

CHAPTER 5

July 11, 1992

*Driving was long, longer than time,
because of the infection that slowly ate us.*

The alarm clock rang and vibrated on my nightstand, and I slammed my hand on top of it. At seventeen, having to be ready by seven in the morning was nearly impossible, and someone would pay dearly. That someone was my father, who had to deal with my complaining until we hit the Bourne Bridge before crossing into the Cape.

“This truck is horrible!” Irritated, I shifted on the tattered vinyl seat, reaching under my legs, wiping the sweat away. “Gross.” He ignored me. “This is a long drive,” I continued, staring right at him, making sure he could see I was bothered.

“Not really,” he mumbled, then opened his mouth and made the retching sound, drumming up a giant loogie. He turned his head and launched it out the window. Unrelenting, I pretended my eyes were laser beams vaporizing him.

“That’s beyond disgusting.” I lifted up from the seat to wipe my legs again. “So gross.”

“All right, all right!” he finally responded.

A giant sign made from carved bushes in the rotary read, *Welcome to Cape Cod*, and I was relieved to be almost there. We followed the green-and-white sign pointing to Woods Hole, Falmouth. I had only ever been to the Cape once, which was weird as I'd lived in Massachusetts my whole life. Aunt Rita, my father's sister, rented a house in Cohasset for a week after she got settlement money from a car accident.

I remembered all the adults sitting around and hearing "settlement" over and over and my father saying, "Ya did good, kid" while patting her on the head.

Most folks on the North Shore didn't go to Cape Cod or the Islands. We usually headed further north to New Hampshire or Maine, while the people who lived south of Boston opted for the Cape or the Islands since they were closer. Living in the ocean-side city of Revere, most of our vacations consisted of us going across the street to the beach, which was okay with us; it was America's first public beach, to be exact, as noted on the signs exclaiming this.

Revere was a tough, blue-collar city with a few Irish and Jewish people scattered about. But really, everyone and everything in the city was Italian, except for us. At least, that's what it felt like. The bakeries, restaurants, and all my friends were Italian, and I wished I were too.

My friends and I hung at the beach and lay in the sun most summers, them with their long dark hair, olive skin, big brown eyes, and me with my fair, freckled skin and reddish-brown hair. I liked my blue eyes, and my hair was long, but I looked like a ghost next to their tanned, glistening bodies. I'd watch them slather themselves in baby oil and become darker. Then I'd do the same and burn red like a lobster. My mother yelled at me to stop pretending I was Italian and to be proud of my Irishness, as they were the most beautiful people in the world. Looking at my reflection and my pasty skin, frizzy hair, and freckles, I disagreed, but in silence.

There were tons of guys around Revere with nicknames like Johnny Rockets or Broadway Joe. Everyone had a nickname. Fat Ricky cashed everyone's checks and had an illegal cab company with a few old 1970s

limos. We had about ten Blackys, and two of them lived near us on the beach. My father was “Richie from the Beach.” Even at a young age, I thought I could have come up with something a little cleverer. None of these people seemed to have jobs—or regular jobs, anyway. “Blacky from the Beach” ran numbers, my father said, although I didn’t know what that meant. My dad was a truck driver, but it seemed he didn’t work much either.

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For a little while, I believed my father might be a gangster like the ones from the movies he watched on TV. He and his friends looked and talked like those guys, and many of them drove the same types of cars.

One night, I watched *The Godfather* while he slept on the couch. I stretched out on the green shag rug, listening to him snoring next to me, unaware I was there. Michael, the main character, had the same enormous eyes as my father that were also slightly turned at the corners. I couldn’t believe Michael, who seemed like a smart guy on a good path, would get involved with and then lead the Italian Mob and hurt people. I guess he had to, but it wasn’t what his father wanted for him. I watched until the end and then lay in bed, wondering if my father could be one of those guys. He drove the car and was in the union, which they talked about a lot. He dressed like them—or tried to, anyway. We weren’t Italian, so he couldn’t be a made guy, but a lot of Irish guys and others worked with them.

Maybe I was onto something.

I woke up the next morning and went to the kitchen. He was sitting at the kitchen table, hurriedly rolling one of his “cigarettes,” as he called them. He never seemed to roll these if my mom was home. I couldn’t understand why he was afraid of her seeing the cigarettes he rolled himself. She didn’t care about the Kools, and she smoked too. She had been trying to quit recently, though, so maybe that was it, but I wasn’t sure. It seemed he was up to something.

I grabbed a Bubba Cola from the fridge—like a Pepsi, but for poor

people; my mom bought them at the weird grocery store down the street. None of the products there had names like the ones in regular stores or on TV. They also didn't have bags for your stuff, and you had to put it all in boxes yourself after paying. Ray hated that store and refused to drink Bubba Cola.

"Why can't we be normal? Can't we have Coke and Doritos like everyone else?" he'd cried the other day while chewing on the end of his clip-on tie. He stood, showing my mom the Bubba Cola can, then walked over and pulled the bag of Nacho Cheese Chips with a giant *Great Value* sticker on the front from the cabinet, pointing to it.

Ray had worn a clip-on tie since he could dress himself. He told us all that he was an executive and didn't care what anyone said because that was how executives dressed. He also told us an executive wouldn't drink Bubba Cola. My mother ignored him and changed the subject.

"What's up, Georgie?" my father said as he rolled his cigarettes, looking past me nervously, watching for my mom. I sipped my cola as he stuffed the cigarette in his pack of Kools, then brushed off the table.

"Are you a gangster?" I asked, taking another sip.

His hurried movements suddenly slowed, and he stared ahead, then turned and smiled strangely. I was relieved after worrying the question would make him angry. In the movies, they didn't say that word in the family. It seemed only the police referred to them as gangsters, so I didn't want to get in trouble for going against the rules. I smiled, pleased, and swung my legs underneath me. I stared at him for a moment, my smile fading.

He shouldn't be smiling. He should be serious, like Michael in the movie.

He suddenly didn't remind me of Michael anymore. He seemed more like Michael's brother Fredo instead. I studied him. His eyes bloodshot, he looked weird. Fredo was a guy who was around because they had to let him be. Maybe he was like that. I felt sorry for Fredo and thought he was stupid.

He stopped smiling and came over, leaning in close. I pulled away in surprise. The familiar beer-cigarette-aftershave mixture made me choke, and I turned my head to cough.

“If I were, you’d never know it,” he whispered, quickly kissing me on the cheek.

He stepped away and smiled down at me proudly, patting me on the head, and then made his way to the stairs out the back door.

I put my can in the sink and then went to my room and plopped onto my bed. I pulled my diary from under the mattress, taking the pen from the holder, writing my last entry for the day: *My dad is not a gangster.*

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I stared out the window as we drove the narrow stretch of road into Falmouth.

“Almost there,” he said, sounding excited.

I felt a little excited too. I was eager to see this place, even if it was with him. I glanced at him, thinking maybe he wasn’t that bad.

I had grown up by the North Shore, so the Cape seemed familiar, only prettier and cleaner. Also, the people seemed fancier, and I liked that. We pulled down into what looked like the town center and stopped for gas across Main Street, next to a few small shops and restaurants. I remembered little of our trip here with my aunt except for my father ending up drunk and leaving on a bus after my mother decked him. I never forgot that. Ray and I were sitting on the dock, eating freeze pops Aunt Rita had given us, when we heard yelling from the house. Ray ignored it, as he usually did, and playfully pushed me over.

“You’re a jerk,” I yelled, starting to push him back, then hearing a door slam and more screaming.

We looked at each other, raising our eyebrows. I tried my best to put it out of my mind and stay right where we were, pretending things were fine. That’s what Ray would want. But I never could and convinced him to come with me and see.

“Let’s go see what’s going on.” I stood, making my way toward the stairs. I turned back. Ray wasn’t moving. “C’mon.” I gestured for him to get up.

“I don’t want to know, George,” he sighed. His blue lips from the pop made him look dead.

We slowly walked to the house. I listened hard, trying to figure it out, but there was no sound. I tiptoed up the stairs and quietly opened the screen door to the porch. Ray stood close behind, looking in every direction except in front of him.

“You’re leaving!” my mother yelled.

We could see through the doorway to the living room. My father clutched the fireplace, appearing to steady himself. He was drunk. Even in the dimly lit room, I could tell. He looked like he needed a bath, and just hours before, he’d looked clean.

Something came flying toward my father. It looked like clothes, but it was hard to tell. I stood at the entrance of the porch, clutching the plastic pop wrapper. I turned to Ray, who was chewing on his, twirling it in his mouth and staring at the ceiling.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Dad said, slurring, attempting to make his way toward where I assumed my mother was standing.

He took a few steps; then suddenly she came into view. He took another step toward her and suddenly was thrown back over the rocking chair. It all happened in slow motion. He looked like liquid spilling from the chair onto the floor. My mom walked over and glared down at him. He didn’t move. I turned to Ray, whose eyes were wide, still twirling the ice pop wrapper in his mouth. Noticing us there, my mother turned in horror. She ran to us, kneeling, assuring us he was okay.

“Sorry, guys, I’m so sorry,” she said.

I could tell she was trying to hold back from crying.

“It’s not your fault, Mom,” I said, rubbing her head.

“Did you hit him, Ma?” Ray’s voice came from behind, and I stared at him with fire.

A tear fell from her cheek. She looked away from us, wiping it with the back of her arm. My eyes filled, and I tried holding them back. I hated crying, but seeing her cry bothered me.

“How about a ride in the rowboat?” She hopped up, glancing again at my father.

“Is he alive?” Ray asked, looking past her.

“Oh my gosh, Ray.” She grabbed his shoulder. “Yes! Yes, of course he is, Ray. He’s just sleeping,” she said, hugging him tightly.

Ray didn’t move.

“Drunk sleeping,” I whispered, watching him. “Let’s go to the dock again, Ray. Come on.” My eyes met my mother’s. “We can make fishing rods and try to catch something.”

“Great idea!” my mother chimed in, pretending to sound excited so we would be. “I’ll grab some line and some bread for the fish.”

She walked to the kitchen, past my father, who still wasn’t moving.

It stunned me that she had hit him. She’d never done anything like that. He deserved it, or I guessed he did. He was breathing, and after watching him for a moment, I saw his hand move. I was glad he wasn’t dead.