

# Safe Harbour Danielle Steel



## **ABOUT THE BOOK**

On a windswept summer day, as the fog rolls in over San Francisco, a solitary figure walks her dog on the beach. Eleven-year-old Pip Mackenzie's young life has been touched by tragedy – nine months before, a terrible accident plunged her mother Ophelie into inconsolable grief. Then Pip meets artist Matt Bowles, who offers to teach her to draw – and can't help but notice her beautiful, lonely mother.

Matt senses something magical about Pip, something that reminds him of his own daughter, before a bitter divorce tore his family apart. Ophelie is thrown by her daughter's new companion, until she realizes how much joy he is bringing into their lives. As mother and daughter begin to heal and to laugh again, Matt must confront unfinished business from his own past. Then, out of the darkness, comes an unexpected gift of hope . . .

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Read an Extract from *A Perfect Life*

About the Author

Also by Danielle Steel

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DANIELLE STEEL

SAFE  
HARBOUR

To my incredible, wonderful children,  
Beatrix, Trevor, Todd, Sam, Victoria,  
Vanessa, Maxx, Zara, and Nick,  
who keep me safe, happy, and loved,  
and whom I love so much.  
May you ever be a safe harbour for each other.

And to the angels of "Yo! Angel!":  
Randy, Bob, Jill, Cody, Paul, Tony, Younes,  
Jane and John.

with all my love,  
d.s.

## The Hand of God

Always with a feeling  
of trepidation,  
excitement,  
fear,  
the day comes  
when we go out  
to God's lost souls,  
forgotten, cold,  
broken, filthy,  
and occasionally  
though rarely clean,  
brand new on the streets,  
with still clean hair,  
french braided,  
or faces cleanly shaven,  
when only a month later,  
we see the ravages of days,  
the same faces no longer  
quite the same,  
the clothes  
beyond repair,  
the souls beginning  
to tatter  
like their shirts  
and shoes  
and eyes. . .  
i go to mass  
and pray for them  
before we leave,  
like matadors  
entering the ring,  
never sure what the night  
will bring,  
whether warmth  
or despair,  
danger or death to them  
or us,

my prayers silent  
and heartfelt,  
and then at last  
we take off,  
laughter ringing  
like bells around us,  
as we watch for the faces,  
the bodies,  
the eyes looking for us,  
they know us now,  
they come running,  
as we jump out  
time and time  
and time again,  
hauling heavy bags  
behind us,  
to buy them one more  
day,  
one more night in the rain,  
one more hour . . . in the cold.  
i prayed for you. . .  
where were you?  
i knew you'd come!  
with shirts plastered  
to their bodies  
in the rain,  
their pain and their joy  
mingling with ours.  
we are the wagons  
filled with hope  
in a scope we cannot  
measure,  
their hands touch ours,  
their eyes digging deep  
into ours,  
god bless you,  
the voices sing softly

as they walk away,  
one leg, one arm,  
one eye,  
one time,  
one life they share  
with us for a moment  
on the streets,  
as we move on  
and they remain  
etched in our memories  
forever,  
the girl with the scabs  
all over her face,  
the boy with one leg  
in the pouring rain,  
whose mother would have  
cried to see him,  
the man who put down  
his head and sobbed,  
too frail to take the bag  
from our hands,  
and then the others  
who frighten us,  
who come prowling,  
watching,  
trying to decide whether  
to pounce or participate,  
not sure whether  
to attack or thank,  
their eyes meet ours,  
their hands touch mine,  
their lives intertwined  
with ours,  
like the others,  
irrevocably,  
immeasurably,  
and in the end, finally,  
trust is our only bond,  
their only hope,  
our only shield  
as we face them  
again and again.  
the night wears on,  
the faces endless,  
the seeming hopelessness of it  
interrupted by the briefest

of moments  
when hope is born,  
and a bag full of warm clothes  
and groceries,  
a flashlight, a sleeping bag  
a deck of cards,  
and some band-aids,  
a sign of dignity returned,  
their humanity  
no different than ours,  
and then finally  
a face with eyes  
so devastated and devastating  
it stops your heart,  
it breaks time  
into tiny fragments  
until we are either  
as broken as they  
or as whole,  
no difference between us  
anymore,  
we are one  
as the eyes search mine,  
will he let me claim him  
as one of ours,  
or will he step forward  
and kill me  
because hope is too far gone  
for him to seize it.  
why are you doing this for us?  
because i love you, i want to say,  
but rarely do i find the words,  
as i hand him the bag  
along with my heart,  
my own hope and faith  
spread thin among so many,  
and always the worst face of all  
at the very end,  
after a few joyful ones,  
and some who are so close  
to dead  
they cannot speak at all,  
but this last one,  
always mine,  
the one i take home  
with me in my heart,



his crown of thorns  
resting on his head,  
his face ravaged,  
he is the filthiest  
and most frightening of all,  
he stands and stares at me,  
holding his ground,  
eyes boring into mine,  
wasted sometimes,  
at the same time ominous  
and filled with despair.  
i see him coming,  
he comes straight toward me,  
as i want to run,  
but can't and won't  
and don't dare.  
i taste fear,  
we meet and stand  
eye to eye,  
tasting each other's  
terror  
like tears  
mingling on one face,  
and then i know,  
i remember,  
if this were my one  
last chance  
to touch God,  
to reach out and be  
touched by Him  
in return,  
if this were my only chance  
to prove my worth  
and my love for Him,  
would i run?  
i stand my ground,  
remembering  
that He comes  
in many forms,  
with many faces,  
with bad smells,  
and perhaps even  
angry eyes.  
i hold out the bag,  
no longer brave,  
but merely breathing,

remembering why  
i have come into this  
dark night  
and for whom. . .  
we stand equal and alone,  
death hovering  
between us,  
as he takes the bag at last  
whispers God bless  
and moves on,  
and i know once again  
as we drive home,  
silent and victorious,  
that once again  
we have been  
touched  
by the hand of God.

refuge

once broken,  
now renewed,  
the thought  
of you  
a place  
where i take  
refuge,  
your seams,  
my scars,  
the legacy  
of those  
who loved us,  
our victories  
and defeats  
slowly  
converging,  
our stories  
merging  
into one,  
basking  
in the winter  
sun,  
the pieces  
of me  
no longer  
broken,  
  
and all of me  
at long last  
whole,  
a crackle jar  
of ancient  
beauty,  
the mysteries  
of life  
no longer  
seeming  
to need answers,  
and you,  
beloved friend,  
my hand in yours,  
as we both  
mend,  
and life begins  
again,  
a song  
of love  
and joy  
that never  
end.

# 1

IT WAS ONE OF THOSE CHILLY, FOGGY DAYS THAT masquerade as summer in northern California, as the wind whipped across the long crescent of beach, and whiskbroomed a cloud of fine sand into the air. A little girl in red shorts and a white sweatshirt walked slowly down the beach, with her head turned against the wind, as her dog sniffed at seaweed at the water's edge.

The little girl had short curly red hair, amberflecked honey-colored eyes, and a dusting of freckles across her face, and those who knew children would have guessed her to be somewhere between ten and twelve. She was graceful and small, with skinny little legs. And the dog was a chocolate Lab. They walked slowly down from the gated community toward the public beach at the far end. There was almost no one on the beach that day, it was too cold. But she didn't mind, and the dog barked from time to time at the little swirls of sand raised by the wind, and then bounded back to the water's edge. He leaped backward, barking furiously, when he saw a crab, and the little girl laughed. It was obvious that the child and the dog were good friends. Something about the way they walked along together suggested a solitary life, as though one could sense that they had walked along this way often before. They walked side by side for a long time.

Some days it was hot and sunny on the beach, as one would expect in July, but not always. When the fog came in, it always seemed wintry and cold. You could see the fog roll in across the waves, and straight through the spires of the

Golden Gate. At times you could see the bridge from the beach. Safe Harbour was thirty-five minutes north of San Francisco, and more than half of it was a gated community, with houses sitting just behind the dune, all along the beach. A security booth with a guard kept out the unwelcome. There was no access to the beach itself save from the houses that bordered it. At the other end, there was a public beach, and a row of simpler, almost shacklike houses, which had access to the beach as well. On hot sunny days, the public beach was crowded and populated inch by inch. But most of the time, even the public beach was sparsely visited, and at the private end, it was rare to see anyone on the beach at all.

The child had just reached the stretch of beach where the simpler houses were, when she saw a man sitting on a folding stool, painting a watercolor propped against an easel. She stopped and watched him from a considerable distance, as the Lab loped up the dune to pursue an intriguing scent he seemed to have discovered on the wind. The little girl sat down on the sand far from the artist, watching him work. She was far enough away that he was not aware of her at all. She just liked watching him, there was something solid and familiar about him as the wind brushed through his short dark hair. She liked observing people, and did the same thing with fishermen sometimes, staying well away from them, but taking in all they did. She sat there for a long time, as the artist worked. And she noticed that there were boats in his painting that didn't exist. It was quite a while before the dog came back and sat down next to her on the sand. She stroked him, without looking at him, she was looking out to sea, and then from time to time at the artist.

After a while, she stood up and approached a little bit, standing behind him and to the side, so he remained unaware of her presence, but she had a clear view of his

work in progress. She liked the colors he was working with, and there was a sunset in the painting that she liked as well. The dog was tired by then, and stood by, seeming to wait for a command. And it was yet another little while before she approached again, and stood near enough for the artist to notice her at last. He looked up, startled, as the dog bounded past him, sending up a spray of sand. It was only then that the man glanced up and saw the child. He said nothing, and went on working, and was surprised to notice that she hadn't moved, and was still watching him, when he turned his head again, and mixed some water in his paints, half an hour later.

They said nothing to each other, but she continued to watch, and finally sat down on the sand. It was warmer, keeping low in the wind. Like her, the artist was wearing a sweatshirt, and in his case jeans, and an old pair of deck shoes that were well worn. He had a gently weathered face and a deep tan, and she noticed as he worked that he had nice hands. He was roughly the same age as her father, somewhere in his forties. And as he turned to see if she was still there, their eyes met, but neither smiled. He hadn't talked to a child in a long time.

"Do you like to draw?" He couldn't imagine any other reason why she'd still be there, except if she were an aspiring artist. She would have been bored otherwise. In truth, she just liked the silent companionship of being close to someone, even a stranger. It seemed friendly somehow.

"Sometimes." She was cautious with him. He was, after all, a stranger, and she knew the rules about that. Her mother always reminded her not to talk to strangers.

"What do you like to draw?" he asked, cleaning a brush, and looking down at it as he talked. He had a handsome, chiseled face, and a cleft chin. There was something quiet and powerful about him, with broad shoulders and long legs.

And in spite of sitting on the artist's stool, you could see he was a tall man.

"I like to draw my dog. How do you draw the boats if they aren't there?"

He smiled this time as he turned toward her, and their eyes met again. "I imagine them. Would you like to try?" He held out a small sketch pad and a pencil, it was obvious that she wasn't going anywhere. She hesitated, and then stood up, walked toward him, and took the pad and pencil.

"Can I draw my dog?" Her delicate face was serious as she inquired. She felt honored that he had offered her the pad.

"Sure. You can draw anything you like." They didn't exchange names, but just sat near each other for a time, as each worked. She looked intent as she labored on the drawing. "What's his name?" the artist inquired as the Lab sailed past them, chasing seagulls.

"Mousse," she said, without raising her eyes from her drawing.

"He doesn't look much like a moose. But it's a good name," he said, correcting something on his own work, and momentarily scowling at his painting.

"It's a dessert. It's French, and it's chocolate."

"I guess that'll work," he said, looking satisfied again. He was almost through for the day. It was after four o'clock and he'd been there since lunchtime. "Do you speak French?" he said, more for something to say than out of any real interest, and was surprised when she nodded. It had been years since he'd spoken to a child her age, and he wasn't sure what he should say to her. But she had been so tenacious in her silent presence. And he noticed, as he glanced at her, that aside from the red hair, she looked a little like his daughter. Vanessa had had long straight blond hair at that age, but there was something similar about the

demeanor and the posture. If he squinted, he could almost see her.

“My mom's French,” she added, as she sat, observing her own work. She had encountered the same difficulty she always did when she drew Mousse—the back legs didn't come out right.

“Let's take a look,” he said, holding a hand out for the sketch pad, aware of her consternation.

“I can never do the back part,” she said, handing it to him. They were like master and student, the drawing creating an instant bond between them. And she seemed strangely comfortable with him.

“I'll show you.... May I?” he asked her permission before adding to her efforts, and she nodded. And with careful strokes of the pencil, he corrected the problem. It was actually a very creditable portrait of the dog, even before he improved it. “You did a good job,” he observed, as he handed the page back to her and put away his sketch pad and pencil.

“Thank you for fixing it. I never know how to do that part.”

“You'll know next time,” he said, and started putting his paints away. It was getting colder, but neither of them seemed to notice.

“Are you going home now?” She looked disappointed, and it struck him as he looked into the cognac-colored eyes that she was lonely, and it touched him. Something about her haunted him.

“It's getting late.” And the fog on the waves was getting thicker. “Do you live here, or are you just visiting?” Neither knew the other's name, but it didn't seem to matter.

“I'm here for the summer.” There was no excitement in her voice, and she smiled seldom. He couldn't help

wondering about her. She had crept into his afternoon, and now there was an odd, undefinable link between them.

"At the gated end?" He assumed she had come from the north end of the beach, and she nodded.

"Do you live here?" she asked, and he gestured with his head in the direction of one of the bungalows just behind them in answer. "Are you an artist?"

"I guess so. So are you," he smiled, glancing at the portrait of Mousse she was holding tightly. Neither of them seemed to want to leave, but they knew they had to. She had to get home before her mother did, or she'd get in trouble. She had escaped the baby-sitter who'd been talking for hours on the phone with her boyfriend. The child knew that the teenage baby-sitter never cared if she went wandering off. Most of the time she didn't even notice, until the child's mother came home and asked about her.

"My father used to draw too." He noticed the "used to," but wasn't sure if it meant that her father no longer drew, or had left them. He suspected the latter. She was probably a child from a broken home, hungry for male attention. None of that was unfamiliar to him.

"Is he an artist?"

"No, an engineer. And he invented some things." And then, with a sigh, she looked at him sadly. "I guess I'd better go home now." And as though on cue, Mousse reappeared and stood beside her.

"Maybe I'll see you again sometime." It was early July, and there was still a lot of life left in the summer. But he had never seen her before, and suspected she didn't come down this way very often. It was a good distance for her.

"Thank you for letting me draw with you," she said politely, a smile dancing in her eyes this time, and the wistfulness he saw there touched him profoundly.



"I liked it," he said honestly, and then stuck a hand out to her, feeling somewhat awkward. "My name is Matthew Bowles, by the way."

She shook his hand solemnly, and he was impressed by her poise and good manners. She was a remarkable little soul, and he was glad to have met her. "I'm Pip Mackenzie."

"That's an interesting name. Pip? Is that short for something?"

"Yes. I hate it," she giggled, seeming more her own age again. "Phillippa. I was named after my grandfather. Isn't it awful?" She screwed up her face in disdain for her own name, and it elicited a smile from him. She was irresistible, particularly with the curly red hair and the freckles, all of which delighted him. He wasn't even sure anymore if he liked children. He generally avoided them. But this one was different. There was something magical about her.

"Actually, I like it. Phillippa. Maybe one day you'll like it."

"I don't think so. It's a stupid name. I like Pip better."

"I'll remember that when I see you next time," he said, smiling at her.

They seemed to be lingering, reluctant to leave each other.

"I'll come back again, when my mom goes to the city. Maybe Thursday." He had the distinct impression, given what she said, that she had either sneaked out or slipped away unnoticed, but at least she had the dog with her. Suddenly, for no reason he could think of, he felt responsible for her.

He folded his stool then, and picked up the worn, battered box he kept his paints in. He put the folded easel under one arm, and they stood looking at each other for a long moment.

"Thank you again, Mr. Bowles."

“Matt. Thank you for the visit. Good-bye, Pip,” he said almost sadly.

“Bye,” she said with a wave, and then danced away like a leaf on the wind, as she waved again, and ran up the beach with Mousse behind her.

He stood watching her for a long time, wondering if he'd ever see her again, or if it mattered. She was only a child after all. He put his head down then against the wind, and walked up the dune to his small weatherbeaten cottage. He never locked the door, and when he walked inside and set his things down in the kitchen, he felt an ache he hadn't felt in years and didn't welcome. That was the trouble with children, he told himself, as he poured himself a glass of wine. They crept right into your soul, like a splinter under a fingernail, and then it hurt like hell when you removed them. But maybe it was worth it. There was something exceptional about her, and as he thought of the little girl on the beach, his eyes drifted to the portrait he had painted years before of a girl who looked remarkably like her. It was his daughter Vanessa when she was roughly the same age. And with that, he walked into his living room, and sank heavily into an old battered leather chair, and looked out at the fog rolling in over the ocean. As he stared at it, all he could see in his mind's eye was the little girl with bright red curly hair and freckles, and the haunting cognac-colored eyes.

## 2

OPHÉLIE MACKENZIE TOOK THE LAST WINDING TURN in the road, and drove the station wagon slowly through the tiny town of Safe Harbour. The town consisted of two restaurants, a bookstore, a surf shop, a grocery store, and an art gallery. It had been an arduous afternoon in the city for her. She hated going to the group twice a week, but she had to admit that it helped her. She had been going to it since May, and had another two months ahead of her. She had even agreed to attend meetings over the summer, which was why she had left Pip with their neighbor's daughter. Amy was sixteen, liked to baby-sit, or so she claimed, and needed the money to supplement her allowance. Ophélie needed the help, and Pip seemed to like her. It was a comfortable arrangement for all concerned, although Ophélie hated driving into town twice a week, even though it only took her half an hour, forty minutes at most. As commutes went, aside from the ten-mile stretch of hairpin turns between the freeway and the beach, it was easy. And driving along the cliffs, on the winding road, looking out over the ocean relaxed her. But this afternoon she was tired. It was exhausting sometimes listening to the others, and her own problems hadn't improved much since October. If anything, it seemed to be getting harder. But at least she had the support of the group, it was someone to talk to. And when she needed to, she could let her hair down with them, and admit how rotten she was feeling. She didn't like burdening Pip with her troubles. It didn't seem fair to do that to a child of eleven.

Ophélie drove through town, and shortly afterward took a left turn onto the dead-end road that led to the gated portion of Safe Harbour. Most people missed it. She did it by reflex now, on automatic pilot. It had been a good decision, and the right place to spend the summer. She needed the peace and quiet it offered. The solitude. The silence. The long, seemingly endless stretch of beach and white sand, which was sometimes almost wintry, and at other times hot and sunny.

She didn't mind the fog and chilly days. Sometimes they suited her mood better than the bright sun and blue skies that the other residents of the beach longed for. Some days she didn't leave the house at all. She stayed in bed, or tucked herself into a corner of the living room, pretending to read a book, and in fact just thinking, drifting back to another time and place when things were different. Before October. It had been nine months, and seemed like a lifetime.

Ophélie drove slowly through the gate, as the man in the security booth waved, and she nodded. She let out a small sigh as she drove toward the house carefully, over the speed bumps. There were children on bicycles on the road, several dogs, and a few people walking. It was one of those communities where people knew each other, but stayed unto themselves nonetheless. They had been there for a month, and she hadn't met any-one—and didn't want to. And as she drove into the driveway and turned off the car, she sat quietly for a moment. She was too tired to move, see Pip, or cook dinner, but she knew she had to. That was all part of it, the endless lethargy that seemed to make it impossible to do anything more than comb her hair or make a few phone calls.

For the moment at least, she felt as though her life was over. She felt a hundred years old, although she was forty-two, and looked thirty. Her hair was long and blond and soft

and curly, and her eyes were the same rusty brandy color as her daughter's. And she was as small and delicate as Pip was. When she was in school, she'd been a dancer. She'd tried to get Pip interested in ballet at an early age, but Pip had hated it. She had found it difficult and boring, hated the exercises, the barre, the other girls who were so intent on perfection. She didn't care about her turnouts, her leaps and jumps or pliés. Ophélie had finally given up trying to convince her, and let Pip do what she wanted. She took horseback-riding lessons for a year instead, took a ceramic class in school, and the rest of the time she preferred drawing. Pip was solitary in her pursuits, and was happy left to her own devices, to read, or draw, or dream, or play with Mousse. In some ways, she was not unlike her mother, who had been solitary as a child too. Ophélie was never sure if it was healthy to let Pip keep to herself as much as she did. But Pip seemed happy that way, and she was always able to entertain herself, even now, when her mother paid so little attention to her. To the casual observer at least, Pip didn't seem to mind it, although her mother often felt guilty about how little they seemed to interact anymore. She had mentioned it to the group often. But Ophélie felt unable to break the spell of her own lethargy. Nothing would ever be the same now.

Ophélie put her car keys in her bag, got out of the car, and slammed the car door without locking it. There was no need to. And when she walked into the house, all she saw was Amy industriously loading the dishwasher and looking busy. She was always busy when Ophélie got home, which meant she had done nothing all afternoon before that and had to frantically catch up in the last few minutes. There was little to do anyway, it was a bright, cheerful, well-kept house, with clean-looking modern furniture, bare light wood floors, and a picture window that went the length of the house and afforded a splendid view of the ocean. There was

a long narrow deck outside, with outdoor furniture on it. The house was just exactly what they needed. Peaceful, easy to maintain, and pleasant.

“Hello, Amy. Where's Pip?” Ophélie asked, with tired eyes. You almost could not hear her French origins at all, her English was not only fluent, her accent was nearly perfect. It was only when she was extremely tired, or vastly upset, that a word or two sneaked through that betrayed her.

“I don't know.” Amy looked suddenly blank, as Ophélie observed her. They'd had this conversation before. Amy never seemed to know where Pip was. And Ophélie instantly suspected that, as usual, she'd been talking to her boyfriend on her cell phone. It was the one thing Ophélie complained about nearly each time Amy sat for her. She expected her to know where Pip was, particularly as the house was so close to the ocean. It always panicked Ophélie to think that something could happen to her. “I think she's in her room, reading. That's where she was the last time I saw her,” Amy offered. In truth, Pip hadn't been in her room since she'd left it that morning. Her mother went to take a look, and of course saw no one. At that exact moment, Pip was in fact running down the beach toward home, with Mousse gamboling along beside her.

“Did she go down to the beach?” Ophélie asked, looking nervous as she came back to the kitchen. Her nerves had been raw since October, which previously would have been unlike her. But now everything was different. Amy had just turned on the dishwasher and was preparing to leave, with little or no concern where her charge was. She had the confidence and trust of youth. Ophélie knew better, and had learned the agonizing lesson that life could not be trusted.

“I don't think so. If she did, she didn't tell me.” The sixteen-year-old looked relaxed and unworried. And Ophélie looked anxious, despite the fact that the community was supposed to be safe, and appeared to be, but it still

infuriated and terrified her that Amy allowed Pip to wander off with no supervision whatsoever. If she got hurt, or had a problem, or was hit by a car on the road, no one would know it. She had told Pip to report to Amy before she went anywhere, but neither the child nor the teenager heeded her instructions. "See you on Thursday!" Amy called as she breezed out the door, as Ophélie kicked off her sandals, walked out onto the deck, looked down the beach with a worried frown, and saw her. Pip was coming home at a dead run, and holding something in her hand that was flapping in the wind. It looked like a piece of paper, as Ophélie walked out to the dune, feeling relief sweep over her, and then down onto the beach to meet her. The worst possible scenarios always jumped into her mind now, instead of the simpler explanations. It was nearly five by then, and getting colder.

Ophélie waved at her daughter, who came to a breathless stop beside her, with a grin, and Mousse ran around them in circles, barking. Pip could see that her mother looked worried.

"Where've you been?" Ophélie asked quickly with a frown, she was still annoyed at Amy. The girl was hopeless. But Ophélie hadn't found anyone else to sit for her. And she needed someone with Pip whenever she went into the city.

"I went for a walk with Moussy. We went all the way down there," she pointed in the direction of the public beach, "and it took longer to get back than I thought. He was chasing seagulls." Ophélie smiled at her and relaxed finally, she was such a sweet child. Just seeing her sometimes reminded Ophélie of her own youth in Paris, and summers in Brittany. The climate had not been so different from this one. She had loved her summers there, and she had taken Pip there when she was little, just so she could see it.

"What's that?" She glanced at the piece of paper and could see it was a drawing of something.

"I did a picture of Mousse. I know how to do the back legs now." But she did not say how she had learned it. She knew her mother would have disapproved of her wandering off alone on the beach, and talking to a strange man, even if he had improved her drawing, and it was harmless. Her mother was very strict about Pip not talking to strangers. She was well aware of how pretty the child was, even if Pip was entirely unaware of it herself for the moment.

"I can't imagine he sat still for his portrait," Ophélie said with a smile and a look of amusement. And when she smiled, one could see easily how pretty she was when she was happy. She was beautiful, with exquisitely sculpted fine features, perfect teeth, a lovely smile, and eyes that danced when she was laughing. But since October, she laughed seldom, nearly never. And at night, lost in their separate private worlds, they hardly talked to each other. Despite how much she loved her child, Ophélie could no longer think of topics of conversation. It was too much effort, more than she could cope with. Everything was too much now, sometimes even breathing, and especially talking. She just retreated to her bedroom night after night, and lay on the bed in the dark. Pip went to her own room and closed the door, and if she wanted company, she took the dog with her. He was her constant companion.

"I found some shells for you," Pip said, pulling two pretty ones out of the pocket of her sweatshirt and handing them to her mother. "I found a sand dollar too, but it was broken."

"They nearly always are," Ophélie said as she held the shells in her hand, and they walked back to the house together. She hadn't kissed Pip hello, she had forgotten. But Pip was used to it now. It was as though any form of human touch or contact was too painful for her mother. She had retreated behind her walls, and the mother Pip had known for the past eleven years had vanished. The woman who had taken her place, though outwardly the same, was in fact



frail and broken. Someone had taken Ophélie away in the dark of night and replaced her with a robot. She sounded, felt, smelled, and looked the same, nothing about her was visibly different, but everything about her had altered. All the inner workings and mechanisms were irreparably different, and they both knew it. Pip had no choice but to accept it. And she had been gracious about it.

For a child her age, Pip had grown wise in the past nine months, wiser than most girls her age. And she had developed an intuitive sense about people, particularly her mother.

"Are you hungry?" Ophélie asked, looking worried. Cooking dinner had become an agony she hated, a ritual she detested. And eating it was even more distressing. She was never hungry, hadn't been in months. They had both grown thinner from nine months of dinners they couldn't swallow.

"Not yet. Do you want me to make pizza tonight?" Pip offered. It was one of the meals they both enjoyed not eating, although Ophélie seemed not to notice how Pip picked at her food now.

"Maybe," Ophélie said vaguely. "I can make something if you want." They had had pizza four nights in a row. There were stacks of them in the freezer. But everything else seemed like too much effort for too little return. If they weren't going to eat anyway, at least the pizzas were easy.

"I'm not really hungry," Pip said vaguely. They had the same conversation every night. And sometimes in spite of it, Ophélie roasted a chicken and made a salad, but they didn't eat that either, it was too much trouble. Pip was existing on peanut butter and pizza. And Ophélie ate almost nothing, and looked it.

Ophélie went to her room then and lay down, and Pip went to her room and stood the portrait of Mousse against

the lamp on her nightstand. The paper from the sketch pad was stiff enough to hold it, and as Pip looked at it, she thought of Matthew. She was anxious to see him again on Thursday. She liked him. And the drawing looked a lot better with the changes he'd made to the back legs. Mousse looked like a real dog in the drawing, and not half-dog half-rabbit, like the earlier portraits she'd done of him. Matthew was clearly a skilled artist.

It was dark outside when Pip finally wandered into her mother's bedroom. She was going to offer to cook dinner, but Ophélie was asleep. She lay there so still that for a moment Pip was worried, but when she moved closer to her, she could see her breathing. She covered her with a blanket that lay at the foot of the bed. Her mother was always cold, probably from the weight she had lost, or just from sadness. She slept a lot now.

Pip walked back out to the kitchen, and opened the refrigerator. She wasn't in the mood for pizza that night, she normally only ate one piece anyway. Instead she made herself a peanut butter sandwich, and ate it as she put the TV on. She watched quietly for a while, as Mousse slept at her feet. He was exhausted from the run on the beach, he was snoring softly, and woke only when Pip turned off the TV and the lights in the living room, and then she walked softly to her bedroom. She brushed her teeth and put her pajamas on, and a few minutes later got into bed and turned the light off. She lay in bed silently for a while, thinking about Matthew Bowles again, and trying not to think how life had changed since October. A few minutes later she fell asleep. Ophélie never woke until the next morning.

### 3

WEDNESDAY DAWNED ONE OF THOSE BRILLIANTLY sunny hot days that only happen rarely at Safe Harbour, and cause everyone to scramble for the sun and bask in it gratefully for hours. It was already hot and still when Pip got up, and wandered into the kitchen in her pajamas. Ophélie was sitting at the kitchen table, with a steaming cup of tea, looking exhausted. Even when she slept, she never woke feeling rested. It took only an instant after she woke up, for the wrecking ball of reality to hit her chest again. There was always that one blissful moment when memory failed her, but there was just as surely the hideous moment following it, when she remembered. And between the two instants, the ominous corridor where she had an instinctive sense that something terrible had happened. By the time she got up, the whiplash effect of waking had left her drained and exhausted. Mornings were never easy.

“Did you sleep well?” Pip asked politely as she poured herself a glass of orange juice and put a slice of bread in the toaster. She didn't make one for her mother because she knew she wouldn't eat it. Pip seldom saw her eat now, and never breakfast.

Ophélie didn't bother to answer the question. They both knew it was pointless. “I'm sorry I fell asleep last night. I meant to get up. Did you eat dinner?” She looked worried. She knew how little she was doing for the child, but seemed to be unable to do anything about it. She felt too paralyzed to do anything for her daughter, except feel guilty about it.

Pip nodded. She didn't mind cooking for herself. It happened often, in fact almost always. Eating alone in front of the TV was better than sitting at the table together in silence. They had run out of things to say months before. It had been easier the previous winter when she had homework, and an excuse to leave the table quickly.

The slice of toast popped up loudly out of the toaster, Pip grabbed it, buttered it, and ate it without bothering to get a plate. She didn't need one, and she knew that whatever crumbs she dropped, Mousse would take care of. The canine vacuum. Pip walked out to the deck and sat on a lounge chair in the sunshine, and a moment later, Ophélie followed.

"Andrea said she'd come out today with the baby." Pip looked pleased at the prospect. She loved the baby. William, Andrea's son, was three months old and a symbol of his mother's independence and courage. At forty-four, she had decided that she was unlikely to finally meet Prince Charming and get married. She had conceived the baby by artificial insemination from a sperm donor and had him in April, a bouncing beautiful dark-haired chubby baby boy with laughing blue eyes and a delicious giggle. Ophélie was his godmother, as Andrea was Pip's.

The two women had been friends since Ophélie came to California eighteen years before with her husband. They had lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, for two years before that, while Ted taught physics at Harvard. There had never been any question in any-one's mind that he was a genius. Brilliant, quiet, awkward, almost taciturn at times, yet gentle, tender, and once upon a time loving. Time and life's challenges had hardened him eventually, even embittered him. There had been hard years when nothing went as he wanted, and there was almost literally no money. And in the last five years, he had been lucky. Two of his inventions had made a fortune, and everything had gotten easy. But he was no longer open in heart or spirit.

He loved Ophélie and his family, they knew that, or said they did, but he no longer showed it. He had become lost in his constant struggles to come up with new designs, inventions, and solutions to problems. And he had finally made millions selling licenses to his patents in the field of energy technology. He had become not only world renowned but universally revered and respected. He had found the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow ultimately, but no longer remembered that there was a rainbow. His entire world centered on his work, and his wife and children were all but forgotten. He had all the hallmarks of a genius. But there was never any doubt in Ophélie's mind that she loved him. For all his difficulties and quirks, there was no one like him, and there had always been a powerful attachment between them. And as Ophélie had said patiently to Andrea one day, "I don't suppose Mrs. Beethoven had it easy either." His prickly character was the nature of the beast and went with the territory. She had never reproached him his quirks or solitary personality, but she often missed the early years when things were still warm and cozier between them. And in some ways, they both knew Chad had changed that. The difficulties of their son had irreversibly altered the father. And as he withdrew from the boy, he also withdrew from his mother, as though somehow it was her fault. Their only son had been difficult as a small boy, and after endless agonies and a tortuous road, was diagnosed at fourteen as bipolar. But by then, for his own salvation and peace of mind, Ted had disengaged from him completely, and the boy had become entirely his mother's problem. Ted had sought and found refuge in denial.

"What time is Andrea coming out?" Pip asked as she finished her toast.

"Whenever she can get the baby organized. She said sometime this morning." Ophélie was happy she was coming. The baby was a pleasant distraction, particularly for

Pip, who adored him. And in spite of her age and inexperience, Andrea was a fairly easygoing mother. She never minded Pip wandering around with him everywhere, holding him, kissing him, or tickling his toes while his mother nursed him. And the baby loved her. His sunny disposition brought a ray of sunshine into their lives, which even warmed Ophélie whenever she saw him.

Much to everyone's amazement, Andrea had taken a year's sabbatical from her successful law practice to stay home with the baby. She loved being with him. She said that having William was the best thing she'd ever done, and she didn't regret it for an instant. Everyone had told her that having him would preclude ever finding a man, and she didn't seem to give a damn. She was happy with her son, and had been ecstatic over him right from the first. Ophélie had been with her at the birth, and it had moved them both to tears. The delivery had been fast and easy, and the first one, other than her own, that Ophélie had ever seen. The doctor had actually handed the baby to her to give to Andrea, minutes after he was born, and the two women had felt bonded forever after sharing William's birth. It had been an extraordinary event, deeply moving, and a memory they both cherished. It was a defining moment in their friendship.

Mother and daughter sat in the sun for a while without feeling obliged to say anything, and after a while, Ophélie went back into the house to answer the phone. It was Andrea, she had just finished nursing the baby, and said she was heading for the beach. Ophélie went to take a shower, and Pip changed into a bathing suit, and then told her mother she was going down on the beach with Mousse. She was still there, wading in the water, when Andrea arrived forty-five minutes later. And as always, she blew into the house like a gale-force wind. Within minutes of her arrival, there were diaper bags, and blankets, and toys, and a swing all over the living room. Ophélie went to the top of the dune