

# *One*

# AUGUST

THERE WERE TALES THAT only the island knew. Ones that had never been told. I knew, because I was one of them.

I stood at the bow of the ferry as Saoirse emerged from the mist like a sleeping giant tucked into the cold waters. The biting wind had numbed my fingers clutched around the railing and they tightened as I swallowed. I'd imagined that moment a thousand times, even on days that I wasn't completely convinced the island had ever existed. But there it was, as real as the skin that covered my bones.

I tucked my hands into the pockets of my jacket, turning my back to the sight of it. As if that would somehow erase all the darkness that had happened there. The last time I'd stood on the deck of that ferry, I was eighteen years old, and instead of watching it grow bigger in the distance, I'd watched it disappear, along with the life I'd lived there. My mother had kept her face turned away from me just enough to hide the tears striping her reddened cheeks, but I could feel in the center of my chest the words she wasn't saying. That I'd fucked everything up. And that deep down, she would never forgive me for it.

My eyes dropped heavily to the pack at my feet, where the smooth emerald face of the urn was visible through the cinched opening. Even in those final days, she'd never spoken a word of any of it. We swore we'd never go back to Saoirse, and we hadn't. That was one of many promises we'd kept. So why, after all these years, had she broken it?

The only answer to that question was one I couldn't stomach.

"Sir?" The voice was half-drowned in the wind pouring over the deck and I blinked, squinting against the blinding morning light. A woman buttoned up in the heavy nylon coat that bore the emblem of the ferry charter stood before me, hand extended and waiting. "Your ticket?"

"Oh, sorry." I reached into the bag slung over my shoulder, rooting around until I found it.

Her hand brushed mine as she took the ticket, reading the stamp that marked the date and time.

"Headed home?" Her pink nose stuck out from over the collar of the coat, her voice muffled.

The word was like ice in my throat. *Home*.

"What?" I stiffened, searching her face for any hint of recognition. But she was several years younger than I was, probably more. If she was from Saoirse, she wouldn't know my face. She definitely wouldn't know my name—not the one on the ticket.

"Sorry, don't mean to pry. It's just..." She handed it back to me. "It's not a return ticket. Don't see many of those on this ferry."

I cleared my throat, slipping the paper into my pocket. "I'm just visiting."

The island wasn't home, even if it once had been. And she was right. No one came to Saoirse to stay.

Though her mouth wasn't visible behind the scarf, I could see the frown in her eyes and the look edged too close to suspicion. I'd been given that look many times before.

"Well"—her gaze trailed over my jacket and down to my boots before snapping back up to my face—"enjoy your trip." There was a stiff uneasiness in the way she stepped around me, following the railing down the deck.

Beyond her, the island was now a sharp figure against the sky. A pair of white gulls glided over jagged black cliffs, catching the freezing wind that had carved the land into the shape of hungry teeth. It didn't matter how many years had passed, the memories hadn't faded.

I'd grown up being told that the people on the mainland were different from us, but living among them was the first time I really understood it. Mom had gotten better through the years at blending in and appearing at first glance like other mothers. But she still spent the equinox in the woods and the solstice at the sea. She still whispered old words over her teacups and I'd caught her muttering a curse as we passed the front door of our neighbor's house more than once.

It was clear almost as soon as we left Saoirse that she didn't want to talk about the island. That those years would be locked away in some secret place we pretended didn't exist. It wasn't the first time I'd broken my mother's heart. It wasn't the last, either.

In a blink, a single moment, every summer in the orchard, every storm over the dark sea, every night in the fishing cabin was entombed inside me like a body beneath a shroud, sealed away from the sunlight. It was for that very reason that I hadn't believed it when I read the handwritten letter folded into the will, just days after I watched my mother take her last breath.

After so many years of staying away, of never speaking of the place, she'd parted this world with only one wish—that her ashes be buried on Saoirse Island.

It had taken me four months to actually book a flight to Seattle so I could make good on her request. I'd closed the window shade as we landed, my heart in my throat. I didn't want to see the listless chain of black islands in the distance or the silvery blue of the water that only existed in the Sound. There were things that the taste of the salt-laced wind resurrected, whether I wanted it to or not, and I was already dreading the months or years it would take to put those memories back to bed.

My phone buzzed beneath my jacket and I pulled it from my back pocket, squinting as I read Eric's name on the screen. I let out a heavy exhale before I picked up my pack, hauling it onto one shoulder. I tapped to answer.

"Hey."

"You make it?"

I pushed through the doors to the ferry's linoleum-floored cabin, where green bucket seats were set in fixed rows. Behind the counter in the corner, a short man with a stained white apron draped over a thick fleece stood awkwardly, watching me over a stainless-steel coffee maker.

"Just about." I ducked low to glance out the hazy window, where the sunlight was a smear of white on the scratched glass.

"Well, I got your message. All you're really looking for is any important paperwork that might have been left there. You'll need the deed to the house in order to sell it. Titles, marriage licenses, bank accounts, whatever. And we need to get someone local to handle the sale unless you want to get stuck going back and forth to deal with all of this." Eric's gruff voice on the other end of the line was a tightly pulled tether between this world and another—my simple life in Portland and my less than simple history on Saoirse. "Any other loose ends there?"

I bit down, following the stark outline of the island with my eyes until it disappeared into the sea. There were a hundred different ones I could think of, but only one I gave a shit about.

"No. The orchard was taken care of in Henry's will." I answered, my voice catching just slightly on my grandfather's name. I hadn't spoken it in years. "It's just the house. Maybe a few pieces of old farm equipment left on the property or something."

"When do you have to be back to class?"

Class. I hadn't thought about my classroom on campus for weeks, and the view of the orange-hued wooden risers in the light streaming through the tall arched windows made me feel even farther away. "Not until next semester. I took a leave to take care of my mom."

"That's right." His tone shifted just slightly. "Well, get all of this sorted and then get the hell out of there."

"That's the plan." I breathed, eyeing the windblown faces that filled the deck outside. It was almost the end of the season, but there were still dozens of tourists on the early ferry, headed for the orchard. "And Eric?"

"Yeah?"

I lowered my voice. "Thanks for your help with all of this."

“Pretty handy when your college roommate turns out to be a lawyer.” He half laughed. “Anyway, I’m sure I owe you for one thing or another.”

But he wasn’t just a college roommate. He was a friend. Maybe the only one I had. He was also the only person I’d ever told about Saoirse Island, even if I’d never uttered a word about what happened there. “I mean it. Thanks.”

“You can buy me a beer when you get back.” He paused. “How’s that?”

“Sure thing.” The door opened again as I leaned into it, and I swallowed hard when I spotted the tipping masts of the boats in the harbor. “Better go. I’ll probably lose service any minute.”

“See you next week.”

“Bye.”

The ferry horn rang out as I hung up, and I pushed back out onto the deck. Below, the bow of the ship was carving through the dark blue sea, churning up a splitting trail of white foam on either side of the vessel.

I wanted to hate my mother in that moment, as I felt the deep grow shallower, the island creeping closer. I wanted to be angry or think her selfish for sending me back here. But I owed her this. After everything, the very least I owed her was this.

A few days, and then I was gone. I could turn my back on the island like I had fourteen years ago. But this time, I would never go back. I’d lived enough years now to know that there were some ghosts that haunted you forever.

Saoirse had secrets, yes. But so did we.

# *Two*

# EMERY

I DON'T KNOW WHEN I started sneaking out of Dutch Boden's bed in the mornings. It was just one of those unspoken rules, drawn like a thick black line around the edges of my life.

A circle of sunlight pooled on my shoulder as the sun rose behind the trees. Through the thin linen curtain, I could see the pale mist that covered the island in a heavy autumn silence. Beside me, Dutch slept soundly. The breath dragged in the back of his throat, the smell of him filling the room with the familiar scent of cedar smoke. Each time I tasted it on my tongue, it soured with the memory of the night before.

The argument had started in the kitchen, drowned in three glasses of wine, and cast in the light of the fire that had gone cold hours ago. But I'd known Dutch long enough to know how to end our fights.

I wrapped my arms around my bare body beneath the quilts, watching the early light spin his wiry blond hair into threads of gold. The angle of his chin had sharpened in the years since we were kids, the freckled skin of his face rough from the sun and salty winds. But there was a part of him who was still that skinny, shirtless boy I'd grown up with, and maybe that was the problem.

The clock on the bedside table ticked softly, the long hand creeping its way along the dial. In another eight minutes, Dutch's alarm would go off, waking him for an early morning at the orchard, but I'd be gone before he opened his eyes. Like always.

I let one bare foot slip from beneath the quilt and slowly sat up, careful not to make a sound. The branches of the spruce outside tapped against the window as it swayed in the wind, and I watched my own reflection take shape on the glass.

That October had been one of whispers. The eyes of people in town had been drifting to the woods more and more, where not a single tree had taken the change of seasons. The long summer stretched far past its time, and though the cold rains had returned to Puget Sound, the island was still as green as July. It was strange, even for Saoirse.

Dutch didn't stir as I stepped across the old floorboards, picking up my clothes where I'd dropped them in the middle of the night. I braided my hair over my shoulder and shrugged on the soft flannel, buttoning it up to my neck before I pulled on my boots. The hinges only faintly creaked as I let the door swing open and slipped out onto the porch.

Up the hill, Nixie Thomas's house sat shrouded in the trees beyond a fenced patch of farmland. The windows were dark, the old truck gone, and I was glad I'd missed her. Her watchful eye had narrowed in the years since my mother died. So had her hearing, it seemed.

I pulled my jacket tight around me before sliding my hands into the deep pockets. The old dirt road that led to town was crowded on both sides by towering evergreens that held the island in a muted silence even when the sea was stirring with a storm.

My footsteps beat almost in time with the faint echo of the harbor bell that wove through the trees, and a sliver of sunlight glared on the face of my watch as I checked the time.

“Shit.” I breathed.

In a matter of minutes, the ferry would arrive, filling the island with the tourists that came in droves this time of year to go apple picking at Salt Orchards. When their canvas totes were filled, they'd wander through the town's shops and end up at my father's pub for a glass of mulled wine or frothy beer while they waited for the last boat.

A few more days, and the ferries would stop. The orchard would be closed for the winter, and this year, it couldn't come soon enough.

The sharp snap of a limb made my steps slow, and I looked up to where a flash of something skittered ahead, disappearing around the bend in the road. A familiar prick crawled over my skin, and I knew that feeling—like a sudden fever.

When I was a child, the island's whispers had been like the sound of my mother humming to herself as she crouched in the garden, or the familiar groan of waves crashing on the rocky shore. But I'd learned a long time ago that sometimes they brought unwelcome fates.

I took the bend slowly, staying close to the shoulder of the road, but stopped mid-stride when I saw it. Beyond the grove of redwoods, the leaves of a two-hundred-year-old hickory tree had turned gold in the night. All at once.

The ancient creature glimmered like a writhing flame in the fog, every leaf painted in the saturated yellow that usually colored the island in autumn. It stood like a blazing bonfire among the towering pines.

My hands tightened around the strap of my bag as I took the last few steps to stand beneath it. Nestled on one of the lowest branches, a starling sat unmoving, its head cocked to one side. The shimmer of purple and green glistened on its feathers, the bright white flecking encircling its neck like a collar.

The starlings were late, just like the trees. By September, the birds made their way south, but this year, they'd stayed. The bird watched me in a long silence, black eyes like drops of ink, before it suddenly jumped from the branch and took flight, disappearing.

A rush of cold wind picked up the strands of loose hair around my face and I trembled, staring up into the branches. Not one flaxen leaf had fallen, but the sound of them rustling was a quiet murmur. Some incantation that I couldn't quite hear.

Down the hill, the town was settled into the fog that filled the lowlands. Only the white steeple of the chapel was visible, poking up through the mist like a reed in a pond. My eyes narrowed, watching the mist ripple over an undercurrent of reds and ambers moving beneath it. In another moment, it began to clear, and I realized my fingernails were biting into my palm.

The pointed leaves of the maple trees along Main Street shook on their branches, every one of them painted the color of blood. Nearly six weeks late, and with no warning at all, every tree on Saoirse had turned in a single night.

I knew better than to dismiss such things. We all did. It was the time of year when the veil between worlds was thin, and in that moment, I could feel the tingle of the Otherworld tiptoeing lightly up my spine.

The harbor bell rang out again, signaling the ferry to port, and I finally started down the hill. I picked up my pace, resisting the urge to look back over my shoulder, and the road eventually gave way to the uneven cobblestones of Main Street. The buildings were painted in the same shades of Puget Sound, blues and greens that melted together in the light. They were topped in moss-covered roofs, the glass of their single-pane windows catching the first bits of light as I passed.

I tucked a strand of unwieldy hair behind my ear, reaching into my pocket for the heavy iron key. The letters on the handprinted sign that hung over the walk were faded, their faces worn smooth by the sea winds.

*BLACKWOOD'S TEA SHOPPE  
HERBAL TONICS & TEA LEAF READINGS*

When I saw who stood beneath it, I groaned, stopping at the bottom of the uneven stone steps.

Nixie was nestled into the eave beside the door, a ghost-white pumpkin covered in a blanket of barnacle-like warts propped on her hip. My favorite kind.

Her overalls were two sizes too big and the haphazard bun pinned on top of her head was unraveling.

“You see them trees?” She lifted one eyebrow.

I followed her gaze to the sour gum tree across the street. It was wrapped in a brilliant amber cloak, its reflection illuminated in the windows beside me. Like the hickory on the hill, not even one leaf had yet to touch the ground.

“I saw them,” I answered, my mouth twisting to one side.

When her eyes finally landed on me, they held the look of an impending interrogation. Nixie wasn’t my aunt by blood, but she’d been my mother and father’s best friend since they were all kids. And to my knowledge, I’d never won an argument with her.

“Turned all in one night. Just like that. Bit of a coincidence, don’t you think?” she rasped.

We both knew it was anything but. I’d been taught from a young age how to read the omens, the way children on the mainland were taught their letters and numbers. A butterfly entering the house through a window. Spotting an owl in the daylight. The thin glow of a halo that sometimes circled the moon in winter.

My grandmother Albertine would stand over me as I perched myself on the stool in her kitchen, stirring a pot of bubbling elderberries with a wooden spoon. The deep tenor of her voice still echoed within me. But I’d also been taught that there are some premonitions that stay neatly folded beneath time, only visible when looking back. I’d seen my fair share of those as well.

I came up the steps and fit the end of the key into the lock. It took three tries and a push with my shoulder to shift the bolt free, and the door swung open. The long-lived incense of lavender and sage came rolling out, breathing to life a thousand memories, no matter how many times I smelled it.

Pale light streamed through the windows of the shop, illuminating diagonal beams of dust in the darkness, and I slipped through them as I went to the rusted wall hook to hang my bag. Bundles of wildcrafted herbs dangled from the rafters and shelves lined with neat rows of brown paper bags were stacked against the walls, reaching all the way up to the ceiling.

Handwritten labels identified teas crafted for everything from anxiety to menstrual pains to relief from a sore throat. But it was the more mystical brews you couldn’t find on the mainland that most people crossed the water for on those dim autumn days. Recipes for infusions to draw love, conjure

luck, or beckon dreams were only a few of those that had filled the shop since its doors first opened in 1812.

Nixie shut the door behind her, finding the nearest corner of the counter to place the pumpkin. “I thought I should come check on you,” she said, breaking the awkward silence between us. We both knew why she was here.

“Check on me?”

I traded my jacket for a linen pinafore apron, busying my hands with the ties.

“After last night.” She raised her eyebrows, knowingly. “Hell, the whole island heard you two fighting, Em. Heard you making up, too.” She set a hand on one hip, waiting. But I wasn’t going to take the bait. “How many times are you going to make that boy ask you to marry him?”

“We are not having this conversation, Nixie,” I said firmly. As if that would put an end to it.

“I know you don’t want to hear it, but someone’s gotta say it.”

“You *have* said it. A hundred times.” The CLOSED sign hanging on the door rocked on its chain as I turned it to read OPEN.

“Then when are you going to start listening? One day he’ll stop asking.” Nixie lowered her voice, waiting for me to look at her.

I swallowed against a tight throat, remembering the way Dutch’s shoulders had pulled up as he stood at the sink the night before, every angle of him hardening. Nixie was right. One day, he’d get tired of asking me to move in. To marry him. To start a family. There’d be no more late nights by the fire in his cabin or weekends at the beach. The idea was as terrifying as it was relieving, and that was the worst part of all of this.

“We still on for tomorrow?” I said, changing the subject.

Nixie gave me an irritated look, finally relenting. “Yep.”

The words she wasn’t saying were clear in her eyes as she watched me. We weren’t finished with this conversation. We never would be, as long as I kept pretending that she couldn’t see right through me.

From the beginning, Nixie had never really liked the idea of me and Dutch. She hadn’t bothered to keep it to herself, either. But her real fear was

that after she was gone, like my mother, that I'd be left alone. I could feel her worry mounting by the week.

She leaned forward, giving me a rough kiss on the cheek. A peace offering.

The old brass bell on the door jingled as she pulled it open, but I didn't relax until she was down the steps and out of sight.

I peered up at the gray sky. It would be only minutes before the rain began to fall, but that wouldn't keep the ferry passengers away. Up the street, the low clouds drifted toward the woods, where I could still see the yellow hickory standing like a sentinel at the top of the hill. It vanished and then reappeared as the fog moved, like a candle flame flickering in the wind before it turned to smoke.

Across the shop, my shape moved over the old framed mirror. My blue eyes stared back at me, the left one aglow where the light caught the burst of brilliant green that painted a star in my iris. When I was little, my grandmother told me that it meant I was marked for something. That I was special somehow. But here I was, standing in my mother's shop, wearing her apron. I'd inherited an entire life. One I had once sworn I would never live.

I came around the crude worktable at the back of the shop and replaced the candles that had burned out before I'd finished the new batch of tea the previous night. The open page of *The Herbarium* still stared up at me from beside the row of amber glass jars.

There were two books that were passed down in the family: *The Herbarium* and *The Blackwood Book of Spells*. The book of spells was kept at my grandmother Albertine's, on the mantel above the fireplace. That would be its home until she departed this life, and then it would be given to me. But *The Herbarium* was kept in the shop.

The heavy, leather-bound book was a kind of diary where the Blackwood women recorded the recipes and herbal studies that had become a kind of textbook. The thick parchment pages were covered in botanical sketches along with handwritten notes that filled the margins. It was used by every

herbalist in the family, each one adding their research to it throughout their lifetime, though I had yet to contribute any of my own.

The tip of my finger ran down the page until I found where I'd left off.

I opened the jar of crushed roses first, sprinkling the paper-thin petals into the wide wooden bowl before me. The flower dust lifted into the air and I breathed it in until the perfumed scent of the summer blooms was thick in my lungs. I picked up the jar of shaved cinnamon bark next, giving the contents a gentle shake, and in that still moment between breaths, the air grew thin and brittle. I felt the crease at my brow deepen, my head tilting as I listened, and warmth bubbled under my skin again. Softly, but it was there.

The hollow silence stretched and pulled before a sudden crack shot through the shop and I jolted, knocking the bowl from the table. The jar slipped from my fingers, shattering at my feet, and the pink tissue petals blew across the wooden floorboards as a swift wind poured through the window, extinguishing every candle in one sweep.

I froze, my fingers clenched around the flat lid of the jar so tightly that I could feel its sharp rim cutting into the soft flesh of my hand. A trickle of hot blood dripped through my fingers.

On the other side of the shop, the window's glass was cracked in a split, jagged line. I held my breath, the faint sound of whispering lifting in the back of my mind as I took a hesitant step around the table. I could see bits of gold and crimson swirling in the air outside and I pressed my bleeding hand to my chest, where my heart was beating like a ritual drum.

All at once, the leaves had let go of the trees and were blowing down the street like a swarm of jewel-colored locusts. But it was when I looked down that the sounds of the woods seemed to race into the shop, filling the space between its walls with the cold of midwinter.

There, on the ground in front of the window, a starling lay dead. Its glossy wings were outstretched, the brilliant purples and greens shimmering and the bone-white flecking of its breast reflecting the light.

Sometimes the signs were subtle, like a fleeting shadow or an echo in the trees. Other times, the island wasn't gentle with her words.