Chapter One

The Ferry

The ferry to Innisbray ran twice a day in winter, and Mara had missed the first one on purpose. She told herself it was because of the traffic on the coastal road, or the extra coffee she'd ordered and then let go cold, or the fact that she couldn't find her gloves. But she knew, the way you know the shape of a bruise before you look at it, that she had wanted the extra hours. She had wanted the delay. Eleven years is a long time to stay away from a place, and no amount of ferry schedules could make the return feel anything but sudden.

The water was the color of pewter. Gulls followed the wake of the boat with the patient indifference of creatures who had

seen a thousand returning daughters and felt nothing about any of them.

"First time to the island?" the man beside her asked. He had the wind-cured face of someone who had spent a life outdoors, and hands wrapped around a paper cup of tea gone lukewarm.

"No," Mara said. "Not first."

He waited, the way islanders do, for the rest of the sentence. When it didn't come, he nodded once and returned his gaze to the water, satisfied that he had learned exactly as much as he was meant to.

She had packed light. One suitcase, a garment bag with her only black dress, and a shoebox of her father's letters that she had not been able to leave behind and could not yet bring herself to open. The letters had arrived over the years in erratic bursts — three in a single month, then silence for a year, then one long rambling account of a summer storm that had taken the roof off the boathouse. She had read each one exactly once, filed it, and gone on with her life in the city, where the ocean was a color you saw in advertisements and nothing else.

Now her father was dead, and the letters were the only voice of his she had left, and she still could not open the box.

The ferry's engine changed pitch as it began its approach. Through the salt-fogged window, the island resolved itself slowly: first the dark line of the headland, then the white cluster of the harbor town, then, at last, standing apart from everything else on its spit of black rock, the lighthouse. It had not been lit in three years. She had known that. She had not expected it to look so much like a closed eye.

The house smelled of him. That was the first thing. Not unpleasantly — there was no rot, no neglect, because Mrs. Callahan from the post office had been coming twice a week to air the rooms and water the one stubborn geranium on the win-

dowsill — but there was still tobacco in the curtains and salt in the floorboards and something else, some particular chemistry of wool sweaters and boiled tea and old paper, that could only ever be one man's smell, and it hit her before she had even set down her suitcase.

She stood in the front hall for a long moment.

"You'll want the fire lit," said Mrs. Callahan, who had walked up from the harbor to meet the ferry and had talked the entire way about nothing in particular, filling the silence the way islanders fill silence, generously, as a kindness. "It gets into the walls this time of year. Damp. Your father always said this house was built by a man who hated warmth."

"He said that to me too," Mara said. "More than once."

"Well. He wasn't wrong." Mrs. Callahan busied herself with the kettle, moving through the kitchen with the ease of someone who had spent two years learning its drawers and shelves in another woman's absence. "I kept the accounts up to date. They're in the drawer under the telephone. And the solicitor rang twice — he'll want you to call him back before Thursday, something about the boathouse deed."

"Thank you," Mara said, and meant it, and could not think of anything else to add.

Mrs. Callahan looked at her for a moment with an expression that held no pity, which Mara was grateful for, only a kind of plain recognition. "He talked about you," she said. "More than you'd think. Not in a sad way. Just — you'd come up, in conversation. Like weather."

Mara did not trust her voice, so she nodded, and turned to look out at the darkening water instead.

Chapter Two

What the Letters Said

She opened the box on the third night.

It had rained all day, the kind of steady gray rain that made the whole island feel underwater, and she had spent the hours going through drawers and cupboards with the systematic, slightly frantic energy of a woman trying to outrun her own grief through sheer administrative effort. She had found his reading glasses in four different rooms. She had found a drawer entirely devoted to broken watches, none of which, as far as she could tell, he had ever intended to fix. She had found, tucked behind a stack of nautical charts, a photograph of her mother

that she had never seen before, laughing at something outside the frame, young in a way Mara had never known her to be. By nine o'clock there was nothing left to sort but the letters, and no more excuses left to make.

She made tea first. She sat by the fire first. She rearranged the cushions on the settee, unnecessarily, first. Then she lifted the lid of the shoebox and drew out the first envelope, and there was his handwriting, small and slanted and utterly unmistakable, and something in her chest simply gave way, quietly, the way a shelf gives way under too many years of books.

Dear Mara, the first one began. *The gulls have started nesting early again this year, which your grandmother always said meant a mild winter, though I've never once seen the theory confirmed and I've been watching gulls for sixty years. I hope the city is treating you fairly. I hope you are sleeping enough. I know you will say you are.*

She read that one twice. Then she made herself go on, because she understood, suddenly and with total clarity, that if she stopped now she would never come back to it, and the letters would sit in their box for another eleven years, or twenty, or forever.

Some of the letters were long, spilling over two and three pages, full of island gossip and weather reports and small grievances against the ferry company. Others were only a few lines, written, she suspected, in the last exhausted minutes before sleep. One, from the spring she had turned thirty, said only: *Thinking of you today. No particular reason. Fathers don't always need one. — Da.*

She read for three hours. She read about the winter the harbor froze at its edges for the first time in memory. She read about a young lighthouse keeper named Fitch who had taken over the light after decommissioning made the position obsolete in every practical sense but who kept it running anyway,

out of what her father called "a stubbornness bordering on devotion," until the funding was finally cut for good and the light went dark. She read about a stray dog he had fed all one summer and never named because, he wrote, *naming it would have meant admitting I wanted it to stay, and I did not think that was fair to either of us.*

And in nearly every letter, somewhere, a version of the same sentence: *I understand why you don't come back. I want you to know that. I understand, and it doesn't change the wanting.*

By the time she reached the last envelope — postmarked six weeks before he died, the handwriting noticeably less steady than in years past — she was crying in the unglamorous, unstoppable way that people cry when the grief has been waiting a long time for permission.

Dear Mara, the last letter said. *I won't pretend I don't know what the doctor's face meant, even if he wouldn't say the number out loud. I'm not writing this to frighten you or to ask you for anything you're not ready to give. I only want to say: the light doesn't need to burn every night to still be a lighthouse. Some nights it just needs to still be standing. I think that's true of people too. I think it might be true of us. Come when you can. Don't come if you can't. Either way, you were never the dark part of this, love. You were always the light bit, even from a distance. — Da.*

She sat with that one for a long time after the fire had gone down to embers.

Chapter Three

The Boathouse

Morning came clean and hard-edged, the rain scoured out of the sky overnight, and Mara walked down to the boathouse before she had properly decided to.

The door stuck the way it always had, swollen with damp along the bottom edge, and she had to lean her shoulder into it the way her father had taught her when she was nine years old and furious that a door could defeat her. It gave all at once, the way it always had too, so that she stumbled half a step into the dim, sawdust-smelling interior and had to catch herself against the workbench.

Nothing had changed. That was the strange part. The tools hung in their outlines on the pegboard, exactly as he'd always

kept them, a silhouette of each wrench and chisel painted in fading white so that any tool's absence would announce itself immediately. The old skiff sat up on its trestles, half-sanded, paint scraped back to raw wood along one flank as though he had started a restoration and then simply stopped, mid-stroke, and never come back to finish it.

She ran her hand along the hull. The wood was cool and slightly rough, work interrupted rather than abandoned. She wondered how long ago he had put the sander down. She wondered if he had known, even then, that this particular task would outlive him.

"You'll be wanting to sell her, I expect."

Mara turned. Fitch — she recognized him from the letters before she recognized his face, which felt like a strange kind of magic, meeting someone she had already met in paper and ink — stood in the doorway with the light behind him, a lean man in his fifties with a beard gone mostly gray and eyes the pale blue of sea glass.

"I don't know yet," Mara said. "I don't know what I'm doing with any of it yet."

"No shame in that." He came in without being invited, in the way of a man who had clearly been coming in and out of this particular boathouse for years and saw no reason to change the habit now. He ran a thumb along the hull's unfinished flank, the same gesture Mara had just made, and something about the coincidence of it undid a small knot in her chest. "He was going to take her out again in the spring. Said it was time she saw water instead of sawdust."

"Did you know him well?"

Fitch considered the question as though it deserved real consideration, which, Mara understood, most islanders' questions did, because there was so little to distract from a question here, no traffic and no noise, just the sea and the weather and

the long unhurried business of actually thinking about what was asked of you.

"I knew him thirty years," he said finally. "Knew him well enough to know he missed you every single day and would rather have swallowed his own tongue than say so to your face, for fear it would sound like an accusation."

Mara looked down at the half-sanded hull. "It would have sounded like one. A little."

"Aye," Fitch agreed, without apology. "Probably would have. Truth mostly does."

They talked for an hour, there in the cold boathouse light, about nothing and everything — about the price of diesel and the state of the harbor wall and, eventually, carefully, about her father's last months, which had been, Fitch said, quieter than anyone expected, and not unhappy.

"He sat up at the light most evenings," Fitch said. "Even dark as it was. Said the view didn't need electricity."

"Can I ask you something?"

"You can ask."

"Do you think he forgave me? For staying away so long?"

Fitch was quiet for a moment, turning a wood chisel over in his weathered hands as though weighing his answer's exact grain.

"I don't think there was ever anything to forgive," he said at last. "I think there was only ever something to miss. Those aren't the same thing, though people mix them up something fierce."

Mara found she had no answer for that, so she simply stood in the sawdust light and let the words settle, the way you let cold water settle before you decide whether you're brave enough to swim in it.

Chapter Four

The Light

She climbed the lighthouse on her last full day on the island, up the hundred and forty-two spiral steps her father had counted for her when she was six and never let her forget, past the old keeper's room with its brass fittings gone dull with disuse, up into the lamp room itself, where the great lens sat dark and silent and enormous, a cathedral of glass built for a single purpose it no longer served.

The view from the gallery took what little breath the climb had left her. The island spread out below in miniature — the harbor, the huddled roofs of the town, the pale ribbon of road, the boathouse with its patient unfinished skiff — and beyond all of it, the sea, going on and on to a horizon with no appar-

ent edge, the water catching the low winter sun in a thousand small, restless mirrors.

She stood there a long time.

"It's something, isn't it," said a voice behind her — Fitch again, though she hadn't heard him climb the stairs, or perhaps she had simply been too far inside her own head to notice.

"He wrote to me about this view," she said. "More than once. I don't think I ever really pictured it. Not properly."

"Words rarely do it justice. That's not an insult to your father's letters. It's just the nature of the thing." Fitch came to stand beside her at the rail, and for a while neither of them spoke, content to let the wind and the gulls fill the silence in the way that only wind and gulls can.

"I keep thinking," Mara said eventually, "that I should feel more resolved than I do. Like grief is supposed to end somewhere. Some ceremony, some door you walk through, and then it's finished."

"It's not a door," Fitch said. "It's a tide. Goes out, comes back in. Different every time, and never entirely gone." He glanced sideways at her. "Your father used to say something like that about you, actually. That missing you came and went the way the tide does. Some days he barely noticed it. Some days it took the whole beach."

Mara felt her eyes sting and did not try to stop it this time. There was no one here to perform composure for, and the wind would take the tears before they'd even properly fallen.

"I want to fix the light," she said, surprising herself with the sentence as it left her mouth. "Not — not for any practical reason. I know it doesn't need to guide ships anymore. I know that. But I want it lit. Even once. I think I need to see it lit." Fitch smiled, the first real smile she'd seen from him, something that reached all the way up into the sea-glass blue of his eyes.

"Well," he said. "I still remember how the old mechanism

works. And I expect between the two of us, we could manage the wiring by nightfall."

They worked through the afternoon and into the failing light, Fitch directing and Mara following, her hands remembering more than she expected them to — the particular twist of a fitting, the weight of a tool passed hand to hand without needing to look up. It was, she realized somewhere in the third hour, the first time in eleven years she had done anything with her father's tools, and her body seemed to know things her mind had let go of.

Darkness came the way it always comes to islands in winter: quickly, completely, and without apology.

At six minutes past five, the great lens caught its first current in three years, and the light came up slowly, a low golden glow gathering itself into brilliance, and then swept outward across the water in its old familiar rhythm — sweep, dark, sweep, dark — patient and enormous and entirely unnecessary, and entirely, achingly right.

Mara stood at the gallery rail and watched it turn.

"There she is," Fitch said quietly, beside her.

"There she is," Mara agreed, and found that for the first time since the ferry had brought her across the gray water, she was not thinking about leaving.

Chapter Five

The Ferry, Again

She did leave, eventually — there were things in the city that could not simply be abandoned, a job, a lease, a life built carefully over eleven years that could not be unbuilt in a single week of grief and lighthouse mechanics — but she left differently than she had arrived.

She left the light burning. She left Fitch a set of keys and a promise to split whatever modest electric bill the old mechanism might generate, an arrangement he accepted with the particular gravity islanders bring to practical matters and dismiss for anything sentimental. She left the boathouse skiff exactly as it was, half-sanded, because she had decided, somewhere in the last few days, that she would come back in the spring to finish

it herself, and there was a comfort in leaving a thing undone on purpose, a kind of promise made in wood and unfinished paint rather than words.

She took the shoebox of letters with her. She had read every one by then, twice through in places, and she suspected she would read them all again many times over the coming years, the way you return to a photograph not to see something new in it but to feel, again, the particular weight of what it holds.

The ferry back to the mainland ran at eight in the morning, and this time she did not miss it.

"You'll come back," Mrs. Callahan said at the dock, not quite a question.

"In the spring," Mara said. "There's a boat that needs finishing."

Mrs. Callahan nodded, satisfied, and did not ask further, because on the island, a stated intention was treated as something close to a fact, a thing you could set your calendar by.

The boat pulled away from the harbor into a morning the color of pale tin, gulls wheeling overhead with their same patient indifference, the same wake spreading white behind the stern. Mara stood at the rail rather than sitting inside, wanting the cold, wanting the salt on her face, wanting to watch the island recede rather than simply arrive somewhere else without noticing the leaving.

The lighthouse held her gaze the longest. Even in daylight, even unlit as it necessarily was until the coming evening, it no longer looked like a closed eye. It looked, she thought, like something merely resting. Like something that had simply been waiting, all this time, for someone to remember it could still be lit.

She did not cry this time. She only watched, until the black rock and the white tower and the huddled roofs of the harbor town folded themselves into the gray horizon and were gone, and the ferry turned its nose toward the mainland, toward the ordinary unremarkable business of a life that would, she now

understood, always have this particular tide running underneath it — going out, coming back in, never entirely gone. *Some nights it just needs to still be standing,* she thought, and found, at last, that she believed it.