

Once there were four Sparrow Sisters. Everyone called them the Sisters, capitalized, and referred to them as a group, even when just one had come to the post office to collect the mail. “The Sisters are here for their package,” the postmistress would say, calling her clerk to the desk. Or, “What do you know, the Sisters are taking the train into the city.” All four had left Granite Point over the years on school trips to Boston and for the symphony or the museum, but they always came back; it was home. The only Sparrow sister who did leave town forever did so in the hardest way. The oldest Sparrow, if only by seven minutes, was Marigold, Sorrel’s twin. She was the real homebody, the one people still shook their heads over, and she actually left Granite Point just twice; the first time to accompany her father to a meeting with lawyers upon the death of her mother and the last upon her own death, in a smallish wooden box nestled inside an Adams’s Hardware bag on the arm of her twin. Sorrel took Marigold to the Outer Beach, past the break north of the seal colony, to scatter her ashes in the Atlantic.

Now there were only three Sparrows left in the house at the top of the hill overlooking the far harbor. Long ago this house that their great-great (and more) grandmother Clarissa Sparrow built had rung with the shouts and laughter of her four sons and the many Sparrow sons that followed. It was made of the timber used to craft the whaling fleet that sailed out from the harbor and into the dark waves. Her husband was a sea captain so fond of his trade that Clarissa chose wood from her father’s shipyard with the idea that if George Sparrow loved his boat so much, surely he would be called home to a house made of the very same wood. She’d even built a widow’s walk high above the street so that she could watch for him to sail back to her. Eventually, the widow’s walk would earn its name several times over.

By the time the Sparrow Sisters lived in the house on Ivy Street, lanes and hedges and other houses had grown up, blocking all but a narrow sliver of the deep blue water of Big Point Bay. Ivy House, as everyone called it, stood tall and white as it had for all those years, home to the last of the Sparrows altogether. The house was beautiful and spare with high ceilings and windows of wavy glass. It was most often filled with the flowers and herbs, vegetables and fruits of the Sparrow Sisters Nursery. Like their mother, Honor Sparrow, dead now for twenty-some years—gone on the very day her youngest daughter, Impatiens, arrived—the sisters all had green thumbs. It was ordained, really. They had each been named after a botanical, mostly flowers, and as their mother kept producing girls, the names became slightly ridiculous. But Honor was a keen gardener and in darkest winter, calling her daughter's names reminded her that spring would come again. For months after her death the older girls hated their names and all they recalled for them. By the time they founded the Sparrow Sisters Nursery, though, each thoroughly embraced their names as the sign they were.

Sorrel, Nettie, and Patience might well have gone on as they were accustomed, planting and reaping, selling the abundance of their labors, cooking for each other and listening to the opera every Saturday afternoon as Sorrel did the ironing, fulfilling the roles of town eccentrics. Although to be fair, Sorrel was not yet forty, hardly biddy material. But then the old town doctor, Eliakim Higgins, retired and set in motion everything that came after. He'd delivered all but one of the girls and cared for each of them on the rare occasions that they fell ill. He had diagnosed Marigold, and overseen her chemotherapy, as pointless as it turned out to be, in the seven months it took her to die. Dr. Higgins was very attached to the sisters, even more so after he'd been unable to save

their mother and then Marigold. But at seventy-six his hands were not as steady nor his eyes so clear. He decided to leave his practice for the creosote-scented air of Arizona. Although there was a group medical practice in Hayward seventeen miles west, Dr. Higgins had always been the town's first choice. Well, he and then Patience Sparrow, whose reputation for curing everyday maladies like cradle cap and insomnia had turned her gift into an unexpected sideline. She was more often paid in eggs and striped bass, hand-knitted sweaters and fresh quahogs, than cash, but still. Her ability was cultivated along with the plants at the Sparrow Sisters Nursery, and it wasn't long after college that Patience decided she would stay in Granite Point and go to work with her sisters. Her degree in botany wasn't the reason the Nursery called to her. It was the Nursery that called her to study. In fact, if the older girls hadn't invested their inheritance and, even more, their hearts, in the land, Patience might well have wandered away and had a very different story indeed.

The Sisters remained close to the doctor (he was, after all, as alone as they were), but after Marigold they were never his patients again. The spring after Dr. Higgins left town, a young doctor straight out of Massachusetts General by way of the army bought the small, shingled house and practice on Baker's Way where Dr. Higgins had lived and worked for over forty years. The arrangements were made quietly through a Boston firm, leaving little time for speculation in town and even less for real digging. The young man remained a mystery.

Henry Carlyle moved in quickly, alone, on a cold Wednesday in April. He'd collected few things over the years in medical school and then the service. The neighbors watched Dr. Carlyle, muffled in a dark blue sweater, sleeves pushed up over his elbows as

he unloaded the rented van. Movers had already brought all the big stuff, so what Henry now carried into the house was expected: boxes, lamps, two suitcases, and a large duffel. The oddest item was a long single shell and oars. Henry slid it out effortlessly, shouldering the impossibly thin boat before he went back for the oars. His little audience behind their twitching curtains might have wondered where he meant to row—the glacial lake, Frost Fish perhaps, or the still pond down Arey’s Lane? But the snoopers were more curious that the tall, broad-shouldered doctor limped, and as the van began to empty, the hitch became more pronounced. By the time Henry Carlyle climbed into the van to return it to the U-Haul in Hayward, he’d begun to wince with every step. His first patients would try to divine how he’d been hurt but, although he was attentive and gentle in his examinations, Dr. Carlyle revealed nothing personal beyond the fact that he was a product of Yale Medical School (class of 1999—the diploma was on his wall).

Henry Carlyle was just a year or so younger than Nettie Sparrow, and on the day she came to see him, she couldn’t help but notice the way his dark hair curled behind his ear. There were strands of gray in it that led Nettie to think that while it might be youthful in its length, perhaps it showed he hadn’t had things so very easy. She sat on the crinkly paper covering the old leather examination table, the first and likely the only sister to consult Dr. Carlyle. She was a bit of a hypochondriac, but really, who could blame her after Marigold and her parents? Nettie had been fighting a chest cold for weeks, it seemed, so she made an appointment, convinced it was pneumonia. The nurse who doubled as receptionist at the practice had gone to high school with Nettie. Sally Tabor had waggled her eyebrows as she beckoned Nettie closer to the counter. She leaned in to whisper, which wasn’t easy given that Sally was heavily pregnant.

“Look out,” she said, glancing behind her to be sure her boss wasn’t in earshot. “He’s as handsome as anything and as chilly as Big Point Bay in January.”

Nettie was in mid-giggle when Dr. Carlyle came to the doorway and called her name. She followed him down the hall, her fingers at her lips as she saw his limp. Now, as she sat watching him glance through her chart (a thin file that was proof of both the Sparrow Sisters’ hearty constitutions and their mistrust of doctors), she hoped that Sally was wrong about him.

Dr. Carlyle looked straight into Nettie’s eyes as he put the file on the table beside her, which made her heart flutter just enough to worry her.

“Nettie, is that short for Annette?” Dr. Carlyle asked.

“It’s short for Nettle.” Nettie hated the way her voice quavered as she shivered in the office gown. “Stinging nettle tea was the only thing that soothed my mother’s hives when she was carrying me.”

Henry laughed and then apologized. “That’s unusual.”

“Yes, well,” Nettie said, “All our names are unusual.”

Henry took her pulse and temperature, laying a gentle hand against her forehead for a moment. He breathed onto his stethoscope to warm it before he slipped it under her gown. Nettie noted the small courtesy and decided there and then that this Dr. Carlyle was a suitable replacement for Dr. Higgins—not that she would be seeing him again. Just being in his office made her feel traitorous, and she regretted her moment of panic. Or was it rebellion? Patience could smell a doctor a mile off.

After listening to her lungs, Dr. Carlyle determined that she did not have pneumonia but rather a stubborn case of bronchitis and prescribed antibiotics and rest.

Nettie left his office in an unreasonably grateful state, prescription in hand, feeling better already. There was only a moment of hesitation when she considered the reaction of the pharmacist. Since Marigold's death none of the Sisters had needed Mr. Howe's services. It had not gone unnoticed. As she waited for her medicine, Nettie knew that his clerk had her ears pricked as she unnecessarily straightened the magazines on the rack next to Nettie.

When Dr. Carlyle brought her chart to Sally, he saw that Nettie had left her jacket on the chair nearest the counter. It actually belonged to her sister Patience, but Nettie was feverish and distracted; she'd grabbed the first thing she saw as she snuck out of Ivy House that morning. He picked it up to give it to his nurse, but the smell of tarragon and thyme and something almost *cool* made him pause and hold it a little closer. Sally eyed him as she took the coat from his hands and signaled the next patient. Henry was already planning what would be the first of many house calls since arriving in a town that seemed absolutely determined to stay trapped in the amber of a time long past. The last patient was dispatched by 5:30 so Henry had just enough time to listen to a filing lecture from Sally before he washed the disinfectant off his hands and face. As Henry picked up the jacket Nettie had left behind, he remembered how his father had always told him that he should start as he meant to continue, so Henry decided that he'd make Nettie Sparrow his first house call. He buttoned his vest and stepped out into the slanting light.