

PROLOGUE

Like most New England summertime destinations, Martha's Vineyard was no stranger to tragedy, though it often hid deep in the island's underbelly, safely tucked away from tourists, rarely disrupting their cycle of lobster rolls and blue-sky beach days. But real islanders—the ones who raised children there, the ones who buried parents there, the ones who weathered hurricanes there, the ones whose darkest secrets existed within the lush ninety-six square miles of that Massachusetts island—knew far too well that tragedy was, actually, everywhere on the island, all the time, waiting to strike.

Winter on the Vineyard showed no mercy for locals. Beaches once bathed in warm sunshine, festooned with sandcastles and ice-cream-cone drippings, stood frozen and barren from November through March. Occasionally, during that long winter, the sun would appear, and moods would temporarily lift, but only briefly. While summer residents were back home in Greenwich and Wellesley and on the Upper East Side, island locals were struggling to find housing, to secure childcare, to prepare for the onslaught of another season of demand. Addiction of all kinds quickly became a familiar old acquaintance to most residents, knocking at their doors during those lonely, cold months, offering an

escape from the brutality of the off season. Every winter, the island braced itself for inevitable losses: to drugs, to alcohol, to depression.

But the island wasn't immune to hardship during the summer, either. Summer, in particular, was ripe for tragedy, and violence, and pain. Deceptive and misleading, the island felt impossibly safe to summer visitors and seasonal residents during its peak season—a wholesome, bucolic snow globe of white picket fences in Edgartown and roadside farmstands in Chilmark. How could anything bad happen in such a beautiful place? How could anyone feel pain and suffering on an island where the sunset was so vivid, painted in bright hues of apricot and coral, that it seemed to be pouring right out of the sky and into the sea? Serious crimes couldn't happen here, summer folks assumed, not in a place that didn't have a single traffic light on the entire island. A trip to the island was, to visitors, a potent reminder that there were places in the world impervious to danger, places where happiness was the norm, places where humankind was *good*.

In the summer, guards were let down. People relaxed. People got careless. They became sloppy, forgetful, a little too much at ease. One more drink? One more swim? *Why not, we're on vacation*. And in turn, locals needed to let loose during the summer, too—if they were ever lucky enough to have an opportunity to do so. Locals spent those months breaking their backs working double shifts, barely making enough to get by, so when a chance to have some fun presented itself to them, they sure as hell took it, and they took it hard. Accidents happened.

It made sense, then, that on a perfect day in late June, when the body of a young woman was found on the shores of Norton Point Beach, residents weren't particularly shocked. Already that summer, islanders had suffered a fatal car accident, a drowning off the infamous *Jaws* bridge, and an overdose. These tragedies hit the island like tidal waves, delivering swift and powerful blows of pain and sadness, but then pulling back just as fast as they'd arrived. Because islanders weren't allowed to grieve during the summer. June, July, and August were the most important months of the year, when residents were laser-focused on

one thing: work. This numbness to pain was an act of self-preservation that islanders had developed over time, enabling them to forge onward whenever tragedy struck, despite their hearts shattering silently inside.

This time, at first, it seemed like all those other senseless and terrible accidents: a young person partied too hard, went for a swim, perhaps with a lover, but was caught by the riptide, or got a cramp, or was simply too intoxicated to swim and drowned. The island would cry and mourn, but then it would be forced to move on, for it would have to usher in the next round of hotel guests, of house tenants, and of dinner reservations, all with a smile.

But this time was different. Once the initial shock wore off, and funeral arrangements had been made, and people stopped bringing flowers to the makeshift seaside shrine, the island began to realize that this was, in fact, nothing like all the other tragic accidents. Once the island learned who this person was, who she knew, and *what* she knew, the island realized that this wasn't an accident at all.

This was murder.

CHAPTER 1

Brynn Nelson seemed to be nursing the worst hangover of her life. The kind involving six dirty vodka martinis, a pack of Parliament Lights, smudged eyeliner, a tank top strap slipping down a shoulder, dim lights at a crowded dive bar. It was early morning now, and her head throbbed, her stomach churned, and her body ached.

But she wasn't hungover. It had been months since she'd even tasted a dirty martini—almost a year. And she hadn't smoked a cigarette in almost ten years, when she was in her early twenties, living in a shoebox apartment in the West Village. She *yearned* for that shoebox apartment now, a world away from the island of Martha's Vineyard, where she lived today. She longed for the freedom to drink martinis with abandon and smoke cigarettes with a stranger, knowing that she'd never be able to do that again. Not really.

Brynn only *felt* hungover, because she was a first-time mother to a three-month-old who refused to sleep. She was exhausted, and this was now how she felt all the time. A hangover seemed like a luxury in comparison to the way she felt now.

That morning had started for Brynn like any other since Lucas was born: with a headache and a sense of dread. She'd spent most of

the night wide awake, either feeding Lucas every hour and a half, which he demanded almost down to the minute with a glass-shattering wail, or pumping in the dark stillness of the kitchen, and then carefully transferring the milk into freezer bags and labeling them with the date and time, and finally stuffing her face with blueberry muffins and cookies—whatever carbs she could find—then putting on a fresh change of clothes, as her shirt became drenched in sweat every hour throughout the night, and her underwear still became speckled with blood, even though she'd had a C-section. No one had warned her about the sweat, or the blood.

Last week, Brynn thought she'd successfully implemented the sleep-training technique from a virtual sleep coach for which she'd shelled out four hundred dollars. She'd found the coach on Instagram while she was pumping at three in the morning and immediately purchased the “Magic Sleep Package” in a moment of sheer desperation. The package included a half-hour phone call with the sleep coach and an emailed brochure with a personalized plan. But really, in its most distilled form, the plan simply gave Brynn permission to let Lucas cry. For one torturous week, she followed the instructions. And at the end of the week, it really *was* like magic: she and her husband, Ross, had enjoyed an entire night of peace and quiet, when Lucas hardly moved during a glorious nine-hour slumber. But that had turned out to be a fluke, and now he woke throughout the evening in a relentless pattern, screaming and crying at such an acute, guttural pitch that Brynn thought her eardrums might actually burst.

Brynn had tried other things, too, in addition to the expensive sleep coach. She still kept notes on her phone documenting his sleep stretches and feeding times throughout the night. She'd read every parenting book, she followed all the advice-giving social media accounts, she bought all the baby gear and gadgets out there, she had the pediatrician on speed dial. She'd even reluctantly joined a local support group for new moms through Martha's Vineyard Community Services, which she knew had been a huge help to many island parents before her.

Lucas had cried a raspy cry the entire meeting. And the more he

cried, the more anxious Brynn got. She could feel her own body temperature rising, her muscles tensing.

“He’s just fussy,” she had said to the group while bouncing Lucas in her arms. No one asked for an explanation. The other parents just looked at her with a mix of what she discerned as pity and confusion.

“Brynn,” the group leader had said, as her own toddler sucked away with ease at her breast beneath her cocoon sweater, “he’s a *baby*. When he cries, he’s trying to *communicate* with you. You’re his mother. You just need to listen to him.” Brynn had nodded. She’d heard this advice before—that babies cry to tell us something. Usually, that they’re hungry, or tired, or need a diaper change. The problem was, whenever Brynn addressed these potential needs, Lucas still wasn’t satisfied, and his relentless wail continued no matter what kind of comfort she offered him. She tried to listen closely, as though something might suddenly click, and she’d innately understand him, the way she thought a mother was supposed to understand her child. She shut her eyes and tuned out everything else around her. But Lucas’s cries only stabbed away at her eardrums, tightening her chest, and filling her with panic. The truth was, all she really heard when Lucas screamed was the disappearance of herself, and the suffocating feeling that she was forever lost. Each time he opened his mouth to howl, she swore that she could feel a piece of herself being erased. Sometimes, she felt like she’d do anything to silence him for just a moment, to have a few seconds for herself. To *breathe*. “I’ll try that,” she had responded to the group leader. Brynn never returned to the support group again.

Now, it was just past seven in the morning, and she’d already fed Lucas, changed him, and put him down for a nap. The daytime schedule the sleep coach had given her was a far cry from the reality of how Lucas’s day unfolded. “Try to sleep when he sleeps,” the coach had advised, as so many others had, as well. Brynn wanted to, and sometimes she did, but she found it difficult to mentally unplug enough to fall asleep. She had too many worries constantly jogging through her mind: Did she put the next pediatrician appointment in her calendar? Did

she move the laundry into the dryer? What was she going to make for dinner? Did she wash the bottles from last night? Did she rub the vitamin E oil on her scar? Was her car-insurance payment due or did she already pay it? Did she respond to the email from her literary agent asking—for the *third* time that month—when the new chapters of her next book would be ready? Quieting these thoughts was impossible. It was easier, instead, to stay awake and distract herself during Lucas's naps with Instagram or Bravo or by cleaning the house.

The other baby she needed to take care of—her third book—she'd all but abandoned, and the guilt ate away at her constantly. Brynn had already published two romance novels, which had sold well enough to give her financial independence and a respected name in that genre, but with that success came responsibility—and *deadlines*. She'd secured a third book deal halfway through her pregnancy, thinking she'd zip through her first draft before Lucas was born. But she'd gotten side-tracked. She'd fallen into nesting mode, something she never thought she'd do. Every day there had been a project for the baby that somehow consumed Brynn's time—the crib needed to be assembled, curtains had to be put up, clothes had to be laundered with skin-sensitive baby detergent. There was always *something*, and then suddenly, Lucas was born.

But she'd told herself that she would have plenty of time to write during the newborn phase. "All they do is sleep and eat at first," everyone had said. She didn't need to send Lucas to daycare or hire any childcare, she thought, because she could just work from home with him, and that's what she'd always wanted, anyway. And nearby, she had her mother-in-law, Margaux, who was a true baby whisperer and was always ready to help. Brynn would have all the time in the world for writing, she thought. And yet, now, there somehow wasn't time for anything. The concept of *free time* no longer existed in Brynn's world. If she had any time for herself, she had to use it to address her own basic hygiene or chores.

And even if Brynn *did* have time to write, she didn't have the creative brain capacity that she used to have. During the few attempts

she'd made at writing, she was embarrassed by what she produced: generic characters, flat storylines, and—worst of all—sex scenes as dull as watching paint dry. These days, her writing was the opposite of romantic. It was downright depressing.

She used to be able to write the most vivid and electric sex scenes in five minutes on a Post-it. Creativity was never something she had to *work* for. But now she couldn't conjure up a steamy lovemaking scene no matter how hard she tried. It didn't help that her own sex life was nonexistent. How could she describe a kiss when she hadn't even had one herself in months? At least not a good one, anyway. Did she even remember what it was like to have an orgasm?

Maybe it was just the sleep deprivation that was causing her to lose her literary edge, or maybe, she thought, it was something more. She felt as if she'd had to remove the part of her brain that maintained her intellectualism, curiosity, and creativity so she could replace it with a deep knowledge of baby choking hazards, the risk of SIDS, the difference between swaddles and sleep sacks, the multitude of baby bottle styles. It was as though her brain couldn't handle being both a mother and a writer. *One or the other*, it told her, though she refused to accept it, and she continued to try to do both. The result was that she couldn't really do either.

"Good morning, honey," her husband Ross said as he bounded into the kitchen, bright-eyed and well rested. Brynn had just sat down on one of the kitchen stools to pump. The plastic flanges were tucked into her nursing bra, the kind with little slits to hold the flanges steady. Her nipples engorged and retracted with the pump's pulses, and she immediately started dripping milk into the bottles. She'd bought one of the portable pumps that she could carry around like a purse. It had been advertised to her as one that would allow her to be mobile while pumping. But it only ended up making her feel trapped. Anytime she tried to do anything while pumping, she'd forget that she was hooked up to the machine, or that the tubes from the flanges to the machine were only two feet long, so she'd accidentally disconnect them and

cause everything to go haywire. The only thing she could do while she pumped was sit there and count the minutes, watching the milk drip down into the bottles until she reached her capacity.

The first time that Ross had seen her pumping, his eyes had widened with bewilderment and horror.

“Whoa,” he had said, cringing. “Does that hurt?” He’d watched Brynn’s nipples expand inside the clear plastic flanges as if she were some kind of animal in a lab.

“No,” she said. “It sort of feels good. Or at least, I feel better when it’s done.”

She stared out the window now as though the world outside was a foreign land that she’d never know again, full of freedom and sunshine and youthful people without any responsibilities.

Brynn had elbowed Ross a little past midnight, sometime after feeding Lucas. She had been furious at the sight of Ross in his deep sleep, and she had wanted him to be awake with her, if only for a moment. But the nudge hadn’t even stirred him.

He kissed her forehead now, so lightly that she barely felt his lips on her skin. He was obviously happy as he went to make coffee. “How was the little man last night?” he asked.

“He was . . . he was fine.” The stupidity of the question confounded and enraged her. It was both infuriating and miraculous that Brynn’s fatigue was not shared by Ross, even though they slept in the same bed and were subjected to the exact same cries from their son, who slept in the bassinet right next to them.

It was as though Ross existed in another realm entirely, one where he only *watched* the changes happening around him since becoming a father, but he and his own life continued as before, relatively unchanged. Sometimes, Brynn felt like she and Lucas were animals in an observation room, with Ross waving to them from the other side of the glass while she cried out for help. It didn’t make sense that Ross was *right there* with her and yet he wasn’t there at all. He didn’t share even a shred of Brynn’s suffering. The only disappointment he

ever seemed to show was in *her* disappointment with everything. And Brynn had started to hate him for it.

Yet she didn't have the energy to tell Ross how she really felt, or that the night hadn't been *fine*. It had been a disaster. *All* the nights were disasters.

"That's great," Ross said. Somewhere in the past few months, their conversations had devolved into meaningless, robotic words—*great, good, okay*.

It hadn't always been like this. Everything changed when Lucas was born. Well, not really. What had *actually* changed, Brynn knew, was her. From the moment Lucas was born, Brynn had not become the soft, maternal, joyful mother she'd expected to become, the mother that Ross had told her he knew she'd be, the one she thought he wanted her to be. Instead, she had transformed into a stranger, as if she were playing a role, pretending. When she held Lucas for the first time, her entire body shaking, her eyelids fluttering and her throat burning for water, she did not look at him with the adoring eyes of a devoted mother. She'd looked at him with bewilderment, fear, and resentment. The resentment wasn't for him, exactly, but for everyone around her expecting her to feel anything different. Brynn had been in labor for almost forty hours, become violently ill with a high fever and nausea, then had an emergency C-section when Lucas's heartbeat started to drop and he turned sideways, throughout which she continued to vomit bile into a plastic bag held by a nurse, with the bright lights of the operating table blinding her eyes, her arms held down. And from the instant that Lucas was lifted from the swamps of her stomach, her guts pushed aside to create an exit for him, and then presented to her covered in white, creamy film, screaming with the anguish of someone who had indeed just been ripped from their home, Brynn was tasked with taking care of him, and not of herself.

So, while Brynn and everything in her life had permanently changed, the only thing that had really changed for Ross was the disposition of his wife.

“What’s your day look like?” he asked her. The question was a mockery. He knew *exactly* what her day looked like, because it was the same each day: try to survive. Brynn felt Ross’s eyes quickly glance over her bathrobe-clad body, with her gigantic, veiny breasts exposed. Was this his way of asking her if she was going to shower today? Or if this would be the day when he’d come home to a happy wife, who would greet him with a T-bone steak for dinner and a blowjob for dessert? Ross didn’t have to say it; Brynn could feel his disappointment in her all the time. His sadness was loud and physical, hanging heavy in his sighs, in the shrugs of his shoulders, in his slow and steady hand on her shoulder when he returned home from work to still find her on the couch, still in her bathrobe, another pizza ordered for dinner, another hamper of laundry to do. She perceived it to be the sadness of someone whose partner had turned out to be someone else entirely. A letdown.

But what Brynn wished Ross understood was that she didn’t *want* to be this way. She *wanted* to be his happy wife. She *wanted* to be a happy mom. She *wanted* to get back to her writing. She just didn’t know how. She didn’t know if it was possible.

“You’re looking at it,” she said. “I mean, we’ll get some fresh air, go to the playground to see everyone. Lucas has a doctor’s appointment in the afternoon. And I’m going to try to do some more writing if I can. I made some progress yesterday.” It was a lie, of course. She hadn’t made progress on her book yesterday. She hadn’t made progress in months.

“That’s great. Great.” He tightened the lid of his thermos. “Well, I love you. Try to have a good day today, okay? It’s so nice out.” He kissed her forehead again and headed for the door. “I have to play a round of golf tonight at the club after work. Clients. But it should be quick.”

“*Again?*” Last night, Ross had been out late with his father and brother, courting potential clients for a big job in Katama. Brynn couldn’t remember what time Ross had come home, but she knew that it was during one of the rare, brief windows when she had been sleeping. He’d briefly woken her up by accident and she’d been furious.

“Last night was Katama,” he responded, somewhat defensively. “Tonight is the North Water Street job.”

“Okay,” Brynn said. She couldn’t argue with him when it was work. But there was always a round of golf. Always a client dinner. Ross worked for his father, Henry, who was considered the island’s foremost builder and developer. If a home was being built by Nelson & Sons, it was going to be spectacular, with no expense spared. Still, Brynn had naively assumed that Ross’s hours could be flexible since he was the boss’s son. But it was the opposite. Ross put pressure on himself to work the hardest, to be the most available, to always say yes to his father no matter what the request. And having a new baby didn’t mean anything to Henry in terms of Ross’s work schedule. Paternity leave wasn’t something Henry even knew existed. Henry valued family above all else, but his view of it was traditional. As far as he was concerned, Brynn’s role was to take care of Lucas, just as Ross’s mother, Margaux, had done with Ross and his brother, Sawyer.

Before Ross left, he turned back toward her and gave her a funny look, one Brynn hadn’t seen in years. He smiled and his eyes locked with hers.

“Brynn,” he said, “I . . . I need to tell you something.”

What does he need now? Brynn thought to herself, already annoyed. *Did he invite his friends over this weekend? Did he say yes to the guys’ fishing trip to the Bahamas, even though the two of us had discussed it already together and decided no? In what way is he going to make my life harder today?*

“I . . .” he started to say. He paused. “You’re such a good mom.”

Brynn almost laughed. “Really? That’s what you wanted to tell me?”

“Yes,” Ross said, serious. “I should tell you more.”

“Well, thanks,” Brynn said. “I don’t feel that way.”

“You are. You’re an amazing mom.”

Brynn started to remove the flanges from her bra; she was done pumping.

“I want to be here more,” Ross continued. “For you, for Lucas. I

do. I know it's been hard. But I promise it won't be like this forever. Things . . . things will change soon."

Brynn carefully poured her new milk into freezer storage bags and labeled them with a marker. She knew that Ross had to go, but there was so much she wanted to say in return. She'd been waiting for a moment like this—a moment of connection. She hadn't realized how much she needed to hear those words of affirmation from Ross until she heard them.

"I wish you and I could switch places and I could just hang out here with the little man all day," Ross added before Brynn could say anything.

Almost instantly, the affection Brynn had felt for Ross a moment ago disappeared and was replaced with rage. She knew that Ross didn't mean to insult her, but the implication that she just *hung out* with Lucas all day was hurtful. Except that when Ross did take care of Lucas—so that Brynn could shower, or work out, or cook dinner, or go to Cronig's for groceries—his only job *was* to hang out with Lucas. He didn't worry about prepping dinner or getting on the preschool wait lists or signing Lucas up for swim lessons. He wasn't on hold with Lowe's for forty-five minutes trying to track down a lost order of the filter to go on the fan above the kitchen stove while also wiggling Lucas out of a spit-up-covered onesie. He wasn't debating whether Lucas was ready to go up a size in diapers or not, and what to do with the leftover ones they hadn't used. He wasn't photographing the mysterious bump on the inside of Lucas's left ear and then searching the ends of the internet to find out what it was while waiting for a call back from the pediatrician. These tiny, sometimes stupid, but entirely necessary things that demanded Brynn's time and mental capacity prevented her from just *hanging out* with Lucas all day. Rather, taking care of him often felt like another job on her to-do list, even though she felt terrible admitting that.

Ross kissed Brynn on the cheek, and then he was gone. Brynn squinted as she watched him go; she knew him well enough to know that something was on his mind that he wasn't telling her.

Almost the moment Ross got into his car, Lucas's cries pierced through the monitor. Brynn hurried to her room and threw on some stretchy shorts and an oversize tank top. She sniffed the nursing sports bra she wore yesterday and decided that she could wear it today, too. She threw her hair up in a bun, slathered on some tinted moisturizer and deodorant, and somehow remembered to take her birth control pills, which she'd just started back on last week, though they only seemed to ridicule her in their complete uselessness to her. She looked at herself in the mirror—just once, briefly—and tried hard not to cry. She didn't even recognize herself. Her face was gray and sunken, marred by exhaustion, and the shape of her body had shifted into something unfamiliar, something she didn't like. She wanted to celebrate her new body for all that it had accomplished, but the truth was that she hated her new stretch marks and wider hips, her elongated and cracked nipples, her displaced abdominal muscles and the pain she felt whenever she squatted.

Her phone buzzed with a text from her friend Ginny Bloch, asking if she'd see her at the playground that morning. *Yes*, Brynn thought to herself, and typed it out. *Where else would I go?* The West Tisbury playground, just a five-minute drive or a fifteen-minute stroller walk from home, had become Brynn's go-to for when she needed to get out of the house. Now that it was summer, and school was out, the same group of parents always showed up there in the mornings. In the past few months, seeing them had become a comfort that Brynn needed each day. Lucas was still too little to do anything there but sleep and eat in Brynn's arms, so the playground was more for her than it was for him. Something about being there, and being around other moms with their kids, made Brynn feel a kind of validation as a mother that she needed.

She found comfort in the other mothers not because she related to them, though. On the contrary, Brynn felt like a fraud among them, even among her own friends. None of the other moms seemed to be struggling. They somehow all looked like they'd slept and showered. They cooed over their babies, inhaling the sticky scent of their heads as

if it were a revitalizing smelling salt. They didn't hate their husbands (well, most of them didn't, or at least they didn't say so). Brynn had been to some of their houses, and they were all clean and tidy. She'd come to the conclusion, with absolute certainty, that her experience of motherhood was more difficult than theirs because of some innate deficit of hers. Everyone else at the playground was meant to be a mom, she thought, but not her.

That's exactly why she went, though. Because being around these other moms—the ones who had their shit together—gave Brynn proof that she was at least attempting to have some semblance of normalcy in her life as a mom. It gave her the façade of belonging. Temporarily, it made her feel okay. And she thought that if she kept going through the motions of doing all the nice, happy things she was *supposed* to do as a mother—like go to the playground and hang out with other moms—she just might trick herself into actually enjoying motherhood. She might trick herself into being happy.

She might even, somehow, turn herself into a good mom, instead of the bad one she was sure she was.

CHAPTER 2

It took Brynn nearly half an hour to get out of the house, even though she hustled the whole time. She changed Lucas, fed him, then restocked Lucas's diaper bag with the essentials: diapers and wipes, a pacifier, a bottle of breast milk in a mini cooler bag in case she didn't want to nurse at the playground, wipes to clean the bottle nipple in case she dropped it, alcohol-free hand-sanitizing wipes, a travel sound machine, a portable fan, an extra outfit for him, burp cloths, a few rattly toys, and an extra shirt for her in case of spit-ups. Then she had to change him again before they left.

Once she was outside, she instantly had to pee, but it was too late. It had taken so much effort from her to get out the door that she was not about to turn back now. She was thirsty, too, and regretted not grabbing a seltzer for herself from the fridge. But her own needs were an afterthought.

Brynn spotted Ginny as soon as she approached the playground. Ginny was unmissable, with long legs, dark skin, curly black hair, and a big toothy smile. She was also pregnant. Very, *very* pregnant, due in just two weeks. Brynn watched Ginny as she handed her eighteen-month-old daughter, Olivia, a pouch of applesauce, while she simultaneously

called out to her four-year-old son, Sam, to be careful going down the slide.

“Hey!” Ginny yelled to Brynn. “Look who it is, Olivia! It’s your buddy Lucas.” Olivia sucked the applesauce pouch down and stared.

“More,” she demanded, and Ginny handed her another. Then Olivia waddled off.

Lucas was now asleep, his brow furrowed in a look of discontent, even though he was peacefully snoozing. Brynn pushed the stroller up next to where Ginny sat. She took out the sound machine and turned it to an ocean-wave setting.

“I got you an iced coffee from 7a,” Ginny said, handing her the drink, with the perfect amount of half-and-half, just the way Brynn liked it. The act was so kind and so *necessary* that Brynn nearly cried. “And a jalapeño biscuit breakfast sandwich.”

“Thank you,” Brynn said. She shook her head. “You know, I actually mean it when I say that *I don’t know how you do it*, Ginny. Seriously. Just the logistics of buying breakfast with two little kids. I can barely do anything with one.” Brynn really did mean it, and she often wondered how Ginny completed errands like that with such ease. Did she leave both kids in the car while she went into the café to get the food? Did she let them both come in with her and run around while she waited in line, hoping that they wouldn’t bolt into the busy parking lot? Brynn had no idea how all these other moms juggled everyday things like that, but she never asked.

“Nothing was going to stop me from getting a sausage, egg, and cheese today,” Ginny said. She leaned back, putting her hands on her stomach. “I actually had two of them. And now I feel like I’m going to explode.”

“One for you, one for baby,” Brynn said, eyeing Ginny’s belly. “How are you feeling?”

“Ready to *not* be pregnant,” Ginny said. “It’s funny. You know I love kids and I love babies, but I fucking *hate* being pregnant, I really do.”

Brynn had known Ginny for a long time, before either of them

had kids. Ginny had always wanted a big family. *I want the chaos of a big family*, she'd told Brynn long ago. *I want the messiness of it all*. Brynn had never understood this. The thought of *wanting* chaos in life made Brynn feel claustrophobic and out of control. But maybe if Brynn had the support system that Ginny had, she'd want that, too. Ginny's mother *and* sister lived on the island, nearby, and had the time, energy, and resources to help Ginny out with the kids all the time, so she basically had two free nannies available around the clock. She also had a husband who let Ginny make all the decisions when it came to childcare and preschool, whereas Ross had an opinion on everything.

Brynn's parents had moved off-island to Falmouth years ago, so she only had her mother-in-law nearby to help her. And while Brynn was grateful to have her, it wasn't the same. Brynn was mostly on her own.

They watched Sam climb up the slide. Brynn appreciated that she and Ginny could just sit in silence sometimes. They were both exhausted, though it didn't need to be said. In addition to having two kids, Ginny was a freelance reporter for both of the island's newspapers, as well as several nationally distributed magazines. Her husband, Trey, was one of the island's few public defenders, so he was even busier.

"How's the writing going?" Ginny asked. Brynn could usually be honest with Ginny about their careers. Though they were different types of writers, they'd always shared the same level of ambition.

"It's *not* going." Brynn sighed.

"You know, you had a baby, like, *yesterday*," Ginny reminded her. "Why don't you just put work on hold for a while, enjoy the summer with Lucas?"

"I can't," Brynn said. "I have a deadline. I somehow thought that I'd be able to get a lot of writing done during the newborn days. I was such an idiot. And now, if I take a break, I feel like I'll never start again. You know?"

"Yeah." Ginny watched Olivia push a toy dump truck around on the grass in front of them. "But trust me, you will. I know it feels like

you'll never get your old energy or drive back, but you will. Eventually. For now, you're still in the eye of the storm."

Brynn nodded, but she wasn't so sure. She'd seen the way Ginny had thrown herself into a routine after having Sam and Olivia, and it wasn't something she herself seemed capable of: the way Ginny had returned to the gym as soon as her doctor cleared her, the way she brought both kids with her to run errands as if it were no big deal, the way she locked in babysitters early on so that she and her husband could have regular date nights. Ginny even found the time to read both *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* every morning! Brynn only scrolled Instagram while sitting on the toilet these days, her eyes glazed over. She could practically feel her brain cells evaporating with each passing day.

But there was something else that separated Brynn from Ginny, and the other playground moms, too. Something that felt more sinister to Brynn. Even when Ginny complained to Brynn about her struggles of motherhood—the kids' sleep regressions, the difficulty of potty training, the tantrums, the fights with her husband—there was always an unspoken implication that Ginny nevertheless *loved* being a mother, and that she *loved* her children.

It was this understanding of unconditional love that entitled Ginny to lament her exhaustion and frustrations. Even the sharpest anger toward her kids on a given day could be excused by the unwavering fact that motherhood was, to her, a sacrifice she was always *willing* to make. Happily.

Brynn's truth was that she *wasn't* necessarily willing to make the same sacrifice. She thought she would be willing, but now that she was a mom, she wasn't sure she *could*, even if she wanted to. Whenever she opened up to Ginny about her difficulties with Lucas, Ginny assumed that Brynn also felt the same unconditional love for her child that she felt. She assumed that Brynn loved Lucas above all else. Because that was what mothers were supposed to feel. But Brynn knew, deep down, that she didn't feel that way. For her, it wasn't just a bad day, or a rough

night, or a tough fight. It was all of it. It was her decision to become a mother in the first place. It was the way she'd been swallowed up by her own life, unable to claw herself out. It was how she often regretted becoming a mother.

Brynn and Ginny appeared to be in sync, on the surface of things, but Brynn knew she existed somewhere else—a darker place, a lonelier place. She didn't want to drag Ginny—or anyone else—down there with her, so she kept it hidden.

"What about you?" Brynn asked. "How's the story going?"

Ginny paused and gave Brynn a quizzical stare, like she'd been caught in a lie.

"Oh," she said, "right. The motherhood story. Good, actually." Ginny had been writing a piece on the specific challenges of motherhood on an island—how hard it was to find year-round childcare, or baby supplies, or access to certain pediatric healthcare. It was the kind of article Brynn wished someone would finally write. It was a conversation that *needed* to be had on the island. "There's just so much to cover," Ginny added. "This island is like a microcosm of our country, really."

Before Brynn could respond, they both heard voices from the parking lot.

"Hi ladies!" Their friends Annie Adams and Marcus Haywood were walking toward them. Marcus cradled his six-month-old, Liam, while Annie pushed a double stroller, containing her twin toddlers, Stella and Benji, who were both gnawing on bright pieces of fruit leather, staining their lips red.

"So much for a relaxing morning," Ginny said, though Brynn knew that she was joking. Annie and Marcus were their close friends, but any time spent with them was sure to be full of chatter. The two of them loved to *talk*. Whatever the island gossip was, they knew it before anyone else, and they were quick to share it, too. They spent nearly all their time together, so much so that strangers often thought they were a couple. Marcus was always fast to correct that assumption.

"I'm married," he would tell people, flatly, "to a *man*."

Annie was a gossip magnet—it followed her everywhere—since she was the island’s preeminent wedding planner. She knew before anyone else who was getting married, who was splitting up, who was behind on their Big Sky rental bill, and which mother-in-law was trying to elbow out another one for the prime wedding weekend at the Edgartown Yacht Club. But Annie never spilled anything about her clients. That is, unless they treated her staff poorly or tried to shirk their bills. Annie and Brynn had grown up together on the Vineyard, but both had fled the island after high school, with Annie winding up in Los Angeles and only returning years later when her dad got sick. Today, the two of them shared an understanding that while they might have become legging-clad, stroller-pushing island moms, they once had big lives in big cities. They saw each other’s former selves, and that was something for which Brynn was always grateful.

Marcus was a respected Wampanoag tribal member, born and raised on the island, and a math teacher at the high school, revered for his ability to connect with even the most math-averse students. He often told Brynn and their friends that they were his *only* outlet to talk about everyday parent life, especially during the summer, his precious time off from school. His husband ran a successful caretaking company and was always on call, 24/7, especially in the summer. Brynn knew that Marcus yearned for more family time together. After all, they’d spent five agonizing years going through the adoption process before finally bringing Liam home four months ago. But Marcus did have his mother to help him. She lived just down the road from him and came over daily to help cook and clean.

“So,” Annie said once she took Stella and Benji out of the stroller and let them run to the slide with Sam. She looked toward Ginny and Brynn. “Did you guys hear?” She sat down and stirred her thermos of iced coffee with a metal straw. Brynn knew that sometimes Annie liked to gossip to deflect attention away from herself. If anyone ever asked Annie how she and her husband were doing, she’d say *Great!* and that would be that. Everything had to be fine, all the time. But Brynn knew

better. "About the girl?" Annie continued. "The dead body?" Annie looked at them all like they hadn't heard her. "*Hello?*"

Marcus sat on the grass in front of them, and gently put Liam on the ground for some tummy time. "Brynn, what did Ross say about it?" he asked.

"Ross?" Brynn looked at Ginny to see if she was equally lost, but Ginny cast her eyes downward. "What are you guys talking about? A dead body?"

"Yes. A body was found at Norton Point," Annie said, leaning in. "It was a girl, a woman." She paused. "Cecelia was her name. Cecelia Buckley."

"The paper said that she worked at the Oyster Watcha Club," Marcus added. "Did you know her, Brynn?" It wasn't a surprise that Marcus would ask Brynn if she knew Cecelia. All of Brynn's friends knew that Brynn and the Nelson family spent a lot of time at the club. It was where Margaux had thrown Brynn's baby shower, and where she and Ross had hosted their wedding rehearsal dinner. And Ross was there almost every night. Of course Brynn knew Cecelia Buckley. All the Nelsons did.

Brynn's throat tightened.

Cecelia Buckley was dead.

She tried to process it.

Cecelia Buckley was dead.

It didn't make sense. Brynn had just seen her a few days ago when she, Lucas, and Ross had met Henry and Margaux at the club for Sunday brunch.

"The usuals for you all?" Cecelia had asked them when they had sat down. She'd worked at the club for the past three summers, and because the Nelsons were always there, they'd all gotten to know her. Brynn knew that Cecelia wanted to be a veterinarian, and that she spent her summers working around the clock at the club to save money for school. Cecelia had told her that she'd earned a scholarship to attend Middlebury, and that she was from somewhere in Pennsylvania. She'd

also told her that she had been dating Jacob Hammers, a young Edgartown police officer and the son of the police chief.

"I did know her, yes," Brynn said. "She'd worked there for a few years." She cleared her throat. "She . . . Henry especially loved her. They were close."

"What do you mean *close*?" Marcus asked.

"Not like *that*," Brynn said. "Margaux loved her, too. We all did. Everyone at the club did. She was just a hard worker, smart, always took great care of the members."

Brynn didn't tell them that Henry's fondness for Cecelia was in fact somewhat like *that*. It wasn't romantic, not at all, but it was . . . noticeable. A little strange, even. Henry thought of her like a daughter. She was his point person at the club, the place where he felt most important and the most at home. Cecelia knew exactly how he liked his gin martini, how he took his after-dinner coffee, what time he finished his daily round of golf, which David McCullough book he was reading, and of course what Margaux's favorite wine was and how she only liked the tuna tartare with *no* green onions. Henry often asked Cecelia to sit with him in the library or on the porch overlooking the golf course as he finished his last drink. He would ask her about school and her ambitions. None of this was secret. The club manager, Mauricio, was aware of it, and he ran a very tight ship, never allowing staff members to cross inappropriate lines with members or vice versa. Even *Margaux* was aware, and didn't care. But now, the relationship between Cecelia and Henry somehow made Brynn queasy. Now, it somehow felt wrong.

Lucas woke from his nap just then, blinking his eyes and releasing a groan. The June sun had intensified since the early morning. Brynn felt the back of Lucas's neck. It was slightly sticky. She needed to feed him.

"Hold on," Brynn said, still in disbelief. She took out the bottle she'd packed. "What do you mean she's *dead*? What *happened*?"

"Trey learned about it first thing this morning," Ginny said. This made sense; Ginny's husband was always aware of the island's criminal activities. Most of the time, he had to clean up the mess. He practically

lived at the courthouse. But this was the first time that Ginny had spoken since Annie and Marcus had arrived. She hadn't even mentioned Cecelia to Brynn before that. How come everyone else had heard about this but Brynn hadn't? Ross and his family were usually some of the first people to know about anything related to the club.

"And my niece Halle is one of the beach patrollers at Norton this summer," Marcus said, "so all the twentysomethings are talking about it." Norton Point Beach was one of the island's most popular beaches in the summer, because it was one of the only ones that you could drive your car onto. In the summer, employees of the preservation organization that owned the beach patrolled it to make sure that dogs were kept on leashes and that cars didn't drive over the endangered piping plovers' nesting areas.

"I guess a guy shore fishing for stripers found her last night on the beach. She'd been in the water," Annie said. "Seems like a drowning."

"Honestly, the way kids drink these days, maybe there was a beach party, and she drank too much, went for a swim, and just drowned?" Marcus suggested. "Sorry to sound so callous. But it's happened here so many times. And Halle told me the popular drink these days with kids is called *fire water*. It's literally just tequila and water. Not even ice. Can you imagine? *Blugh*."

"Yeah, but supposedly there's no sign of a party having happened out there on Norton that night. I mean, it's so hard to drive all the way out there anyway, no one goes there late at night anymore except for fishermen," Annie added. "And I heard that, like, none of her friends were with her last night. So, I guess they're not ruling out any kind of foul play."

Brynn began to feed Lucas, who stared up at her, his tiny body sinking into her arms. Her friends kept talking, guessing about what had happened, who was involved, what clues there might be. But Brynn couldn't hear. It turned to white noise.

She tried to imagine what Cecelia could have been doing before her death. Brynn knew *facts* about her, she realized, but that didn't

mean that she actually knew her. She had no idea who her parents were, or what kind of parents they'd been, or whether Cecelia had even been close with them or not. Brynn had a vague recollection of Cecelia telling her once that she had a brother, but she wasn't sure. She wondered if her parents had already been informed. Had they cried, or screamed, or sat in silent shock? Would they be looking for someone to blame? But she did know that she had a boyfriend. And he wasn't just any guy on the island.

"Her boyfriend is a cop," Brynn said, thinking out loud. "Jacob Hammers. And his dad is the chief."

Jacob's dad, Pete Hammers, the longtime and revered Edgartown chief of police, was close friends with Henry. They were proudly cut from the same cloth—self-described "washashores" who arrived on the island with nothing and rose to be prestigious leaders in the community. Brynn hadn't ever really interacted with Jacob herself, though she'd seen him at barbecues and at hockey games. He played in the same winter men's hockey league as Ross.

"Oh, interesting," said Annie. "I wonder where *he* was last night."

"It's always the boyfriend, right?" asked Marcus. "Ginny, what do you know? You always know everything."

"Nothing," Ginny said. "They still don't know if it was just an accident."

This wouldn't be the first time that Ginny was withholding confidential information that Trey had given her or that she'd heard on the local news circuit. And Brynn could understand why Ginny would be secretive about this one. The police chief's son's girlfriend found *dead*! Brynn was certain that this case was going to be kept far away from the scrutiny of the public eye. Or as far away as it could, in a small community like this one where secrets never stayed secret for long.

"Ugh," groaned Annie, breaking the conversation away from the news about Cecelia. She was looking at her phone. "This fucking bride is going to be the end of me." Annie was supposed to be taking it *easy* this summer so she could spend more time with the twins, but she'd

begrudgingly agreed to plan the wedding of a well-known Edgartown socialite, Joanna O'Callahan. "*Shit*," she said.

"What happened?" asked Marcus.

Annie let out a frustrated sigh, and frantically started typing into her phone. "We were supposed to have the welcome dinner for this wedding at Oyster Watcha—*this* weekend. But I just got an email from the manager saying that it's going to be closed. Out of respect for Cecilia. So the staff can mourn." She continued to type. "Great. Now I have to find a whole other venue. Hold on, I need to call this guy." Annie dialed. "Go figure. It keeps going straight to voicemail."

"Is it Mauricio you're calling?" asked Brynn. "The club manager?"

Annie nodded. "You'd think this would be an important time to be reachable. So annoying."

While Annie called her assistant next, Brynn's phone vibrated. She was certain that Ross would be calling her now that he'd heard about Cecilia. *I can't believe it . . . so terrible*, he'd say. *She was a good kid. My dad's really broken up. . . .* Or maybe Ross already had the full story; maybe he'd tell her that he'd heard that the staff at the club had all gone out partying together and Cecilia never made it back. Maybe she'd gone swimming. Maybe she'd taken pills. Maybe she'd drunk too much.

But instead, it was a text from him:

Trust me. Please. I can explain everything. You'll understand soon.