, but she contemplated do so the entire way up to the attic with her bowl full of grapes. She was going to do some mid-morning spying to see how the women were doing. Constance couldn’t help but jump up from the attic chair, spilling her grapes all over the pants she rarely wore. The pants were red—a color she didn’t much wear since

Jake left. The glare from the windshield prohibited her from seeing who was in the car. She thought it was Jake for a second, but remembered he wouldn't be in a Focus. The license plate read "Virginia," a state where she only knew one person, Camden. The last time she talked to Camden was about three months before then. She had called to check in on Constance. The call was not received because Constance was dodging all calls at that time.

Camden had never been to Halfmoon Harbor. She had never been to South Carolina from what Constance knew. At least if she had, she didn't call Constance to meet up. Constance didn't blame her for not trying to meet up. They had grown apart, grown into other people. Constance was sure Camden was still mad about her not making it to their parents' funerals.

"It can't be," Constance whispered to herself.

Walking quickly down the stairs, Constance's heart was racing. She ran down the hall and through the front bedroom to see if the driver had made a move. When she looked out again she saw her sister and her niece. Her niece she had only met once. She was a baby and Constance snuck up to visit. That was long ago.

"Nicole," Constance whispered again as she saw her niece walking up the walkway.

When Constance greeted them at the door she was in utter shock, frozen. Camden, a younger version of her, stood tall in her suit-pants and blouse. She looked older than Constance remembered, worn. The bags under her eyes were dark and sagging, and her make-up was smeared. For a little sister, she sure looked old.

Nicole was a spitting image of Camden. She was tall for her 7-year-old self and held herself like an adult. She reminded Constance of Camden at that age. Confident. Innocent. Too old for her own good. Too smart for Constance. Her confidence reminded Constance of the women walking down the street to her house on Sunday. She seemed bossy before she even spoke, a 7-year old bully tired of the aunt she barely knew.

“Hi, Constance,” Camden said in a tone that their mother used to use when she was angry with them.

“What are you doing here?”

“We were driving through. We came to check on you. You haven’t been returning our calls.”

“I’ve been so busy,” Constance said as she reached her hands down and covered the wet spot on her red pants.

“This is Nicole,” Camden said as she placed her hand on Nicole’s back. “Say hi Nicole. You haven’t seen her since she was a baby, Constance”

Constance looked at Nicole’s eyes staring her up and down. She seemed bored and disgusted by her aunt while she mumbled a breath of “hello.” Constance could tell that they weren’t going to leave, but she couldn’t find the words to invite them in. She couldn’t even find the words to say hello back to her niece. She just looked at the two of them, standing on her front porch, waiting for the invitation to come in. She tried to open her mouth and speak, but nothing came out.

“Can we come in?”

“Sure. Sure. Come in,” Constance said as the words popped into her head. “The house is a mess. I had a dinner party on Sunday and since I’ve started this new job I haven’t had a chance to clean.”

“It’s ok. A dinner party? A job? I didn’t realize you had so many friends down here,” Camden said.

“Yeah. I actually run a support group for women in the neighborhood. It’s a real hit.”

“What type of support group,” Camden said as she paced the unfamiliar house of her unfamiliar sister.

“It’s for women who want to leave their husbands. They are all in really awful marriages and I am helping them leave their husbands.”

“Wow. That’s great, Constance. It seems like you are taking the situation and making the best out of it.”

“Yes. I figured if I could kick Jake out then the other unhappy women could as well.” Constance said this without even thinking. She didn’t kick Jake out and Camden knew that. She had just been so caught up in the story that she had forgotten her own truth. Constance wondered if Camden actually did know that she didn’t kick Jake out. I mean, yes, they talked about how Constance would leave, the last she talked to Camden she said she was going to leave him. Maybe Camden didn’t think anything of her slip up. Maybe Camden didn’t know the truth. Constance had no idea what Camden knew and didn’t know.

“That’s great. And what about the job?” Camden asked. Constance knew that Camden must not have known that Jake left her if she was moving on to another topic. This excited Constance. Maybe nobody would ever have to know that Jake left her. Maybe nobody would ever have to know that she wasn’t the person she was pretending to be.

“I work down at the Halfmoon Harbor marina a couple of days a week. I just spend some time helping the owner stay organized. It’s really nice to have something to do when I don’t have my support group women over.”

Camden looked at Constance and then looked down and Nicole. Constance could tell that something wasn’t right. There was a strange tension in the air that she wasn’t sure she had felt before. She didn’t know why Camden was there and she didn’t know how to ask. Sure, they had talked on the phone over the years, but to Constance, Camden felt like a stranger. She didn’t know if they were there because they were driving through South Carolina or if they were there to check on her situation. She didn’t feel they needed to be there to check on her. In her opinion they hadn’t been much a part of her life over the years. She didn’t know why they would start trying then.

“How long are you staying?” Constance asked.

Without missing a beat, Nicole looked at her mother and said, “How long are we staying, Mom? This place is creepy.”

“Nicole!”

“It’s ok,” Constance assured them.

Camden sat down on the couch in the living room, motioned for Nicole to sit down next to her, and stared into Constance's eyes.

"A few days."

"Okay. Well the two of you can stay downstairs in that front bedroom. It hasn't been used in years so I will get you some fresh sheets." Constance said this trying to remember the last time anyone had ever slept in the front bedroom. She couldn't remember. As she went to grab fresh sheets, Camden tried to get her to sit down and talk. Constance didn't feel much like talking so she ignored her gesture and continued with the sheets.

"Now make yourselves at home. Just be careful in the bathroom. I am repainting so there are paint cans in there."

"Don't you want to stay up and visit with us some? I haven't seen you in years and you have never even had a chance to get to know your niece."

This bothered Constance but she didn't let it show. Of course she wanted to get to know her niece and of course she wanted to catch up with Camden, but she wasn't sure she knew how. She didn't know what to say or what to do. She didn't know if it was built up guilt or nerves making her so distant, but it was a feeling she hadn't really felt before.

"Sure I can visit for a little bit."

"Great."

"Who goes to bed at 6 o'clock at night anyways?" Nicole asked her stranger aunt.

"Oh. I just have a big day tomorrow."

“What do you have to do?” Nicole asked this without blinking or showing any emotion. Constance recognized that emotionless expression. It was often something she would do as well.

“I just have to get ready for my support group and stuff. So what are you guys doing here, really?” Constance asked, as she remained skeptical about their sudden arrival. They were strangers to her. The prior week she would have been relieved to see her sister, but then, as the support group was getting up and running, it was just a nuisance to Constance.

“We saw Jake, Constance,” Camden said. “Now I didn’t talk to him or anything but I did see him. He didn’t see me. I was a little bit behind him on the street. He was with another woman. I came here to tell you this and to help you pack and to move you back with us while he is gone.”

“You can’t have my room if you come,” Nicole said.

“Don’t worry. I’m not coming,” Constance said back.

“I didn’t realize that you kicked him out when I saw him or decided to come down here. Maybe if I knew that I wouldn’t have. Maybe I still would have. I don’t know.”

“You don’t need to rescue me.”

“That’s what I told her,” Nicole said in response to her aunt.

“I just want to help you.”

“I don’t need help. I am doing just fine here. I have a job and friends and the life I have always wanted. I am happy here.”

Constance wasn't sure why she was resisting her sister so much. She didn't want to push her away or be mean to her. She didn't want to resist her help. It felt nice to have a conversation with her. It felt nice to hear her voice and see her face. It felt nice to feel wanted by somebody, but Constance had a good thing going and she didn't want to ruin it. The women of Halfmoon Harbor needed her help. She wanted to be that person who she could have used when she was first unhappy with Jake. She wanted them to thank her and be friends with her. She wanted to be a part of them.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Discovering Wednesday

Constance spent most of the next morning in her bedroom drafting up fliers to slide under the women's doors before their husbands got home. She knew Camden and Nicole went to the beach because she heard them leave and watched them walk, all bundled up, down that way. She thought briefly about following them, but she decided to make the fliers instead. She took some old markers from the attic and wrote "SAME TIME SAME PLACE" on five pieces of blank white paper. Underneath that she wrote, "I WILL HAVE COSMOS AND FOOD AGAIN. SEE YOU ALL THERE." On Krissy's she drew a little heart at the bottom so she would know that she was there for her. Constance was sure that the next Sunday would be the day. She was sure at least one of the women would have a breakthrough and decide to leave, or kick out, their husbands. All she needed was Sunday and then they would all begin to come around. She especially wanted to focus on Krissy because she was the most important to Constance.

After she finished the self-made fliers she went out and slid them under the neighborhood women's doors. She figured this would give them plenty of time to plan for Sunday, and allow them time to get excited about it. She was sure at first they would resist it, just as they resisted the first meeting, but they four days to warm up to the idea and four days seemed like plenty of time.

When Constance arrived back home she saw Heineken sitting on her front porch. She had khaki's on and a light jacket. He had a Heineken in one hand and a glass of wine in the other.

"What are you doing here?" Constance asked him as she walked towards him.

"What were you sliding under those doors?"

"It was just a flier. We have a girls day support group on Sunday's that I host so I was just reminding them."

"But seriously, what are you doing here? How do you know where I live?"

"Well knowing where you live is easy. You live right off the main road. It doesn't take a genius to figure that out. And I came to see if you wanted to have a drink."

"A drink? It's 10 in the morning."

"So," Heineken said as he held out the glass of wine.

"So I can't have a drink with you. I have work to do. Plus, I have guests."

"Work? You're off work this week. I'm not stupid."

"I have work to do for the Sunday thing I was telling you about."

"It's Wednesday," Heineken said as he smiled a familiar smile.

Just as Constance was settling into his smile Camden and Nicole came walking up the driveway. Nicole had seashells inside of her jacket and Nicole was holding all of the shells that couldn't fit in Nicole's Jacket.

"We were wondering when you would wake up," Camden said as she dropped a shell or two.

“Yeah. I’ve never met anybody who goes to sleep at 6 and then sleeps past 8,” Nicole said in her matter-of-fact tone.

Just as the two of them walked up to Constance they looked and realized there was somebody else there.

“Who is he?” Nicole asked Constance.

“Hi there,” Camden followed up with.

“Hey, ladies, my name is Sam. I’m a friend of Constance,” Heineken said as he reached out his hand to greet them. Constance was furious that he said his name. She didn’t ever want to know his name. She wanted him to be Heineken for as long as she knew him. She liked it that way. She liked the distance not knowing his name kept. It was all ruined the second he said his name.

“Sam,” Constance said, shaking as his name came out of her mouth for the first time, “was just leaving.”

“Well, that’s my cue, ladies. I guess I better get going.”

Constance watched Sam leave the driveway with his beer and glass of wine. She was sure in that moment that he was the man she saw on the beach earlier the week before. The back of the man’s body was etched into her brain and it matched Sam’s perfectly. This realization made her happy and satisfied all at once. She felt accomplished for sleeping with the man who she saw reading that letter. She made a point to remember to ask him about the letter the next time she saw him.

Camden and Nicole walked right into the house and made themselves at home.

“You know you have nothing to eat here,” Camden said as Nicole stood next to her and shook her head.

“I know. I need to go to the store I have just been so busy.”

“I am going to run up to the store. Will you stay with Nicole?”

Both Nicole and Constance yelled “no” as Camden grabbed her keys and headed for the door.

“I won’t be long.”

Constance wasn’t really sure why Camden left her daughter with Constance. She was basically a stranger. And Constance was sure Nicole was thinking the same thing. She could tell Nicole didn’t care for her much. She didn’t blame her—she didn’t know it. There was a part of Constance that really liked how honest Nicole was. She liked watching Nicole move and interact because it reminded her so much of her sister at that age. Her dirty blonde hair and blue eyes matched Camden’s perfectly. She reminded Constance of that moment, that dream she had the previous Sunday. There was something nostalgic in the way she viewed Nicole.

“So how was the beach?” Constance asked as she sat down at the kitchen table across from Nicole.

“It was good. How was that man?”

“That man is just a friend and he was good.”

“You know, you’re nothing like I imagined you would be.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“My mom always told stories about you. You know, when you were just girls. You are just nothing like the stories.”

Constance really wasn't sure what Nicole meant. She felt she was exactly the same as she was when they were younger. She felt there was little about her that had changed. Maybe Nicole's young mind couldn't wrap around the idea of adults vs. children. Maybe Nicole only knew stories of Constance as a child so seeing her as an adult was just different.

“My mom said you didn't really date anyone before you married Jake and now you have men coming up to your porch to talk to you.”

“Like I said, Sam is just a friend. And I dated people before Jake. Your mom was just off in her own world.”

“That's what she says about you.”

“I'm sure she does. So are you not in school right now or something?” Constance asked, trying to change the subject.

“I am in second grade.”

“You are a little grown up for the second grade.”

“I am not a baby.”

“I didn't call you a baby.”

“That's what it felt like.”

Constance smiled at Nicole as she realized how young she really was. Second grade was young and a second grader isn't capable of having their own opinions.

“Your house is kind of scary. I couldn’t sleep last night,” Nicole said as she tapped her foot on the ground and her finger on the table. That was something she remembered Camden doing as a child. The tapping soothed her for some reason and Constance always thought it was weird. Seeing Nicole do it made her smile.

“Why is it scary?”

“It’s just so empty and big.”

“Oh, come on. It isn’t that big. It just seems big to you because you are so young.”

“I’m not a baby.”

“I said you were young.”

“I remember when me and your mom were kids we used to go over to our grandmother Barb’s house when our parents were at work. As kids we thought that place was a mansion. It was the biggest house we had ever seen. We would lay awake at night and pray that one day we would be able to live in a house that big...”

“And you got your wish,” Nicole said, cutting Constance off.

“No. My point is, when we went back at seventeen and eighteen the house looked like a run down small dump. A little kids mind is not able to comprehend size.”

“I told you I am not a baby!” Nicole said as she stood up and walked out of the kitchen and into the living room. Constance really wasn’t sure what she said. She didn’t know why Nicole kept thinking she was calling her a baby. She was just trying to explain that her house wasn’t that scary or that big. Constance followed Nicole into the living room and sat down next to her on the couch. She wasn’t used to dealing with children.

She hadn't spent much time around them. It wasn't that she didn't like them. She honestly just didn't know how to deal with them. Jake never really wanted kids. The entertained the idea. He pretended to want them early on. He just never really wanted to follow through. Before they were married kids were what they wanted. Something changed over time, though. He got a vasectomy years after they were married to be sure he would never have children.

"Nicole," Constance said as she placed her hand on her knee. "You'll have to forgive me. I'm not used to being around...people younger than me. I was not calling you a baby. You are obviously not a baby," Constance said as she realized that was probably the first time she had ever been good at solving conflicts. She spent her whole life fighting conflict, dodging conflict, cheating conflict, and all it took was her 7-year-old niece to get her to sit down and work through a conflict.

"I am definitely not a baby," Nicole replied.

"I know. I just said that. Gosh you're exhausting."

"So you have parties here on Sunday's?" Nicole asked, changing the subject about as well as Constance can.

"Yes. I guess you could call them parties."

"Like birthday parties?"

"Kind of like birthday parties."

"I really like going to birthday parties."

"Me too."

Constance looked down and saw her hand still on her niece's knee. It felt natural for her to be consoling her. The conversation felt like a normal conversation and she felt like a normal aunt. There was a sense of pride she felt when she looked at her niece or listened to her speak. There was a piece of her there and she could feel it. There was a connection that she wasn't sure she had felt before.

When Camden got back from the store she cooked the three of them a nice dinner. They sat around the kitchen table with candles and homemade decorations by Nicole. They ate and laughed and talked about Nicole. Constance realized that when they talked about Nicole they didn't have to talk about Constance or Camden. They didn't have to talk about their parents' funerals or their drifting apart. Nicole was their source of connection and they both let that happen. Camden talked about Nicole's dad and how they drifted apart. Constance was shocked that she talked about that right in front of Nicole. She watched Nicole look up at her mother with admiration as she spoke. Nicole would chime in every now and then and correct her mother or add a small detail to a story. Constance sat across from the two of them and smiled. She wondered if it was too late to have a baby. She was only 40-years-old. People could have babies at 40-years-old. Maybe having a baby would fix her. Maybe a baby would be just what she needed. She could have a little girl looking up at her the way Nicole looked at Camden. A baby would be a forever best friend and would love Constance unconditionally. A baby was just what Constance felt she needed to move on with her life. A baby just like Nicole. Somebody who would love her and only her.

That night, after Camden and Nicole went into the front bedroom, Constance snuck out into the cool night and started heading to the marina to see if Sam was still staying there. She wasn't sure if she was going to tell him or not that she wanted to have a baby. She hadn't had much time to think about it from the moment she decided to have a baby and the moment she was walking to find Sam. She figured she could sleep with him and tell him she was on the pill. Or she could say she couldn't have babies. She really didn't want him to be a part of her or the baby's lives but she thought having someone to help out might be a plus. If she told him then she could present it as a business deal and then they could sleep together and then he could be the father. If they ended up getting married and having more babies then the women of Halfmoon Harbor would probably not like her anymore because by that time they will have all gotten divorces so she knew they couldn't get married. They could live together or secretly raise the baby together. The whole way over to the marina Constance contemplated letting Sam in on the plan or keeping it a secret. She figured she would feel him out and then decide what to do.

She walked up to the glass marina door and tapped on it with her finger. The lights were on in the shop and when she cupped her hands to the door to look inside she could see Sam lounging on the pile of shirts she had just finished organizing the week before. He couldn't see who it was out there, but he got up anyway and unlocked the door. When Sam saw that it was Constance he smiled and welcomed her in.

"How about that glass of wine?" she asked him as flattened his hair and wiped off his crumb-filled shirt.

“I think I can do that.”

Sam went over and poured Constance a glass of wine and opened himself a beer. He motioned for Constance to have a seat on one of the chairs in front of the register and he sat down next to her.

“So, I guess 10 am is too early, but 10 pm is just fine?”

“I guess so,” Constance said as she sipped on her glass of wine. She noticed this time that Sam didn’t remind her of Jake. She wasn’t sure if it was because she was there on a mission or if it was because she was thinking about Jake less and less, but she liked not being reminded of him.

“I think I saw you walking on the beach one morning last week reading a letter,” Constance said to Sam as the two of them sat awkwardly in the “waiting room” type chairs.

“That was me.”

“I didn’t know it was you at the time but I had a feeling.”

“Were you stalking me?”

“No. I just thought it was interesting how you were reading a letter on the beach.”

“Why is that interesting?”

“I guess I’ve just never seen that before. I’m not sure.”

Constance wanted to ask so badly about who the letter was from but she didn’t want to ruin the image she had in her head. She already knew his name and knew he was the man on the beach. She thought learning anything else would ruin her wanting to have him get her pregnant.

“You like me, right, Sam?”

“Sure I like you. You’re a...unique person.”

“Good,” Constance said as she thought about how she would ask him.

“I’m not sure you like me,” Sam stated as he laughed a little to himself.

“Sure, sure, I like you. I like you just fine. So listen, I have a business proposal for you,” Constance said in a rushed tone as her heart began to race and her stomach filled with nerves. “How would you like to have a baby with me? I will compensate you. You don’t have to be involved that much if you don’t want. It’ll be a simple money transaction. I get money from my husband every month and I can give it to you. I just want a baby and I feel like you’re perfect for the job. You probably want kids. I’m sure of it. So you could have a baby with me and I can pay you and we both will win.”

Sam looked at Constance in the eyes with a blank stare. After a few seconds his look changed to confused and he began to shake his head and stand up.

“What the fuck, Constance?”

“What?”

“Have you lost your mind?”

“What do you mean? It’s a business proposal.”

“First of all, before I even get to the insane baby stuff, you’re married?! When were you going to tell me you were married?”

“I’m not technically married. Well, I am legally married. I kicked him out. He lives up north. We don’t even talk. We can get divorced if that would make you feel better.”

“No that would not make me feel better! Second, what type of person asks someone she has known for barely a week to have a baby with her? You are offering to pay me to get you pregnant? I don’t know you. Why would I take your money to get you pregnant?”

Constance stayed seated as she looked down at the ground. The way Sam yelled at her made her smile. His voice was really high pitched and he sounded like a chipmunk. It was nothing like the way Jake used to yell at her. She couldn’t help but laugh at Sam. Constance thought if she gave him some time to think about it then he would probably come around to the idea. It was a lot to ask of him but if she knew Sam at all she knew he would probably come around to the idea. She decided to let him work through his chipmunk anger alone so she stood without saying a word and walked out of the marina.

Constance kept laughing the entire walk back to her house. She was laughing at Sam’s voice, at his reaction, at his red face. She thought it was ridiculous of him to react that way. She was offering to help him out by paying him. She didn’t think she presented it in any kind of scary way. That’s why she knew he would come around to the idea. He had to come around to the idea. It would only be a matter of time.

When Constance quietly tippy-toed back through her front door she was surprised to see the lights on and front bedroom door open. She turned the corner to the living room and saw Camden and Krissy sitting down on the couch. Krissy had the fliers Constance made earlier in her hands and Camden was holding the letter that Jake wrote Constance. She couldn’t tell what they were doing together and her mind didn’t even register what was in the letter. She thought maybe Krissy came over to apologize after she saw the flier

and RSVP. Or maybe Krissy was telling Camden all about the advantages of the support group.

“Constance, sit down,” Camden said as she opened up the letter from Jake.

“I see you two met,” Constance said as she turned to Camden. “Krissy is the only reason why that support group got started. She took a chance on me.”

“Constance, that support group is not a support group. It was five neighborhood women who came over because I convinced them to give you a chance.”

“It’s fine. Clearly you are still in denial about your unhappiness. You will realize it sooner rather than later and then you will want to kick Phil out and I will be the only one you have to run to,” Constance said this so nonchalantly as she laughed again, thinking about Sam.

“I read the letter from Jake,” Camden said as handed Constance the letter.

“So.”

“So, you didn’t kick Jake out, Constance. He left you. He left you for D.C. He left you for that woman I saw him with the other day. I know that’s hard to cope with but you can’t go around telling people that you kicked him out when you didn’t.”

Constance was so surprised. It wasn’t that she was shocked by the news. She always knew the truth. She always knew he left her. She was just shocked that it had gotten that far. Thinking about it in that moment she knew he left her. She knew she lied to everyone. She didn’t completely erase it from her mind. She knew she had been lying about it, but she didn’t know anyone would ever find out. As she listened to her sister speak, she knew she had two choices.

One. Start crying.

Two. Explain why she lied.

Constance thought back to her conversation with Nicole. She thought back to how resolving that “baby calling” conflict made her feel. She decided to push through the confrontation and explain why she lied. She thought that she should try the opposite of what she normally did.

“You’re right. He did leave. I lied because I didn’t...I didn’t want to admit it to myself. I was trying to come to terms with it and then I hung out with Krissy one night.”

“Don’t blame this on me,” Krissy said softly.

“I am not blaming it on you. I am just saying that the night we hung out I felt like I had a purpose,” Constance said this as tears began to fill up in her eyes. She was sure her own sister had never seen her cry. She always tried to keep her feelings in. She always tried to protect herself in this regard. That day she decided to stop doing that. She decided that the jig was up. “I liked that you were looking at me for answers. I especially liked knowing that you and the other women were unhappy because I thought that maybe we could all be single together.” By the time Constance finished speaking her entire face was soaking wet. She had to remind herself to breath but for some reason she couldn’t get enough air.

“Constance,” Krissy said, “We aren’t unhappy. I have told you this before. We meet because we are friends. We vent about our husbands because that’s what we have always done. We never wanted to kick our husbands out or leave them. That was something you invented in your head. It took so much for me to get the other women to

come to your house on Sunday. Not because they didn't like you, but because they didn't know you outside of the random neighborhood functions."

Constance looked down at the floor and when she caught her breath she looked back up at Krissy holding the fliers.

"You have crossed the line with these. Nobody was even planning on coming back to your house because you offended everyone," Krissy said as she placed the fliers on the coffee table.

"You need help," Camden said. "Let me help you."

Constance looked back down at the floor and felt the tears fall from her eyes to her shoes and onto the ground. She remained in that position for several minutes until she heard heavy footsteps on her wooden floor. When she looked up she saw Sam peeping around the foyer.

"I hope I'm not interrupting but the door was open," Sam said, entering the living room.

"Great," Constance whispered under her breath.

"Can I talk to you for a minute, Constance?"

"No," she said as she looked back to the ground. "Just leave, Sam."

"I need to talk to you. Please just step outside with me."

Constance thought about her conversation with Sam earlier. She thought about his reaction and her reaction to his reaction. She replayed what she said to him in her head and he stood there waiting for her to say something. She couldn't believe she asked him to have a baby. She couldn't believe she slept with him just a week after Jake left. She

couldn't believe that spending one day with her niece made her think that a child would solve her problems. She used to always laugh when she would read about women getting pregnant to trap a man or save a marriage. She remembered women from high school or college doing this. She always thought it was insane. Babies couldn't fix people. She realized how out of line she was as the three of them stared at the top of her head.

"No. Please leave, Sam," Constance said without looking him in the eyes. She was sure she would never be able to look him in the eyes again, half because of embarrassment and half because she didn't recognize the reflection of herself in his eyes. She didn't recognize the reflection of herself in anyone's eyes.

After she heard Sam leave the house she lifted her head and looked in the direction of Krissy and Camden.

"Nicole and I are leaving tomorrow to go back to D.C. We would like for you to come with us. You don't have to move. You don't have to leave. Just come with us for a little while."

Constance stood from the couch, turned, and walked upstairs.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Art of Letting Go

Constance sat on her bathroom floor thinking about the last two weeks. Every conversation played in her head, fighting for her attention. If she bent down to the vent on her blue and white tiled floor she could hear the voices of Krissy and Camden. She wanted to listen, but couldn't. She wanted to be down there, but couldn't. She stood and walked quietly to the attic. She sat in the chair next to the window and looked out over Halfmoon Harbor. To the right, the ocean. To the left, the other houses. She cracked open the window to try and hear the waves crashing. She listened and felt nothing. She realized that maybe she never really liked the ocean. She thought about it and remembered how much she hated getting in the water. She felt a sense of betrayal from the ocean ever since she almost drowned in Ocean City, MD at 8-years-old. Why she ever moved to a town on the ocean was beyond her ability to understand that night.

Constance turned her chair away from the window and looked around at the attic. Nothing looked familiar to her. None of the boxes were hers. They were all Jake's. She didn't feel any kind of connection to anything up there. She stood and walked back down to her bedroom. As she passed the office she felt the same detachment as the attic. Nothing was hers. When she walked back into her bedroom she remembered why she only packed her clothes that one time she tried to leave. Nothing in the house felt like

hers. Nothing was hers. Sure, she lived there. Sure, she helped decorate. Nothing was her decision, though. She did what Jake wanted. It was always what Jake wanted.

She reached under the bed and saw that Jake had left one empty suitcase behind. She opened her drawers and packed what she thought she would need. She didn't pack anything red except the dress she was wearing the night she and Jake met. She didn't pack it as a memento or out of love. She packed it to remind herself to never go back to that place again. She grabbed her passport and stuck it in the suitcase before zipping it up. On her dresser was the letter she was waiting to send Jake. She ripped up the letter and found another piece of paper to write a new letter.

Jake,

I left. I took what I wanted. I hope this letter finds you.

Best,

Constance

Constance placed the letter on the bed, picked up her suitcase, and took one last look around the room that ruined her. She rubbed the scare on her wrist from Jake grabbing her too hard, scratching her too often, and breaking her watch. She closed her eyes and tried to remember one good memory from that room. She couldn't.

After closing the door, Constance walked downstairs to an empty living room. She went over to the front bedroom and tapped on the door like Camden used to do to her bedroom. She stood for a minute before speaking.

"Camden?" she said through the closed door.

"Yes," Camden said, defeated and exhausted.

“Can we go now?”

There was no response at first. Constance remained still with only her finger tapping the door. She waited until she saw the light turn on at her feet. She heard two sets of feet walking around the room and whispering. Camden opened the door with Nicole standing behind her. She looked at Camden with swollen eyes and a half-way smile.

“Can we go now?” she asked again, holding her suitcase in her hand still.

Camden looked at her in eyes and took a deep breath in. She saw the suitcase and smiled a sympathetic smile.

“Nicole, get your stuff together. We’re leaving.”

“It’s like 2 o’clock in the morning, mom. Can’t we leave in the morning?”

Camden looked at Constance with a questioned look on her face. Constance shook her head and turned away from her fully smiling sister.

“No we can’t wait until tomorrow. You don’t even like it here. Get you stuff and lets go,” Constance said as she did a walk through of the downstairs.

Camden couldn’t help but laugh and cry at the same time. Constance could hear her from the kitchen as she looked for anything else she wanted to take. She heard Nicole huffing and puffing and whispering something to Camden.

“You heard her, baby. Get your stuff. We’re leaving.”

By the time Constance walked through the kitchen and living room, back to the front bedroom, Camden and Nicole were packed and ready to go. Constance turned off the lights and the walked out into the salty fall air. After locking the front door, she threw the key into the yard and laughed to herself.

As they pulled out of the driveway and onto Halfmoon Drive, Constance tried not to look back. In fact, she never turned to look back once until they were on Ocean Boulevard, and even then she just looked in the side mirror. She saw in the mirror that she had left the attic light on. The light was enough to light up the entire street that night because it was so dark. The light looked like a tunnel leading her away. It almost looked to her like the attic light was a beacon, only guiding her away. She rolled down the passenger window to listen to the waves crashing on the beach. She breathed in the beach air and listened to the ocean. She wondered if the ocean was following her like she imagined it followed Jake that day he left. She thought about how she was leaving for the same city she knew Jake was living in. She wondered if she would ever see him on the street. It was her home. D.C. was where she grew up. She was allowed to go back. To her they would just be right back where they were before they ever met. It would be like they never met. They would be two strangers living in the same city. People live in cities their whole lives and never run into people they don't try to run into. She was sure that she would never have to see him again. She was even more sure that she would never have to see the ocean again.

She thought about whether or not the ocean ever really found her worthy. When they passed Yukka she turned to catch a glimpse of it one last time just as she did when she looked at Jake for the last time. The moon lit up the exact spot she looked at and she swore she saw a man standing on the beach. She didn't care to look again. She rolled up her window, took one last look at the house at Halfmoon Harbor as it disappeared in the mirror, and turned to look at her sister.

“You’re going to be just fine, you know?” Camden said as she watched Constance’s eyes fill with tears. She knew her sister was right. She knew she would be just fine. She knew that it would take a lot of work, but she would be fine. No more Jake. No more ocean. No more marina. No more basement support. No more lies. It was time for her to figure out who she was once and for all.

Constance grabbed Camden’s hand and held onto it as tight as she could and said, “I know.”

BIOGRAPHY

Kelsey Goudie graduated from George Mason University in 2016 with an MFA in Creative Writing (focus on fiction). Before moving to Virginia and earning her MFA, Kelsey lived in South Carolina where she received her MA in Writing from Coastal Carolina University. Her fiction has appeared in *Thrice Fiction Magazine* and *Gravel*. She currently lives in Dallas, TX.