

Prologue

Corliss Blines was always racing from one moment into the next, as if she were somehow late to live her life. This hurry was, no doubt, at the root of her memory fog. The often-repeated phrase, “Gee I don’t remember that,” frustrated her—perhaps even frightened her—but drove her gallery assistant, Ruggiero, to the brink. “How can you possibly conduct business when you can’t remember shit?” He had finally exploded and then answered his own query. “I’ll tell you how: me!”

She now kept copious notes for business.

It was not early onset Alzheimer, as she had feared. “It happens as we age,” her very young doctor had assured her with a shrug and a lopsided smile Corliss wanted to slap right off the young Harvard graduate’s face. But instead, she too smiled and said, “Whew, that’s a relief.” No need to show the rage that simmered constantly just below the surface. The entirety of her inner workings had become, as she saw it, a freak show brought to her by the sponsors of menopause: the bearded lady, the human sauna, and yes ladies and gentlemen, the elastic woman whose skin ... well best not to think about that.

But now, after a lifetime of Peggy Lee’s “Is That All There Is?” riffs, she had found something she wanted to savor, to take time with and relish each and every moment, not race off into the next. Perhaps that was the problem all along; there had been nothing to fully engage and excite her. Yes, she was a powerful art rep and gallerist, and yes she could walk into just about any major museum and be welcomed with open arms (oftentimes fists curled at the end, but she

didn't care), and yes she even had a dog, Beanie, whom she really did like. She provided Beanie with all the expensive toys and blankies, designer sweaters and coats, a concierge vet and groomer, but she never seemed to have that "My dog is my life" connection with the mutt that most other people seemed to have. In truth Beanie didn't seem to cotton to Corliss either, but they lived together amicably, one wishing she's gotten a cat and the other thrilled to be out of the old lady's house from which she was rescued that smelled like urine, which would have been fine except it was cat urine.

But things were changing now. Now Corliss had a *raison d'être*. From now on she would, as she had been doing for the last few months, take her time and fully experience one moment before hurling herself into the next. And it felt good.

Chapter One

It had been a good run on a beautiful morning. Corliss had had a totally Zen jog, managing to block out everything except the high from her exercise, the warm air on her skin, the smell of the ocean, the wet strands of hair on her neck—chilling proof of a good workout.

She paused in her driveway, closed her eyes, raised her shoulders and dropped them several times, and then rolled her head from side to side easing the tension in her neck. Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. But before she could fully exhale she was blindsided by a force so powerful it felt as if her body would split in half. She opened her mouth to retrieve the air that had been knocked out, but it was useless. There was a moment of searing pain when the tip of the hunting

knife made initial contact with her tongue, but it all happened so quickly that she barely had time to gurgle “Oh” before her knees buckled and she fell back into a dense row of holly bushes crowded with brambles, hawthorns and gooseberry shrubs that hid her property.

An unexpectedly perfect hit.

It was late June and the homes along the road with its breathtaking view of the ocean were not yet filled with the owners and renters. That would come July Fourth when second homeowners and entitled visitors alike would descend on the area like locust in such density that the natural beauty of the land would be momentarily lost in the influx. Only Corliss’s killer saw her face shift from its normal state of haughty contempt to surprise. The executioner couldn’t help but notice that death had an altogether softening effect on the internationally renowned art dealer who was nothing more than a wolf in lamb’s clothing, a crook whose misbegotten wealth was built on the bones of trusting fools. Her rigid mouth was still, and her lips looked almost tender wrapped around the black, non-slip handle of the dagger.

No one would know that the last thing Corliss saw in clear consciousness was a seagull gliding overhead, wings still, a vision of grace and beauty in a clear summer sky. Just as no one would know what she was thinking when blissful unconsciousness brought her the first and only moment of absolute inner peace she was to know in this life.

When she finally departed this world it was oddly without so much as a glance back, completely unconcerned with the fifty-five years of experience she had just left behind. Even released inmates turn around to see what it looks like from the other side, but Corliss Blines was out of here in no time flat, taking with her the name of her killer and the recipe for her orange/cilantro scallops.

However, unlike Corliss, her killer was entrenched in the here and now, senses jolted into a state of hypersensitivity that was frighteningly pleasurable. This enhanced sharpness embraced all of the senses: the smell of sweat mixed with Corliss's shampoo and her fear; the taste of bile; the sound of the ocean, and the almost electrical, physical charge that zapped the killer's body at the moment the blade met Corliss's tongue and glided effortlessly to the back of her head.

The killer looked down at her slender, light body fisting the fabric of her t-shirt in one hand, holding her up, and ran a gentle finger along her left cheek with the other.

Without rushing the killer was able to get Corliss under a tarp in the back of the vehicle and cover all tracks.

Two pickups passed the driveway before the killer felt cleared to enter the road unnoticed.

One stop first but soon enough they were on Old Stone Highway, a winding road that runs through the bay side section of Amagansett into Springs. They pulled into the Old Stone Market, a deli many still called Marty's from the old days when Marty and his wife lived in half the space of the corner store. Ordering coffee, an egg sandwich, and two doughnuts, the killer lingered at the deli, engaging the woman behind the counter in mindless conversation, not wanting to get to Landing Lane before all the contractors who breakfasted at the bay had finished their coffee, read their papers and started their workdays.

If the killer hadn't lost the Cuddy cruiser in a stupid bet there would have been no problem getting rid of Corliss. A quick zip out into the ocean to toss her overboard and that would have been it. Without a boat, options were limited. But with time to plan and creative thinking the killer had devised a perfect send-off for a woman whose foundation was based on the principle, "Screw others before they screw you."

Corliss would have her ultimate send-off from the shore. Landing Lane, an indented boat launch facing Accabonac Harbor with spits of beach like Louse Point and Gerard Drive, seemed to be the most sensible place. It was surrounded by marsh with dense, high beach and cordgrass and there was one spot forty feet off the road where no one except deer would venture, and none of the nearest houses would have clear sightlines. In truth this watery necropolis was an all-too-idyllic setting for a woman as underhanded and greedy as Corliss, but the killer—really a softie at heart—smiled at this final act of kindness.