

Chapter One

Perry pretended not to hear the mutters of the two fishermen standing near the wheelhouse door.

“Looks like her mother.”

“Skinny thing. Grew up wrong on the mainland.”

Blood rushed into her cheeks. She'd known she would be an object of curiosity here—the stranger, the other, the odd one out. She'd also grown used to hearing snide comments about her mother over the years, but now, it was different. These men might have known her mother as a child or a teenager. And they would have known Aunt Mara, too.

The air inside the wheelhouse pressed close, heavy with the smell of cigarettes and the underlying reek of salt brine and fish guts. Beyond the little window, dark water churned and foamed. The trawler groaned as she rode the swells, as though about to give up and sink beneath the waves. Perry tightened her grip on the edge of the bench and tried not to imagine the shriek of buckling metal, the inevitable surge of icy water, and the crushing pressure as you were pulled down, knowing you'd never come up again. Now that she was on a boat for the first time in her life, the ocean seemed much bigger and more frightening than she'd counted on.

“You should go out on deck, little lady.”

Perry looked over to where Captain Foley stood at the helm. “Outside?”

Though elderly like the rest of his crew, he was trim and straight-backed, with a bushy gray beard and eyes that constantly roved over his vessel. “Fresh air will help if you feel sick. And you'll be able to watch as we come in. You want a first look, don't you?”

“I’m not sick.” Perry wished her voice didn’t sound so small. She glanced at the fishermen by the door, who still studied her. She zipped her jacket and got to her feet, maneuvering around the narrow table bolted to the wall.

“Keep a good hold on the railing, you hear?” said Captain Foley. “Your family doesn’t need to lose another girl.”

Perry’s stomach clenched, and she stared at him, but he didn’t turn around. At home, the subject of Aunt Mara’s disappearance was taboo, not to be mentioned. Would everyone here treat the family tragedy so lightly? At the same time, she felt a strange excitement. This could be her chance to find out more—to find out all the things her mother refused to tell her.

She caught a whiff of fish blood from one of the men and suddenly had to be outside. The door’s latching mechanism was complicated, and she used all her weight to slide it open. She stepped out and shut it behind her.

The wind immediately whipped her hair into tangles. A set of steps led down to the deck, where the rest of the crew tidied gear and prepared for docking. They all moved about easily, completely in tune with the sway of the vessel.

Perry clung to the railing, rust and paint peeling under her palms. She inched down the stairs to where a walkway ran around the side of the wheelhouse. Spray dashed her cheek, and she shivered. The other fishermen glanced at her, perhaps wondering why she was outside. She avoided their eyes and followed the walkway toward the bow, moving slowly as the deck lurched and rolled. She missed the weight of her father’s arm around her shoulders. She wished he hadn’t sent her away.

She nearly gasped when she raised her head and saw the hulking shadow looming in front of the boat, growing closer and more distinct every minute. Cliffs reared up to the west. A

lighthouse stood high on a lonely bluff, already flashing in the fading light. To the east, the land flowed more gently into a series of beaches and coves.

Perry stared. Until now, the island had existed only as a dark blot in her imagination: the place where her mother's twin sister had vanished without a trace. Where her mother vowed she'd never set foot again. Where she insisted Perry should never go. Maybe it was ironic that her mother's fear of the island had ended up being the very thing that brought Perry to its shores.

A buoy's bell clanged as the trawler passed a tangle of outlying islets. After a minute more, the boat rounded a great stone breakwater and entered the harbor, where the water was calmer. The engine fell to an idle. A mooring field took up one side of the bay, and a labyrinthine network of docks dominated the other. Captain Foley navigated to an empty slip, and the crew jumped down to secure the lines.

A boy leaned against a piling nearby, almost like he'd been waiting for them. He looked around Perry's age, fifteen or sixteen. He was tall and slim, like her, though his shoulders already had some of a man's heft. One of the fishermen called to him, and he stepped forward, catching the thrown line one-handed and tying it off to a cleat. The engine gave a last cough and died, and the crew moved away down the docks. A few glanced back at Perry.

Captain Foley came out of the wheelhouse with her suitcase. He didn't look surprised to see the boy. "Make yourself useful and take this."

"I thought I just did," said the boy, looking up. "Make myself useful."

"Your father should've taught you to follow orders." Foley's mustache twitched in a sardonic smile.

The boy didn't answer, but he made a show of taking his time as he walked over for the case. Foley jumped to the dock and beckoned to Perry. She hesitated—the step down was several

feet, and she didn't want to slip or make a fool of herself in front of the boy, who watched her with his head to one side and a slight smile on his lips. He reminded her of the teenagers who stood smoking in a corner of her schoolyard, ready to trip those passing by and then laugh while they lay in the dirt—the ones who always teased her about her mother.

Captain Foley offered a hand. "Come on, little lady. Nothing to worry about."

"I'm not worried." Perry gripped the railing and jumped down. She drew in a breath as her feet met the planks: her first steps on the island.

Foley turned to the boy. "Get along, now."

The boy inclined his head to Perry, touching two fingers to his temple in a mock salute. Then he turned and vanished into the falling darkness.

"That one's a piece of work." Foley picked up Perry's suitcase and started toward shore. "There's not enough for boys of his type to do around here anymore."

Perry kept an eye out for the boy as they walked up the docks, wondering what Foley meant by *his type*. School would be freshly out for the summer—did teenagers here have jobs? How did they spend their days? Her father said the island had fallen on hard times. Maybe that explained Foley's remarks.

Salt and diesel laced the air. Derricks and cranes overshadowed the quay, their tops obscured by thin, clammy mist. Groups of fishermen—including the trawler's crew—gathered around lighted pedestals on the docks, talking and smoking. They stared at Perry as she passed, and she looked down at her shoes, unease heavy in her stomach.

"Peregrine!"

Perry looked up at the call: a woman stood on the quayside, one arm raised in greeting. It had been several years since Perry had seen Aunt Nora, but she recognized her at once. She had

the same smile as Perry's mother, but whereas Deirdre was a whirlwind of untucked clothes and flyaway curls, Aunt Nora wore a neat duffle coat and had her hair in a braided bun, not a thread out of place.

When Perry came within reach, Aunt Nora pulled her into a tight embrace. "It's been too long." She stepped back to hold her at arm's length. "You were a chubby little thing last time I saw you, and now look. All knees and elbows. You'll be taller than me if you keep it up."

Perry rubbed her elbows unconsciously and tried not to hunch her shoulders. Her mother was always telling her to stand up straight. *Don't shy away from the world, my love. Be proud of who you are.* If only it were that easy.

Aunt Nora turned to Captain Foley with a brisk nod. "Thank you for bringing her." Her mouth twitched as she spoke, as though the words were bitter.

"Nothing but a trifle, Mrs. Nolan." Foley pulled a pipe from his pocket and moved toward a nearby cluster of fishermen.

Aunt Nora lifted Perry's suitcase. "Did you enjoy the trip, love? I'm sorry we had to put you on that old rust bucket—Foley was the only skipper who could pick you up along his route today. There used to be a ferry, but that was a long time ago."

"Captain Foley and his crew were very kind." Perry chose not to mention the things they'd said behind her back or the way the boat had heaved as though trying to throw her overboard. Her aunt and uncle were taking her into their home—the least she could do was try to be a good guest and not more of a burden.

Aunt Nora led her along the embankment toward the town. "Most men around here could drive a boat before they could walk. And don't worry, you'll see much more of the ocean on better days than this one. It'll be good for you, being here."

Perry wanted to believe it. Her father had said that her mother's fear of the island was irrational—a delusion or a coping mechanism. But as Aunt Nora glanced up at the darkening sky, Perry thought she seemed anxious.

“Hurry, now. Let's get you home.”

Beyond the harbor, several shopkeepers were closing up, locking doors and lowering blinds. Fishermen and the few other islanders left outside moved toward the lighted refuge of a pub.

Aunt Nora put the suitcase into the trunk of an old green station wagon parked at the curb, and Perry sank into the passenger seat. She stared out the window as Aunt Nora started to drive. If things had been different, she might have grown up here. For a second, she allowed herself to picture it: her mother sitting in a rocking chair on the porch of a cottage, laughing, sharing a cup of tea with her twin sister. Perry would be an islander—she would know this place like the back of her hand. She would invite friends over to her house without worrying whether her mother was having a good day or a bad one. She would belong. Without warning, a bright bolt of anger seared through her, startling in its intensity: anger at her father for sending her away. Anger at her mother for causing it. For demanding all her father's time and attention. For being the one who needed looking after, rather than the one who looked after Perry.

She took a deep breath and tried to push the feelings down. She didn't need looking after.

“Something on your mind, love?” asked Aunt Nora.

Perry shook her head. “I'm fine. I just never thought I'd be here.”

“Well, we're glad to have you. I know things have been difficult lately—I've been worried about you. We all have. Your father did the right thing, sending you to us.”

Perry stiffened. Would Aunt Nora ask after Deirdre's condition? She must be anxious about her younger sister, after all. What answers could Perry give? What was there to say? But Aunt Nora merely rested a hand on Perry's shoulder.

The winding road climbed steadily, and soon, the close quarters of the commercial district gave way to pretty homes with dormer windows and wide gardens. The car rattled over potholes, making the ride almost as bumpy as the cobbled streets around the harbor.

Aunt Nora pulled into the gravel drive of a white clapboard house with green shutters. "I hope you're hungry. Your grandparents are over for the evening, and your Gran insisted on cooking up a storm for you."

They got out of the car, and Perry took her suitcase from the trunk and followed her aunt up the path. A waft of cooking smells enveloped them as they stepped inside: butter, garlic, and onions.

Aunt Nora strode down the narrow hallway, gesturing for Perry to leave her suitcase and follow. "Here she is. Fresh from the mainland."

The kitchen took up the back of the house. Gramps, Uncle Ellis, and Dana sat at the table. Gran and Rowan stood by the stove.

"Hi," said Perry, feeling very small.

Aunt Nora looked pointedly at her daughters. "Say hello to your cousin."

"Hi," said Dana. She was fifteen, like Perry, with a heart-shaped face and fox-clever eyes.

Rowan, six years younger with curly hair and round cheeks, stared at Perry but didn't speak.

Gran set down her spoon. "Come here, love." She had a dancer's slender build and the elegance to match. She wore her long, silver hair in a braid down her back.

Perry moved forward. She was taller than her grandmother, now.

"You look like your mother." Gran put a hand on Perry's cheek, and her eyes crinkled as she smiled. "It's been too long since we've seen you."

As Gran enfolded Perry in her arms, Perry breathed in the smells of lavender, fresh bread, and clean linen. Exactly how a grandmother should smell. Some of the tension left her body.

After a few seconds, Gran released her. "Sit down. I'll make you a plate."

Perry sat next to Dana, across from her grandfather and uncle.

"It's good to see you, Peregrine." Uncle Ellis's receding hair, well-trimmed beard, and reading glasses put Perry in mind of a college professor, though she knew he worked at the town hall. The island wasn't big enough for a university.

Perry picked at a seam on her napkin. "It's actually Perry."

"What's that?" asked Aunt Nora as she sat next to Uncle Ellis.

"Nobody's called me Peregrine in years. It's Perry."

"Perry?" Gramps finally looked up from his paper. "That's a boy's name, love. Hate to break it to you." Years in the sun had left his skin freckled and mottled. Above his mustache, his eyes were fixed in a permanent squint. He sat with his bad leg stretched out. Maybe it hurt him more these days.

Perry had heard this comment many times before. "Is it better to have people think I'm a boy, or a bird?"

The grown-ups all laughed—even Gramps chuckled. A little shoot of warmth blossomed in Perry's stomach, and she realized how hungry she was.

Gran handed her a steaming plate of broiled fish, corn, and cooked greens. "Eat up. Wouldn't hurt to put a bit of meat on your bones."

The air filled with the sound of clinking cutlery as the family settled to their meal. The hot, hearty food dispelled some of the chill that had clung to Perry since the ocean passage. It had been a long time since she'd sat around a table like this with her mother and father.

"That's fresh catch on your plate." Gramps gestured with his fork. "Better than what you get on the mainland, I'll wager. Nothing like what we had years ago, mind you. The fish used to be beautiful—almost as big as you, with scales every color of the rainbow."

Dana rolled her eyes. "Give it a rest, Gramps."

Aunt Nora frowned. "Don't disrespect your grandfather."

"That's what you get for having girls." Gramps stirred his corn and greens together into a mush. "A good, strong boy knows his place on the boat and in the world."

Aunt Nora cut her food into precise, uniform bites. "You had girls, too."

"Look how well that turned out," Gramps said with a snort.

What did Gramps think of boys like the one who had helped tie up the trawler? *There's not enough for boys of his type to do around here anymore*, Captain Foley had said.

"So, Perry." Uncle Ellis studied her with concern. "How's your mother?"

Perry stared at her plate as she faced the dreaded question. "Not very good."

Uncle Ellis nodded. "Your father said as much. Well, you're welcome to stay here as long as you need to. As long as you like."

"Thank you." Perry kept her head down. She knew it was rude, but she couldn't bring herself to meet anyone's eyes. She didn't think she could bear to talk more about her mother tonight.

“She’s been so far away for so long.” Gran toyed absently with her napkin. Gramps covered her hand with his, and she gave her head a little shake before summoning a smile.

“We’re so happy to have you here, love.”

Perry managed a small smile in response.

After everyone had finished, Gran started to clear the dishes, but Aunt Nora stopped her.

“Let me, Ma. Girls, show your cousin where she’s sleeping.”

“Thank you for dinner, Gran.” Perry stood up from the table.

“Don’t mention it, love,” said Gran with a smile.

Perry followed her cousins out of the kitchen. Dana took Perry’s suitcase and lugged it up the stairs, where she deposited it in one of the three second-floor bedrooms. Crisp white curtains framed the window, and a vase of flowers stood on the bedside table. Rowan ran in and flung herself on the bed.

“Get down,” Dana commanded. She turned to Perry. “Is it true your mom’s in the loony bin?”

Perry’s cheeks burned with anger and shame. She forced her voice to stay steady. “It’s a hospital. And she went voluntarily.”

Dana folded her arms. “But she’s been crazy for years, right?”

“She’s been on the mainland too long.” Rowan slid off the bed. “And so have you. That’s what Gramps says. He says bad things happen to our kind on the mainland.”

“What kind is that?” Perry asked.

“Fishing folk,” said Dana. “Sea folk.”

“My dad says this island is dying bit by bit.” Perry folded her arms, too. “He says there aren’t enough fish to keep everyone paid anymore, and it’s only getting worse.”

Dana shrugged, unfazed. "He's not from here."

"How long are you staying?" Rowan hopped from foot to foot.

Perry drew her shoulders in, wishing to disappear. "I think just a few weeks." In truth, she didn't know. Her father had looked away when she'd asked, running his hands through already ruffled hair, eyes red with exhaustion and desolation. She hadn't wanted to press him.

"This room used to be your mom's. Hers and Aunt Mara's." Dana held Perry's gaze as though hoping for a reaction. "We cleared out the closet and dresser for you, and you have your own bathroom."

A chill slid down Perry's spine at the mention of Mara's name, but she said only, "Thanks."

Once Dana and Rowan withdrew, Perry searched the room to see if her mother or Mara had left any mementoes. The drawers and closet proved to be disappointingly bare, so she crossed to the window and perched on the seat. It took her a moment to locate the crank for the casement. She gazed out at the dark town, arms around her legs. Her mother had grown up here with her twin sister. And then Mara had disappeared, at around the same age Perry was now. Deirdre always insisted Mara hadn't died by suicide, as everyone else assumed. Perry's father, on the other hand, said this was another of her delusions.

Perry tried not to think any more about her parents—how she'd watched them become hollowed out, scraped clean, like phantoms of themselves. More than anything, she wanted them to tell her everything would be all right, but she'd learned a long time ago how empty those words could be.

She rested her chin on her knees. Lights twinkled through the mist, and the lighthouse flashed in the distance. A breeze stirred the curtains and lifted the hair from her face, carrying a trace of the ocean's salt.

After tossing and turning for what seemed like hours, she finally managed to sleep. In the morning, she woke to sunlight. Yesterday's clouds had broken, leaving the sky banded in delicate shades of cream and blue, like a watercolor painting.

She dressed and washed her face in the little adjoining bathroom, listening for noises from the rest of the household but hearing none. When she went to the window to look out at the daylit town, she stopped short. Something white had been wedged into the outside of the frame, flapping slightly in the breeze. A folded piece of paper.

She opened the window and pulled it out, trying not to rip it. When she smoothed it flat, she saw a single line of cramped, messy handwriting.

Mara didn't kill herself. Leave before the same thing happens to you.