

part 1

AUGUST, BLOCK ISLAND

Prologue

“IT WAS DISCONCERTING, to see a man cry like that,” said Bridget Fletcher.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” said Pauline Morrison, who thought that Bridget could be a bit soft at times. Probably because of her youth, and also because she hadn’t grown up on this island, as Pauline had. Growing up on an island toughened you. That was common knowledge. “Why shouldn’t a man be able to cry? I’d be crying, in that

situation. Anyone would.”

“You’re not a man, though,” said Bridget reasonably. “That’s what made it all seem . . . uncomfortable. It seemed like such a private thing. He was just heaving. The sobs were coming out of him in waves. They were wracking his entire body.”

Pauline knew that Bridget was enrolled in an MFA course at Boston University that would begin in the fall. It was her private opinion that Bridget talked as though she were speaking lines from a novel she hadn’t yet written, and Pauline, who was as well read as the next guy, was used to a more plainspoken way of communicating. That’s what years of island living did to you. You learned not to waste anything: not food, not heating oil, not time, not words.

“I don’t blame him one inch,” answered Pauline stoutly.



“I don’t either, of course not!” cried Bridget. Young people were so eager, weren’t they? Especially young women. Pauline found it annoying and refreshing in equal measure. Retaining a feel for youth was why Pauline enjoyed her friendship with Bridget, as unlikely as it was. It had only come about because she and Bridget’s aunt, Leona, who owned the house on Payne Road where Bridget was staying (rent-free, lucky thing), had been friends at Vassar all those years ago. Leona—she lived in Boston most of the year, running some big-time charitable organization—had asked Pauline to “keep an eye” on Bridget. So dutifully once a week Pauline invited her for coffee at the whoopie pie shop on Dodge Street.

It was a cloudless day toward the middle of August, the wind light and out of the southeast, the water clear as glass. Down on Fred Benson Beach nearly all of the umbrellas were rented out already, and two-thirds of the boogie boards. It was amazing how quickly people forgot there had been a storm.

“I’m not saying he *shouldn’t* have cried,” said Bridget. “Obviously he felt responsible. So on top of the grief, there was all of that guilt. I’m just saying it’s a disconcerting thing to watch. That’s all. It was so raw. I can’t get it out of my head, the sound of it.”

In her own head Pauline began composing the email to Leona. *Checked in with Bridget!* she’d write. *All seems well. We’re about cleaned up from the storm.* “Well, you’re going to have to get it out of your head and move on,” she said aloud. “You’ve got to be to work in half an hour, right?”

Bridget seemed not to have heard her. “It was just over a week ago. Isn’t that hard to believe?” Bridget pressed her palms into the table and regarded Pauline seriously. “You have to admit, it’s hard to believe.”

Pauline shrugged. Except for the flooding out on Corn Neck Road, really this storm hadn’t been as bad as it could have been. Though it seemed like it had come out of nowhere, that was true.

For that, people blamed global warming, or they blamed the new president, or they blamed the capricious nature of this particular storm, which had changed direction at the last minute, barreling toward the island without so much as a by-your-leave. Even so, this was nothing like Hurricane Bob, in '91. That had really been something. Pauline said as much to Bridget.

Bridget giggled. "I wasn't even born until '94!"

Pauline snorted. The fact that somebody who was born in 1994 was old enough to be headed to graduate school and hold down a job was just ridiculous. How old Pauline was getting!

Bridget's face turned serious again. "It's just that I'd never seen a dead body before," she said. "I mean, at a wake, sure. But a *recently* dead body. *That* I had never seen. I guess that's why I can't get it out of my head. It was just—life, and then no life. Just like that." She shuddered. "No matter what anyone did or tried to do. The life was just *gone*."

Pauline took a bite of her whoopie pie. Raspberry cream. It was tasty, but this far into the summer Pauline really started looking forward to the fall, when the flavors got more interesting. Pumpkin spice, gingerbread, apple cinnamon. In Pauline's opinion, everything got more interesting in the fall.

"I mean, Pauline, who comes to a summer vacation place and expects to die?"

Pauline regarded Bridget. Her face was so open and unsullied. There was so much ahead of her: she had so much to learn.

"Who ever expects to die, anytime?" she asked.

TWO MONTHS AGO, JUNE

Chapter 1

ANTHONY

ON THE TOP deck of the ferry from Point Judith to Block Island Anthony Puckett watched a group of bachelorettes drinking from plastic tumblers. They wore identical skintight tank tops—white, of course, bachelorettes always wore white—that depicted a pair of cowboy boots with the words Ride 'Em Cowgirls above and Jennie's Last Rodeo below. Each tumbler was printed with its girl's name in large block letters: ashlie, lexie, sadie, etc. (It seemed to be a rule that to attend this party your name had to end in *ie*.) He didn't know

what was more depressing: The *ie* factor, or the cowgirl hats each girl wore, here in Rhode Island, so far from Texas or Nashville or anyplace where such a hat might be warranted. Or the orange juice he could see through the clear plastic of the tumblers, which meant they were drinking screwdrivers, the most unimaginative drink of all the drinks.

It was all depressing. Everything was depressing. Not to the bachelorettes, though. They were laughing, laughing, the way you do when you're young and carefree with a weekend ahead of you.

On the other side of the deck, at a safe distance from the bachelorettes, a little boy about Max's age sat pressed into his mother's side. His mother was on her phone, scrolling mindlessly through something, paying the boy no heed.

Don't think about Max, Anthony told himself fiercely. He wouldn't think about the way Max's face transformed when he was about to ask a cosmic, loaded question. For example: *If God made everything, who made God?* (Anthony's parents were staunch Catholics, and Anthony's mother, Dorothy, was indoctrinating Max on the sly, a fact that made Anthony's estranged wife Cassie's normally yoga-calm blood pressure rise.) Or, another example, when Anthony hadn't turned the channel from the nightly news fast enough, allowing Max an accidental glimpse of the aftermath of an ISIS bombing in Turkey: *Why is there evil?*

Anthony couldn't answer either of these questions properly. (Neither, it should be noted, could Dorothy.)

Anthony wouldn't think about Max, and he wouldn't think about Cassie, and he wouldn't think about Glen Manning, Cassie's smarmy art dealer with whom Anthony was positive she was sleeping. He wouldn't think about his future—financial and otherwise—which was as murky and inscrutable as a churning ocean. And he definitely, *definitely* wouldn't think about his father, Leonard Puckett.

He closed his eyes and dozed. When he felt the ferry slowing he opened his eyes. They were approaching land. He took a deep breath and surveyed his surroundings. Buildings were coming into relief, a jetty, a dozen or so moored sailboats. *To approach a place you'd never been before and to have the privilege of approaching it by boat—well, he supposed there was some sort of magic in that.* He head-wrote that sentence, and then deleted it. It wasn't very good.

He'd told nobody where he was going, and he didn't expect to run into anyone he knew. Cassie certainly hadn't asked: she just wanted him gone. Nobody he knew vacationed on Block Island.

They all went to Nantucket or the Vineyard or the Hamptons. It was a stroke of luck that an ancient uncle of a college friend had a Block Island cottage for which he needed a house sitter.

“Couldn’t he rent it?” asked Anthony. “For actual money?”

“He could,” said the friend. Ryan Fitzsimmons, his name was. In college they called him Fitzy. “But, dude, this place is *old*. It looks like something your great-great-great-grandmother would have lived in. And he can’t be bothered to fix it up. But he doesn’t want it left alone either. Comes with a car too. A Le Baron. Also old.”

“Why don’t you stay there?” asked Anthony.

“Me?” Fitzy laughed, long, deep, almost insolently. “No way. Charlotte’s parents hooked us up with a sweet house on Nantucket for August. And I don’t get that much time off from the bank anyway. Gotta keep making the coin.”

Rub it in, why don’t you? thought Anthony.

Anthony had wanted to go farther away, to a different type of island: Anguilla, Saint Martin, Barbados, someplace where a person could slip in among the beautiful and the glamorous. But his coin was gone. All of his coins were gone.

When the ferry docked he let the bachelorettes lurch ahead of him, pulling their weekender rollaway bags. He now observed that the bride-to-be had a white bow affixed to the side of her cowboy hat—he had missed this before. Her shirt, instead of saying Jennie’s Last Rodeo, said My Last Rodeo. Clever.

Have a great bachelorette weekend, Jennie. Have a wonderful life and a happy, happy marriage.

Marriage is the worst kind of heartbreak, he wrote in his head. That’s what the disgraced, lonely man wanted to say to the young bride-to-be. Get out while you still can, Jennie. Run for the hills.

Before he and Cassie got married she’d gone on a yoga retreat with her four bridesmaids. It was all very civilized and Zen. He’d gone on a bender with his Dartmouth buddies, the details of which were hazy.

He plodded down the ferry ramp and stood for a moment. *The wave of summer humanity undulated around him.* No. Delete.

Just ahead of him was a large white Victorian-era hotel with a sign reading **HARBORSIDE INN**. Next to it, another one: **NEW SHOREHAM HOUSE**. Next to that, another inn, and another one. Any deck attached to any building was full of laughing, drinking people. There were dogs and children and ice-cream cones and sunlight, mopeds and bicycles and Jeeps. And here was Anthony Puckett, dragging behind him his own wheelie bag, holding in his hand a wrinkled piece of paper with an address on Corn Neck Road.

He supposed he'd have to find a taxi to take him to the borrowed cottage, the borrowed Le Baron. Did an island this small have taxis? Ubers? Anything? He could feel sweat dripping down his neck, and his jeans were sticking to his legs. He trudged up the hill that led away from the ferry, and he crossed the street. There his eyes snagged on a sign on a small building next to the post office. He felt a squeeze like cold fingers on his heart.

ISLAND BOUND BOOKS said the sign. And in the front window, of course, inevitable as death or taxes, Leonard Puckett's latest. The cover was fire-engine-red; no images, just the white letters of the title popping out, *The Thrill of the Chase*. Book number nine in the Gabriel Shelton series.

Even here his father followed him.

No, that wasn't right. The book had been here; Anthony had only just arrived. *Revise that, Anthony. Delete. Rewrite.* Once again, he had followed his father.

Twenty-seven Corn Neck Road was a weather-beaten little cottage with a long seashell driveway and, as promised by Fitzzy, a large flat rock beside the front porch with a key hidden underneath. From the outside, it could have been any year. On the inside, time had stopped in the early 1900s. Lace, brocade, straight-backed chairs, heavy dark furniture matched only by the heavy dark rugs that lay under them. In the kitchen (small) it was closer to 1942, with ancient silver pulls on the drawers, a laminate countertop in pale green. The stove bore the word *Hotpoint* across it. He had never heard of such a brand. The door to the refrigerator closed completely only when Anthony pushed against it with all of his weight. No matter: there was no food to keep fresh in it, and only a half-empty ice tray in the freezer.

Or was it half full? This was a joke that at one time he might have made to himself, or even out loud. But he no longer felt like joking.

On the kitchen table, which was small and wooden, with four wooden chairs, as if the three bears had put out an extra for a guest, was a note from Fitzzy's uncle.

house rules, it said.

1. Garbage day is Thursday.
2. No pets.
3. No parties.

"That's it?" Anthony said out loud. He thought he could probably handle three rules.

On a sideboard in the living room sat a crystal decanter flanked by two glasses. Whether this was decoration or invitation he couldn't be certain, but it lent a certain sense of propriety to the place, like he'd just wandered into *Downton Abbey*. There was an amber liquid in the decanter. Brandy. Or sherry. *The lonely man had to stop himself from tipping the whole thing into his mouth, gulping it down like lemonade.*

What a boring story this would make.

He turned from the decanter and into one of the two bedrooms, which contained a four-poster bed whose posts looked sharp enough for him to impale himself on. (Not out of the question.) In his former life, he and Cassie reposed on an upholstered Avery bed from Room and Board on Newbury Street in Boston, chosen, of course, by Cassie. Paid for by Anthony.

Anthony tried not to think of how his wife might now be reposing on the Avery bed—or, more accurately, with whom. The thought that his despicable actions had brewed marital discontent was terrible to consider, but even more terrible was the possibility that the marital discontent had existed long before, like a chapter outline to a book that was yet to be written.

Oh, Anthony, stop it. What an obvious metaphor. You never used to be so obvious.

He wondered what Max was doing right then, right that very minute, and whether he'd been offered a reasonable explanation for his father's absence. But thinking about Max hurt too much, so he rolled up the thoughts like a sleeping bag, tucked them into their matching carrying pouch, and placed them tenderly in a corner of his mind, to be taken out later.

Anthony unpacked his single suitcase into the dark recesses of the dresser drawers. Next he started up the old Le Baron and followed the directions on his iPhone to the Block Island Grocery, a gray-shingled building that smelled of sea air and tourism. Once inside, he saw that the produce section looked like it could fit in the pocket of the produce section at his local Whole Foods. He spent three thousand dollars on four items. (Not really, but it felt like it.) Even to get those four items he had to fight through the throng of people waiting in line at the deli for their sandwiches to take to the beach. They all looked so happy, so hopeful. So sandy! He couldn't stand it.

As he was leaving the store he perused the notices on the bulletin board. Somebody was selling a mini-fridge; seven other people were selling surf boards; a housecleaning crew of six respectable, responsible women was looking for summer housing. But was anyone selling peace? Was anyone selling absolution? A place to live, a career?

He drove to the end of Corn Neck Road, passing three wobbly bicyclists—wobbly,

maybe, because the big wicker baskets on the front of the bikes, stuffed with beach towels, set them off balance. The road ended in a small parking lot. Across a vast sea of rocks he could see a lighthouse, and a small pack of people trooping toward it on foot.

He turned the car around. Was this all there was to this island? Was this really *it*? What should he do now? He could go back downtown. (He put air quotes over the word in his mind; one street did not a downtown make.) He could get ice cream, but he wasn't hungry. He could buy a T-shirt, but he'd packed seven of his favorite gray shirts and didn't need one. And anyway those activities might require smiling. They would definitely require interaction with human beings. And for sure they'd require money. No, thank you, to all three.

He proceeded back down Corn Neck Road. In no time at all he came to the seashell driveway, the cottage.

Anthony had come here to hide from the world. But how on earth was he going to be able to hide in a place so *small*?

