

Excerpt from the Novel, *Fisher*

I spend my days digging for clues. That's how I've come to think of this process – this compulsion, really – of rifling through old memories.

I am at this constantly. I might be in the middle of a meeting, seated beside Peter at the hefty, marble conference table he insisted was required for potential clients to take us seriously. I may be sock-footed in the lobby of my apartment building, handing Yen his tip when he drops off my order of *Moo Shoo Chicken*, the only thing that makes me feel remotely, if fleetingly, better these days. Or I could be staring at the black-and-white screen in the theater on Water Street, where Cole used to drag me for a “think break” when he noticed that the stress of planning our wedding – something we had not discussed in months – triggered an eruption of hot-pink hive marks across my neck. I might be doing any of these things. I might actually be at the marble table. Or in the lobby. Or low in my seat at the Water Street Cinema House. But, really, I'm on my own, lost in the darkest, loneliest corners of my consciousness.

In those middle-of-the-night moments, when Cole wakes to find me out of bed – curled against the chair beside the window with my arms crossed tightly across my knees – and groggily asks me what I'm doing, I always answer “nothing.” What I'm doing, what I'm relentlessly doing, is going back in time. Sorting through an entire life. Working to uncover the warnings I must have overlooked. But I say “nothing” because he wouldn't understand the truth. He wouldn't understand that there's no such thing as a “think break.” Not for me. Not anymore.

When the unexpected arrives, when life shifts into some catastrophic version of what it had been, before we can move forward, before we can face our new reality, first, we must look back. We can't help it. We can't stop ourselves from seeking answers to the two central questions that accompany every version of tragedy: *Could this have been predicted? Could this have been prevented?*

We can't help but dig for clues.

In all this dredging through the past, one particular memory keeps surfacing. One that doesn't even have anything to do with Fisher. Or Mom.

I'm nine years old. It's June. I know this because the memory takes place in Santa Rita Bay, a quiet crescent of Florida coastline where, each June, my parents rented the same stilted, clapboard house. The owners had painted it a buttery yellow color and trimmed the doors and shuttered windows in black. According to the stenciling etched onto the mailbox – which was shaped and colored like a black-and-yellow-striped bumble bee – the house was named *The Bee-ch Hive*. But, in our family, it was never anything other than, simply, *The Hive*.

I'm spread across a white, wicker armchair on *The Hive's* screened-in porch. My tanned, gangly legs dangle over an armrest. I'm clutching a worn, thin paperback. What book exactly, I can't remember. Though I imagine it is one of the *Hardy Boys* mysteries I'd swiped from Fisher's room while he was busy swimming as far out into the ocean as he could go before our mother called him back to shore.

I was confined to *The Hive* that June, nursing a broken arm. The length between my right wrist and elbow was encased in a thick, plaster cast. The cast, I'm sure, was once entirely white. But in this recollection it's covered in writing, mostly messages from my classmates, condolences that had been scribbled during our final week of school. One signature remains particularly clear. On the thin, fraying strip of plaster that hooks around my thumb, *Eloise* is written in precise cursive loops. It was Fisher's handiwork. Something he'd done one night, furtively, after I'd fallen asleep. For weeks he tried to convince me that Baby Eloise, just three years old, had crawled through the darkness across the room we shared and – in a moment of magical, prodigious brilliance – spelled out her name for the very first time.

My father sits beside me, gripping an unfolded newspaper – *The Daily Breeze* – with both hands. His wire-rimmed reading glasses have slid down the slope of his sunburned nose. A small

galaxy of sweat beads dot his cheeks and forehead. His black-and-gray curls are thick and wild with humidity. Overhead, a ceiling fan swirls so violently that I look up from my reading, concerned it might burst from the wooden planks and come chopping toward us. The rush of air hits against the newspaper, creating a noise that's annoying us both.

"You want to go get an ice cream?" My father works against the wind to close the paper.

I look up from the book. I know that my parents feel sorry for me. That there is something pitiable and heartbreaking about the sight of me, confined to my spot on the porch. Despite the noise of the fan, I can still hear the teasing sounds of cool, blue-green waves breaking onto the beach.

I had not been able to swim in the ocean at all that June. After listening to me whine about the agonizing patches of sand that had collected deep and irretrievably inside of my cast, my mother forbid me from venturing onto the beach. But there were no rules, apparently, against ice cream.

"Let's head over to the boardwalk. Grab a cone." As my father stands, the discarded newspaper he's dropped into his chair slithers onto the floor and across the porch.

He reaches a broad hand toward me. "Just don't mention it to Fisher. Or your mother."

We're off, ambling down the boardwalk, moving in on a strip of restaurants and shops. There's the smell of hamburgers frying. There's music pouring out from Jake's Crab Shack, where we sometimes stop for supper on Friday nights. People wander slowly around us, a sluggish parade of shade hats and brightly colored bathing suits. In my memory, they are all faceless and indistinguishable. All but one.

Despite the afternoon heat, she's wearing a long-sleeved black dress. A burgundy scarf wraps around her head, knotted above dark, oval-shaped sunglasses. Each finger is garnished with a thick, gold ring. One hand clutches the base of a tattered white parasol. The other rests upon the small plastic table she's set up between two aluminum-and-vinyl beach chairs. At her sandaled feet stands a homemade cardboard sign: *Palm Readings \$2*.

"Dad." I tilt my head toward the woman. "Can I have that instead?"

“A palm reading?” He laughs. “Hallie, that’s a waste of money. Those people are full of it.” He presses a hand between my shoulder blades. “Let’s go get you an ice cream.”

“But I’d rather have that.” Again, I gesture toward the gypsy-looking woman. I consider raising my casted arm to remind him about the small plaster yoke I’ve been lugging around for weeks.

“Fine.” My father pulls his wallet from the back pocket of his khaki shorts.

In a moment, I’m sitting next to this woman. This bejeweled, shrouded woman who is shifting the angle of her parasol so that I, too, can have a dark slice of shade.

“What’s your name, honey?” she asks, after I hand over two dollars.

“Hallie,” I answer.

“What happened to that arm, Hallie?” She reaches a long purple fingernail toward the cast and softly taps against it.

“It’s broken. I fell off one of the swings at school.”

She brings her purple nails toward my face, cups my chin in her palm. “I’m so sorry about that, sugar.” She frowns her crimson-colored lips. “What do you say we take a look at that left hand?”

I place my left hand, palm up, on the table between us. She scoots her chair toward me, moving in to take a closer look. I see my father, who has stepped a few yards away to buy a soda.

“Oh, my.” The woman sets her parasol upon the boardwalk’s smooth, golden planks. She grabs my hand, lifts it up off the table. The sunlight hits each groove and indentation. “This lifeline is really something.” She shows me my own palm. With the help of a chipped, purple nail, she points out a faint, curved line. It begins at the center of the stretchy space of skin between my forefinger and thumb.

“This is the one of shortest lifelines I’ve ever seen.” Something in her voice makes me nervous.

“Is that bad?” I ask.

“No, honey,” she says. “It’s just unusual, that’s all.” Her lips force themselves into the curve of a smile.

“What does a *usual* one look like?”

She shows me her own lifeline, which looks like a piece of circle that's orbiting around the base of her thumb. She tells me that most lifelines stretch all the way to the wrist, like hers. "But don't worry," she says. "Many cut off long before that."

"What does this mean?" She can see my apprehension. My fear that, just like this line in my hand, my life is going to come to an early end.

"It's alright." She pats her rings against my shoulder. "This," she says, rubbing a nail lightly over my underdeveloped lifeline, "doesn't mean that your life is going to be short. It won't." She offers another tight smile. "It just means you're one of those people who's going to have something happen. Something that changes things so much that the lifeline has to go in a completely different direction. It has to go clear off the hand."

I'm puzzled by this. "Something good or something bad?"

"Hard to say." She pauses, pulling in a long breath of salt-drenched air. "But it won't be anything you can't handle."

"How will I know when it happens?" My stomach knots.

"Oh, honey." She squeezes my hand. "You'll know."

"But *how* will I know?"

"Because it will be a very different life."

She went on to read the rest of my palm. As hard as I try, I can't remember anything else she said to me that day. Just the walk back to *The Hive*. Just the feel of my father's arm resting across my shoulders. His voice assuring me that, "tomorrow, we'll get ice cream." Just the hours spent staring at that thin, stunted lifeline, wondering how it would feel, wondering how old I would be, when it leapt straight off my hand.

People like to look back on ephemeral moments, the ones just before sudden, irrevocable change. When people ask each other, "where were you?" when the President was shot. Or when the

Twin Towers fell. Or when the first painful cramp of a miscarriage arrived. They are really asking is: *When was your last normal day? When was the last sweet moment of your life before everything changed?*

I know exactly what I was doing on my last normal day. I was propped up in bed, reading one of those colossal bridal magazines I swore I'd never buy. One whose editorial staff believes in the liberal, almost reckless, use of the exclamation point. I remember the headline: *Checklist for the Most Memorable Day of Your Life!*

What I didn't know then is that the most memorable days of our lives are the ones we can't prepare for. They are the ones that sneak up on us. That ambush us. They are not the days we mark on our calendars ten months in advance. They are not the days that require florists and photographers. The days we invite our friends and family to rally around us. The days we know what we're going to wear.

They are the days when we're lying in bed, skimming through a magazine, noticing a checklist that's telling us to #1: *Select a venue!* Then #2: *Pick a date!* They are the days when we don't get to #3 because the phone rings and an unfamiliar voice on the other end of the line says, "is this Hallie Miller?" and we – so grammatically astute, so well-mannered – answer, "this is she." They are the days when this man, this person who tells us his name is Sergeant Jennings, someone we've never met, never spoken to before, changes everything.

"I am so sorry to tell you this, but your mother has been killed. And we've taken your brother Fisher into custody."

I don't remember what I said to Sergeant Jennings in response that night. All I know is that I must have closed my eyes for a while because, when I opened them again, I was looking straight at the clock on my bedroom wall.

It was 11:52 p.m. It was Tuesday, January 13. I was twenty-eight years old. And the line on my hand had stopped.