

CHAPTER ONE

Juliet

At a brief pause in the rain, Martin, my mother, and I wedge ourselves into Duncan's banged-up, dark green F-150 pickup. Its oversized tires suspend the cab above the floodwaters, making it possible to ferry us to the boat.

"It's now or never," says Duncan, wading through knee-deep water in his black rubber boots, scooping my mother's dog, Pepper, into his arms and placing her on my mother's lap.

We pull away from the indigo beach house on stilts, unmooring ourselves from its vanishing stability. The marsh on either side swelled overnight and merged with the Gulf, swilling tobacco-brown water into our path, disfiguring the road, and washing away the last bit of serenity that has shined so hard on this island.

"What's going on, Duncan?" My mother asks as the truck lurches over submerged potholes.

"A whole lot of water."

"I see that. From where, though?"

Duncan has nothing to say as the truck bounces us through bloated lagoons that spill across sugar-white sands, leaching into the clear emerald waters of this central stretch of the Florida Panhandle.

Somehow, we make it to the dock. We get out of the truck with skepticism. Even Pepper makes a few false starts. My mother walks over saturated gravel, steps cautiously onto sodden, slippery wooden boards at the water's edge, and looks down at the roiling harbor that spits at her gray rain boots. With her hands on her hips, she pauses and turns toward the truck.

"No need to grab my bags, Dunc," she calls to him.

"Don't do something stupid," I warn her as the rain picks up again.

"I'm alone here most of the year anyway, with Duncan, Karl, Gypsy, and the doctor. Don't tell me what to do."

"The water is rising," I shout through drizzle as Martin and Duncan head down the ramp to the boat, their arms full of luggage, leaving me and my mother on the upper wharf.

She smiles, grasps both my hands, and looks into my eyes with a selfless resolution that marks the beginning of our separation.

"As with the phones, Juliet, and so much else, no one really knows anymore."

"I'm not crossing without you."

"You need to go home to your children." She smiles again, her heavy eyelids straining to convey some cheer. "I'll be fine. The waters have risen before, and then they recede."

"This is different," I protest, my voice rising like an irritable adolescent, while Martin watches us from the flooded dock sinking in the swollen bay that's somehow supposed to collaborate with Karl's boat and get us over to the mainland. "This is madness. I'm not leaving you."

My mother's bemused laugh, her sudden joy under the circumstances, paralyzes me. I stare at her as she puts one hand on the sopping wooden railing and, with the other, waves to Karl, the boat captain, as though she's simply picking up a delivery of fresh Gulf shrimp, which she does on Saturday nights, or her mail, on Wednesday mornings.

Martin walks back up the ramp toward us in his determined way, oblivious to the flooded, slippery wood under his rain boots, arms swinging industriously, his steadfast gaze on my every movement. His drenched brown curls, usually cropped, have grown unruly from days of uncertainty on this island he fled to on a whim. As he approaches, I can see the Daltons sitting on the two seats under the awning of the cabin cruiser, glaring impatiently at us. Karl, at the helm, waves for me to hurry. Martin reaches for my elbow to pull me toward the boat. But my mother gets to me first, with a quick embrace.

“Godspeed,” she whispers. “Don’t look so worried. Duncan will take care of me.”

From the bobbing boat, through the spray that splashes my rain boots and soaks my jeans, I watch her practical denim, yellow Gore-Tex, and red bandana fade into the fog. Her dog, Pepper, disappears against the shoreline, and the rain begins to beat against the fiberglass boat and canvas awning like bored fingertips on a desktop.

The Daltons have taken the two seats in the cabin behind Karl, so Martin and I stand to their left. We hold tight to a metal bar screwed into the bulkhead as the boat surges forward, soars through the air, and slams back against the white caps. The sonar isn’t working. Karl squints as he strains to see through the mottled glass and overgrown strands of his damp blond bangs that have fallen over his brow.

“I got this,” he says to no one in particular, rage in his rural-southern drawl, his teeth grinding.

Looking over my shoulder at the shore again, I fight back nausea. I can’t spot my mother’s red bandanna, can’t catch my breath. Dog Island is just a cottony thread behind us now, the distance between me and my mother an expanding chasm. And because of what happened a few days ago with the pounding rain and swells off the Gulf that swallowed the base of the indigo beach house, inundating the shore, reaching Tallahassee, and pushing Martin south to Carrabelle and across the bay, I imagine that Karl won’t make this journey again for a long time.