

PROLOGUE

From the journals of Gustavo Silva, Jr.: Last Entry

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In prison, you learn that no one is innocent. It doesn't matter whether you were wrongly convicted, if your crime was justified, or if life constricted your path so brutally that even the most heinous act came to feel inevitable. The cell accepts no excuses. There, no matter who you are, the truth will come looking for you in all its darkness and mercy. Either you look back unflinchingly or you die.

Of all the people I have known, there have only been a handful whose eyes reflected that kind of death. Pray for them--yes--and then stay away. There's nothing else you can do.

Part 1: The Widow's Walk

1978-1979

Sometimes I feel the need for religion so I go outside to paint the stars.

Vincent Van Gogh

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It was late October, the first cold night of the year, when nine-year-old Hallie Costa followed the bobbing arc of her flashlight to the roof. Though it was a school night, she was irresistibly drawn to the black sky, the brackish taste of the wind that shuddered off the bay, and the companionship of the gull who slept near the chimney. She knew him from the slight bend in his right wing, and his unbalanced flight--her father had diagnosed an accommodation to an old injury. *Asa Quebrada*, he called him. Broken Wing.

Hallie had been on the roof before, but that night was different. She would never be sure whether her sleep had been disturbed by the shift in temperature or by a sound that entered her room as stealthily as moonlight. *Was it singing?* By the time she opened her eyes and sat up in bed, it was gone. For some reason, she thought of how the old people wept when they played Fado music at the annual Portuguese Festival. *Saudade*, her great-aunt Del called it: homesick music. But according to her father, the emotion was about more than place. It was a profound longing for everything that was lost and would never be regained.

When she heard the sound, Hallie had turned on the light and taken in the objects in her room. Everything was in place. The glowing face of the clock read 3:07. Her dutiful side, inherited from the Costas, reminded her that it was a school night. But at that hour, the unruly spirit of her mother always prevailed. She switched off her lamp and reached for the flashlight under the bed and a jacket that hung on a hook shaped like a clam shell.

Usually, she was careful not to wake her father when she crept through the dark. But that night, she tiptoed down the hallway toward his room. The door was ajar, and she considered

crawling into his bed. She could almost feel his warmth, the arm inserted beneath her neck; she could hear his sleepy murmur. *Nightmare, Pie?*

A nightmare: was that what it had been? She buttoned her jacket against the chill that had infiltrated the house and looked down at her pale feet, wishing she had put on her red Keds. Her father groaned and shifted in bed as if sensing her presence. If she stood there another minute, he would surely open his eyes.

The sign outside his office advertised Nicolao Costa as a General Practitioner, but his patients also knew him as a psychiatrist specializing in common sense, an unorthodox marriage counselor, and a friend they could call when they were too drunk to make it home from the Pilgrims' Club down the street. When the latter happened, Nick would ask his friend, Stuart, who lived in a renovated fish house next door, to come and watch Hallie. Stuart grouched about being disturbed so late at night; but even before he hung up, the light in his dormer window flicked on and he could be seen putting on his pants.

On the rare nights when Stuart wasn't available, Nick would rouse Hallie from sleep and take her along. He made his house calls at the bar in faded pajamas, hair spiked with sleep. Syl Amaral, who owned the place, would have a shot of bourbon waiting for him after he'd returned from getting the offender home safely. Hallie would watch as Nick downed it quickly, cursing the *bacalhau* who'd dragged him out, and vowing never to do it again. To his consternation, everyone in the bar would laugh.

But even she knew that Nick was too haunted by the drunk driving accident that had claimed her mother to ignore any late night call. If one person, one family, could be spared what he had seen, or the loneliness he had endured following the collision on the infamous stretch of

road known as Suicide Alley, he would be there.

Hallie was surprised that her father, with his famously keen sense of observation, hadn't yet discovered her secret excursions to the roof. The only one who knew was her best friend, Felicia.

"I think you just miss your mom," Felicia had said, twisting her wheat-colored braids and studying Hallie like a therapist, after she confided to her on the playground. "You go up there because you're *looking* for her."

"Liz Cooper's got nothing to do with it," Hallie insisted, wishing she hadn't brought it up. "Besides, it's *scientifically* impossible to miss someone I can't remember."

She would never admit that she didn't go onto the roof to find her mother; she did it to escape her. In many ways, Thorne House still belonged to Liz Cooper, whose fledgling renovations and dreams of a family large enough to fill the place had ended abruptly on the highway. Though the first floor had been gradually taken over by Nick's rambling office, it was cluttered with her memory.

Hallie and her father confined themselves to the kitchen, and the large room that most people would have referred to as a living room. Nick preferred to call it his study. One wall was covered with maps that told the story of ancient societies, and newer ones that defined the world as it was now. There were charts that explored the intricacies of the human body right down to the cellular level, and others that mapped the heavens.

"Either one will give you a view of infinity," Nick liked to say.

Another wall chronicled a different kind of history. Nick's mother's family had arrived with the first wave of immigrants nearly a hundred years earlier, but on his father's side, he was

only second generation, and the ties with people at “home” were still strong. Photographs of family in the Azores mixed with shots of Nick’s friends from Provincetown and Harvard.

There were pictures of him and Liz Cooper on the leafy, brick streets of Cambridge where they’d fallen in love, at their small, private wedding, and then holding their newborn daughter. But most of the wall was taken up by images of Hallie at every stage in her young life. At the bottom of a baby picture, her mother had written her proper name in a dramatic left-handed slant. *Hallett*. Since the accident, however, she had become irrevocably Hallie. Nick’s shining happiness. The only thing that had stopped him from walking into the sea after he lost his wife.

The real proof of Liz Cooper’s continuing dominion over the house was found on the second floor where the desolation of her absence settled like a thick dust. The doors to three spare bedrooms were kept closed, as if the children the couple would never have were sleeping behind them. The ghost rooms, Hallie called them.

Only the widow’s walk was her’s alone. Most of the spoke railing had rotted away and what was left tilted precariously toward the sidewalk, but the platform remained as solid as it was when a whaler named Isaiah Thorne built the house. According to town lore, his wife, Mary, would sit up there for hours, often at night, watching for her husband’s ship to return. The first time Hallie heard the story, her curiosity was aroused. *Just once*, she promised herself, knowing how her father would react if he found out. But as soon as she felt the proximity of the stars, she was spellbound. She extended her arms and took in the night air, pretending she was wearing a long white dress with a peplum and high-button shoes instead of mismatched pajamas and bare feet, and that she was waiting for a handsome sea captain to return. An exhilarating sense of release--and something else, *possibility*--assailed her whenever she pushed open the heavy door.

Despite her vow, she was drawn to the roof regularly, sometimes as often as once a week.

The sole obstacle between her and the place where she could be anyone she wanted to be was the painter who rented the attic as a studio. People called him Wolf for his preternatural leanness, and the almost predatory way he took in the landscape. Nick, who treated his asthma and admired his work, was the closest thing he had to a friend.

Three years earlier, Wolf had convinced Nick to rent him the space as a studio, but it soon became apparent that he wanted far more. He extended the hours he spent in the attic until it was time for dinner, knowing that he only had to pause outside the kitchen for Nick to add a plate to the table. Still, Hallie had been startled the first time she stumbled upon Wolf sleeping on a futon in the corner during one of her late walks to the roof. Fortunately, the energy that fired his work also exhausted him. Once he succumbed to sleep, he almost never stirred.

Hallie trained her light downward, and navigated the detritus in the attic. Careful not to disturb Wolf, she pushed open the trap door to the sky. The stars were sharp and cold, closer than they'd ever been. There was no wind, but she sensed the kind of pressure system that preceded a Nor'easter. It was so strong that when she put her hand to her chest, the ladder, nailed to the wall for more than a century, seemed to dodder.

Her first instinct was to pull the door shut, and scurry back to her room. But remembering the fearsome quiet that had driven her out, she clambered onto the roof, and focused on the steady green eye of Long Point Light. The dinghies, iridescent in moonlight, floated nearly motionless on the water. *Asa Quebrada* opened one eye, ruffled his black-tipped wings, and went back to sleep.

Hallie took her usual perch next to him. When her feet grew numb with cold, she drew her

knees to her chest and covered them with her pajamas. Finally, she stood up and wandered to the edge of the roof and cast the little beam of her light over the town, searching for something she couldn't name.

As far as she could see, every house in Provincetown was dark; the crooked roads, nearly impassable in the bright days of summer, were empty. All but a few restaurants and bars had been shuttered for the season, returning the town at the tip of Cape Cod to the people who lived there year round.

The gray shingled houses that huddled tightly together in the village usually made her feel secure. But at three a.m., the spit of sand surrounded by dark, unpredictable waters seemed particularly vulnerable. Hallie was startled by her fear, and by the fat tears that suddenly spilled down her face. As unpredictable and powerful as the East wind, a deep sorrow entered her bones and left her shaking. Her heart hammered in her chest. The sound of an engine revving, and a lone car starting down the road made her jump. *Asa Quebrada* spread his wings and emitted a long, disgruntled *cawww*. Hallie normally loved his trilling squawks, but as he swooped over the bay, he sounded more like a crow. She cried out for her father with the name she rarely used.

Papai!

She was still yelling as she sprang toward the door and down the ladder. The trap flapped open again behind her, admitting the brittle stars, the incipient chill of winter, but she didn't go back. Near the window, Wolf churned in his blankets, jerking awake. His face, caught in her careening light, revealed the demons he worked hard to hide during the day. "Jesus Christ, Hallie. What the--"

Hallie heard him cursing some more as he emphatically latched the door behind her.

Goddamn kid.

She raced down the stairs and through the hallway, her flashlight casting erratic splotches of brightness on the walls and the floor as she went. The sound of her own voice scared her as much as the way she'd felt on the edge of the roof or the sight of Wolf's unguarded expression.

"Papai! Nick--" she yelled as she pushed into his room. But when her flashlight found the empty bed, she stopped short. The phone handset on the nightstand emitted a harsh bleep. Hallie crossed the room and returned it to its place. From the window, she could see Stuart's bedroom light. She wondered how she had missed it from the roof, and why he hadn't turned it off the way he usually did.

Hallie went to the top of the stairs, and listened for the soft sound of the stereo Stuart kept on while he napped on the couch. Instead, she heard him crossing the study for what felt like a prescribed number of steps, before he paused and returned.

She was about to go down and ask what was wrong when the pacing was replaced by Ella Fitzgerald singing about airplanes and champagne. One of Nick's favorite songs. Stuart kicked off his shoes. *One, two*. Closing her eyes, she imagined him lining them up beside the couch the way he did before he pulled the quilt over himself. The world, momentarily askew, clicked back into place.

Hallie had never liked Ella much. (*Too goopy*, she complained, suspecting that the romantic lyric and the aching voice reminded her father of Liz Cooper.) But now as she slipped into bed, she clung to the scrap of melody like an amulet. She didn't sing the words, but they spun in her mind like a record playing on the turntable Nick had used since college. She heard them in his voice...*But I get a kick out of youuuuu*.

If he had been there, she would have admitted the truth about her secret forays onto the roof in the deep of night, and told him about the bewildering emotions that had sent her reeling. But as it turned out, she would never tell anyone what she'd experienced that night. Not her father or Felicia. Not even the boy who huddled in the back of a closet across town as Hallie finally gave in to sleep. The boy with whom her spirit had become entangled in a way she would never, not in all her life, be able to explain.