

TIDEWATCHERS

By

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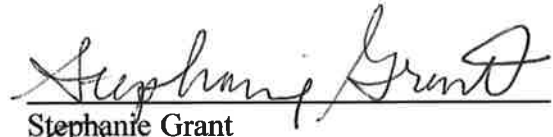
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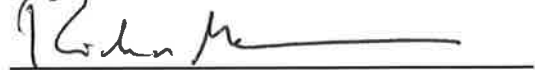
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For Laura

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ABSTRACT

Tidewatchers is an original work of fiction that explores those bonds of blood capable of enduring death. Set on an island in the tidewater region of Virginia, the novel follows the Loops, a family isolated first by their reputation and then by the death of Wavy Loop, the novel's twelve-year old narrator. What begins as a chronicle of Wavy's coming of age in a place on the verge of change becomes an examination of grief as the Loops mourn the life Wavy will never live and Wavy observes the lives she fears she has ruined with her death. Incorporating elements of the fantastic, *Tidewatchers* tells a story about adolescence, sisterhood, and loss; in doing so, it seeks to reveal the miraculous in what too often appears mundane: family.

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PROLOGUE

We were born thundershook. Our gran swore the house was thumping like a heart when the pair of us came sliding out. Me first, Gin second. One of the two piddling times I'd ever be before her, if you count me being dead first. See, islanders said and say babies born in thunderstorms end up woebegone or wild, and if Gin was a nor'easter, I was her calm before. If you want to listen to islanders. We Loops were never known to.

Good thing, too, because to hear islanders tell it, Loops were worse than trash—we were trash born of trash, too poor to ever leave the low dirt at the end of Mud Neck Road and too trash to even know we should. Which is funny, seeing as how out of the three hundred thirty two islanders on Rip's Island the day I died, I can't think of one who wasn't kin to trash or living more than a spit away from a stinking marsh. But islanders always need a kick-can, and we Loops were it. It wasn't our momma landing herself in trouble that got them going, but I'm betting it didn't help. Our bed was made long before Gin and I were a bad shine in our daddy's eye, on account of our gran, Ladye. Can't blame her keeping us down in Mud Neck, what those island hens said about her and Uncle Isadore.

Besides, Mud Neck suited us fine. If Rip's Island is a swampy little tadpole swimming up the Chesapeake, Mud Neck is the tip of its whipping tail. The home place stands as far from any other as our Great-Grand could have built it, but if you asked some islanders, I bet they'd tell you far wasn't far enough where Loops were concerned. But then, far on Rip's is never far. It's just four measly miles from Fosters Wharf at the island's western shore to the trickle of sandbars we call Hole in the Wall at its east, and a scant two miles thick at its thickest. Water on all sides, of course. There's Pounder's Bay to the west, the Narrows to the south, and the Chesapeake everywhere else. Mainlanders think water's water, but on Rip's it's just about everything. An islander talking land will tell you feet high before acres wide: Rip's cemetery, twelve feet, Rip's

Post, ten, and Mud Neck, four.

Loops know that someday the tide will swallow Mud Neck down, same way it has sandbars and beaches and dry dirt before.

Same way it has me.

Down in the muck, I can hear butterfish knocking my ribs. Currents slip under and over me, bloating what body I've got left with water and oyster milk and bad fish. Eelgrass halos my skull, my feet. Mud anchors my bones. When the tide goes it take little bits of me with it: hair and teeth and fingertips. I feed crabs, and skates. Islanders eat me. They swallow down scraps of me no longer mine—even Gin, chewing flounder and trout. If I could swallow, I'd drink the whole Bay dry. Then she'd find me. But corpses don't swallow. Me, I'm stuck, dead sunk.

Islanders said and say the only thing that's ever changed on Rip's is how near to drowning you are. And before the bridge, it was true.

CHAPTER 1

Islanders called it Nobody Bridge, on account of that's who wanted it.

In September of 1960, the same day Ladye made us blackberry fool for our thirteenth birthday, Dr. Mrs. Armistead got bored with touring her shiny white Lincoln up and down the same mainland roads. On June 25th, 1961 the Dr. Mrs. Armistead Bridge popped its shiny white gates and let her on over to try out ours. I guess money's all anything takes, and islanders said Armisteads had money like water has wet.

If Dr. Mrs. Armistead had bothered asking islanders if we wanted a bridge, we'd have told her, "Thanks, no," thinking to ourselves every mainlander Mr. Diggs' leaking ferry hauled over was already one mainlander too many. But she didn't ask, and on the day the bridge opened, she threw herself a parade.

"We're all going," Ladye told me, eyes flicking at me in the mirror on the back of the pantry door. I scraped my knife through the jelly center of my fried egg. Orange bled. "Where's Virginia got to?"

"Heck should I know," I muttered, forking the lacy white.

Ladye turned and hooked a curl behind my ear with her shiny fingernail. When I jerked my head away she said my name, low and scolding, and turned back to the mirror to check her lipstick.

"Lost at sea," I offered, watching her. "Circus. Dead."

"Circus I hope," Ladye mused, dabbing her mouth. "On the high trapeze. Reckon she'd be good at that." She pulled her red lips and squinted at her teeth. They looked fine from where I was sitting.

Out on the drive, Isadore's truck came rattling. "About time," Ladye sighed, smoothing

the bunching waistline of her dress flat. I stood to add my plate to the two-day stack in the basin. Ladye wasn't much for dishes. She pinched my elbow as I slid past her, headed for the front door. "Be a doll and check Virginia kept those shoes on her feet. Make this a nice family outing for once." I nodded and walked out the back.

Gin was crouched at the base of the steps, a whip of cordgrass in her hand and bare feet sunk in sandy mud. She teased a fiddler crab with the point of the reed, tapping its shell between the stalks of its gummy eyes. The crab waved its big claw, snapping the air.

I stooped to hook my fingers in the heels of the Keds my sister had kicked off soon as she stepped outside. "Ladye says you got to wear them."

"About time you and Ladye got done primping," Gin said, popping up. "This rate the thing'll be over before we get there." She reached for the shoes.

I clapped the rubber soles of the shoes together once, eyeing Gin as I handed them over. There was no accounting for it, my sister wanting to go. She hated dressing up much as our gran liked it, and from what islanders had been saying at Louise Callis's Post Office all week, the Armistead lady was putting on a real to-do, red ribbon cutting and all. Besides, what that bridge had to do with us I didn't have any idea. Some folks were near connipting over it changing things, but there was no use worrying about that down in Mud Neck. Any change Nobody Bridge got going would peter out a mile short of us.

Gin snatched the shoes from my hands, dropped them to the dirt, and wiped her palms against the skirt of the pressed cotton dress Ladye'd been up late hemming.

"You want to have to change for the ceremony?" I said.

"Scared what the mainlanders are gonna think, Gravy?" Gin laughed, stuffing her sandy toes into the Keds. As soon as her heels hit the soles, she was off and running around the house,

laces dragging behind. I ran to catch her, biting my lip. It was islanders' lashing tongues I worried about, but no point telling that to Gin.

Out front, the rust-bit Ford sat idling in the crushed oyster shells that Great-Grand had used to line the driveway, tires white with dust from the drive in. Ladye wasn't out yet; Isadore sat alone in the cab, big hand flat to the patchy door under his window. "Look nice," he mumbled as we ambled up, the corner of his mouth working a little when he saw Gin's feet. I knelt at her knees and grabbed her shoelaces, yanking them so tight she yelped.

"You coming?" I said, faking I thought he should.

Gin snorted. "Fat chance." Seeing as how the things Isadore liked least seemed to be talking, standing around, and crowds of people, she was probably right. Me, I was just hoping we'd avoid the hurrah's nest that came with Isadore and Ladye and Louise Callis all being in the same place. Just Ladye and Louise were bad enough.

"Up to her," Isadore said, bobbing his chin at the house.

The porch screen clattered and Ladye came swaying, a Lucky tucked in her red lips. She snapped a match from the book and lit the cigarette's tip. "Well get on then," she said, shooing us into the pickup.

Tell you one thing: Great-Gran named her daughter right. She was beautiful, with a meringue of creamy hair and a figure that got the squat island biddies walloping their husbands as she passed. Ladye had Dora young as Dora had us, and could still get the crabbing boys hooting and whistling with one, "Hello fellas," and did more often than you could call proper. She wasn't like any grandmother I knew. That's why we never called her Gran, and I guess why bony-faced Louise Callis hated her. That and Isadore.

Me, I was no Ladye, but I thought I was freckled and fair and just fine, bonier in the

wrists and bigger in the ears than Gin, who wouldn't have looked half-bad if she ever got a comb through her mop without snapping the teeth. Ladye said she was the spitting-picture of Dora. She never got to telling me whose face I had, which gave me a good enough idea, and we didn't talk about him.

Ladye slid into the Ford to sit next to Isadore and I followed, scooting across the seat to let Gin squeeze in. The dress Ladye had laid out for me—blue and white, like a china plate—rode up, and my thighs stuck and smarted on the leather seat. The door slammed; no Gin. I twisted and saw she'd planted her butt in the truck bed. Shooting Ladye a look, I rapped my knuckles on the glass. Gin grinned.

Ladye shrugged. "Wearing shoes at least," she said. "Now thank your Uncle Isadore."

I was pretty sure Isadore would rather no one made a fuss, but I muttered, "Thank you," at him anyway.

My uncle nodded, eyes front. He jiggled the key in the slot by the wheel and the truck shuddered. Shells crunched under the tires and let off a floury burst of oyster-dust, and off we went, bucking into the pot-holed treads of Mud Neck Road. On the other side of Ladye, Isadore's elbows were tucked so tight to his coveralls you'd have thought him armless. I tried to keep my knees up; I didn't want the seat leaving seam lines up the backs of my legs. My skin peeled off the cracking leather with a soft smack. I could hear Gin's butt thumping the truck bed.

All along the road, we passed old houses sunk in holly and gum: Spook Branch, Possumville, Shambleshack. Gin and I had named them, which seemed right to me. We'd been spending time inside their sagging walls since we were little, Gin leading and me scrambling behind. There were plenty of houses to choose from since, aside from our place and Isadore's, every house in Mud Neck was sitting boarded up empty or abandoned, and they'd stay that way.

Left-houses, we called them. You'd be a fool to think a Mud Neck left-house would ever sell, even Bric-a-brac Place, with its peeling "For Sale" sign stabbed crooked in its straw-choked yard.

Most people can't weather water. Tides creep up, dirt turns muddy, and they leave. Loops, we stay.

"Well dang me," Ladye said, aiming a red nail up the road. "I must be dreaming." By the time we'd rumbled to a crawl in front of Bric-a-brac Place, I'd already seen it: the roadside sign and its sad 'For Sale' were gone. A few clumps of sandy dirt marked where that ply had spent all these years selling what nobody wanted to buy.

"Must have gave up," I said.

Ladye bumped me with her hip. "Or could be we're getting neighbors!" she said, sing-songing 'neighbors' the same way she did our names on nights she'd got into the Cherry Heering. "Vir-gin-yuh!" she'd coo. "Wavy-Gravy!" Listening to her, I had a mind to ask what we'd want with neighbors, but I kept my mouth and watched the swaybacked roof of Bric-a-brac Place disappear behind the pines. Hollow House came next. I threw Gin an eye through the back window as we passed its brush-choked driveway; she bounced her brows.

At the corner of Mud Neck Road and Ferry Way, Isadore brought the pickup rumbling to a stop. He paused a breath, waiting on Ladye like she might say, "Come along," but she didn't, same as always. She just slid over as he climbed out the cab, patting his hand as it left the wheel. We watched him limp across the packed dirt of his yard and up the porch steps of his little house. Ladye kept waving at his back until the screen door swung shut. The frilly curtains Ladye had hemmed for his kitchen windows shuddered when the door closed.

I felt bad, Ladye not wanting him to come, but I got why.

See, Isadore wasn't our blood great-uncle and everybody knew it. He was a Dare, and Dares were rotgutters. But it was Loops that raised him. Ladye was just a little thing when her father heard that Arnold and Maisy Dare on Mad Calf Lane were fixing to liquor-drown and brought baby Isadore home to Mud Neck. So Isadore was an uncle far as we were concerned, no matter what Louise Callis and that bunch thought of Dares, or whispered about Isadore and Ladye being wrong with each other. The man only came by the Loop home place one or two nights out of seven, and Ladye would feed him crab cakes and they'd rock on the porch, her talking and sewing and him smoking and nodding. When he left, Ladye'd cluck her tongue and murmur, "That man," the same way she did now, jerking the stick between us.

The Ford jolted onto Ferry Way.

At The Softshell Diner, where talk had been a few islanders might be plunking down in their truckbeds to watch Dr. Mrs. Armistead's ribbon cutting, the parking lot was empty. The oil stink of Karwin Kidd's fryer pumped out the steel pipes sticking from the flat diner roof, and up the shore a ways, the slips at Foster's Wharf knocked with curving, salt-stained deadrises: the crabbing fleet was in. Seagulls swooped over the docks screaming for croaker guts.

"Guess we're early," Ladye said, forcing the stick into park. Gin was already skipping across the lot towards the shore; she'd been up and out of the truck bed before the wheels stopped turning. She stopped at the water's edge, fists to narrow hips, admiring the bridge like she'd built it.

There was no arguing: Dr. Mrs. Armistead had herself a bridge. Nobody sat over the glassy Narrows, flat as a dead flounder and near as ugly. It was bread mold green and low—nothing like the swooping, stringy bridges you saw in the travel ads in Ladye's glossies. There

was a little house stuck in its trestles, I guess so the new bridgekeeper could stay dry while he sat thumb-twiddling. Wasn't too often something taller than a deadrise came up the Narrows, and far as I could tell, all a bridgekeeper does is open a bridge and close it. I hadn't seen the thing work yet, but talk was the middle of Nobody could spin like a spoke on a barrow wheel.

Ladye sniffed the greasy air and grinned at me. "How about let's get some corncakes before those crabbers come and eat them all?"

"I ain't hungry." Last thing we needed was a scene, and that's what there'd be if Ladye Loop got to flirting with those boys with the whole island watching.

"Well I am," Ladye said, bending her penciled eyebrow. "So get hungry."

Gin picked a table by The Softshell Diner's big window—as good a place as any for us to sit and wait, bait in a glass pot. We'd come through Mr. Kidd's jangling door before he'd even flipped the penciled OPEN sign, but the man, of course, hadn't had a cross word to say. One smile from Ladye and Mr. Kidd ran his palms down his stained apron, slammed three mugs of coffee on the tabletop in front of us, and coughed, "Corncakes coming," as the galley doors swung shut behind him. Men let Ladye off easy. But women didn't, not if Louise Callis could help it.

Being the postmistress made Mrs. Callis about as big-news as you could get on Rip's. Made her chatty as an osprey, too. And Ladye Loop was her favorite breeze to shoot.

A few years back, Gin and I were sliding Ladye's monthly Butterick patterns from Box 188 when we heard Postmistress Callis tell Mrs. Irvin, the shopkeeper's wife, "it's not just Isadore Dare's meals Ladye Loop's fixing down in Mud Neck." The way Mrs. Callis said it was enough to tell me I shouldn't be repeating it, and enough to make Gin want to. She blabbed her big mouth over spoon bread that night and Isadore had to hide the Ford keys to stop Ladye from

driving straight over to the Callis house with her sewing scissors to “stick Louise Callis right in her bony bottom.” Gin laughed over that for weeks, wishing Isadore had let her. Me, I just worried myself silly over what they meant.

Gin emptied half the creamer into her coffee, sliding the rest my way before picking up the sugar. She knocked the dispenser’s bottom on the Formica tabletop and got a few rocks of sugar to slide into her mug. Ladye sipped her coffee black, made a face, and fished a Sweet’N Low out of her purse. My mug’s ceramic bottom came off the grease-sticky tabletop with a pop. The Softshell’s brew was so strong the milk hadn’t made a bit of brown out of its black.

“So how many, you girls think?” Ladye asked brightly. Gin’s spoon clinked circles in her cup. I rolled my eyes.

Sick of betting on tide lines, islanders had taken to betting on the bridge and how many cars would come rolling over it. Seemed like that was all anybody had been asking anybody for weeks, no matter if you were standing in Rip’s Post Office, Irvin’s General, or a dang field. It was guessing beans in a jar you couldn’t see, and about as useful if you asked me.

“I’m thinking thirty-one,” Ladye said, tapping her lips.

“You’re telling me there are thirty-one cars of people parked over there just itching to get over here?”

“Well, I don’t know, Wavy.” Ladye gave me a look. “Suppose it’s just a guess.”

“I say zero,” I muttered. The sizzle and scrape of corncakes flipping on Mr. Kidd’s skillet told me I better work up some kind of appetite.

Ladye sighed. “No harm in some fun.”

Gin was grinding sugar in her teeth, thinking hard. “How many cars leaving Rip’s, you reckon?” she asked.

I stared at her. “Leaving?”

“Easy now with the bridge, ain’t it?”

Mr. Kidd came carrying an armful of white plates. The corncakes came off Karwin’s galley skillet burnt-edged and lacy, but my stomach was twisted up inside me. I hadn’t thought about it, people leaving. Too busy wondering who all would come. Gin forked her whole stack at once and chomped a moon out of its side. I stacked up all the edges neat as layers in a birthday cake and cut circles to triangles. I chewed and chewed, lining up my teeth so they came together just so over and over. People go, I told myself. Loops stay.

By the time we’d scraped our plates white, watermen, reeking of crab and Bay-bottom, were piling into the diner. They shouted their bridge wagers and corncake orders over the kitchen doors. Islanders claimed Karwin Kidd had won The Softshell Diner in a wager on a flounder twenty years back, so everyone put their bets with him, tide or death, birth or bridge. When Ladye stood, I thought she might join them at the door, jostling blushing boys and hollering her thirty-one-car wager, but when the crabbers split a path for her, she only thanked Mr. Kidd and popped her purse to pay.

We left The Softshell for its lot. The heat had come in heavy and thick. Tar blistered from the blacktop and crackled under my Keds. Gin had already made it to the shade beneath the big loblolly pines at the Narrow’s edge. She was standing heron-legged in the sand, the toe of one shoe scraping at the heel of the other. Never waited, my sister; she just took off running, and it was hard telling if she cared we followed. I linked elbows with Ladye, but it was too late to steer her after Gin: Louise Callis’s plain tan Plymouth came rolling in past us, a line of cars in its wake. Mrs. Callis stepped out before us in a white Sunday dress so boxy you could be sure hadn’t come off Ladye’s Singer. She’d gotten herself a permanent, not that there was enough of

that straw hair to set. Galoris Sparrow, Francine Irvin, Viv Sadler, and Margaret Keeble, every one hatted and teetering in church heels, flocked around the postmistress.

Mrs. Callis's lips stretched over her teeth without parting. "Ladye," she said.

"Louise."

She aimed that tight smile at me, tilting her head. "And don't you clean up proper, Miss Gin?"

Down by the Narrows, Gin waded into the shallows beneath the loblolly pines, shoes tossed and streaky hair a burr. How anyone confused us I didn't have any idea. But before I could tell Mrs. Callis she had me wrong, she turned back to Ladye. "No Mr. Dare?" Louise's voice dropped for his surname, like she was saying a word she shouldn't.

"Busy busy," Ladye hummed. Her elbow was pinching mine. "Couldn't drag him away."

Mrs. Callis showed some teeth. "I'd think you'd never have to drag that man anywhere," she said, smiling wide. A giggle bust out of Viv Sadler's mouth and Ladye shot her a flaying look. Mrs. Sadler examined her fresh-shined shoes, mouth twitching.

"Nice to see you, Louise." Ladye's voice was tight.

"Ladye."

Islanders were pouring off Ferry Way now, a few in cars but most hoofing it. Ladye was leading me this time, but neck was so twisted around it looked near wrung. It was only when we'd staked our standing spot in the cool under one of the big loblollies at the lot's edge that Ladye gave up staring back at Louise Callis. She lit a Lucky and started blowing clean lines of smoke. I crossed my arms and nudged a sun-hot tar bubble with the toe of my Ked; it snapped. Gin was still overboard; dark eelgrass swirled around her knees as she walked through the smooth water, stalking softshells and having a hoot doing it, I was sure.

It took the bridge letting out a horn blast so loud I'd bet fiddler crabs in Mud Neck went to ground to bring Gin ashore. Ospreys swooped from their nests in the loblollies to fly in screaming rings over us. Gin stood next to me, new hem dripping a dark halo in the sand. I found myself holding my breath as, across the water, Nobody Bridge shuddered and started to turn. The center broke from the new roadway and spun like a spoke on its side, grinding. Either that County-hired keeper was blessed with a skipjack's sea legs or I was betting he'd gone green as the bridge under him. As the big gear under the bridge span turned, a waterway opened on either side. A Yorktown tallship would have no trouble getting through, not that you'd ever see one on the Narrows. Everyone in the lot started in on a ruckus that wasn't cheering and wasn't booing either; it was hollering for the sake of hollering. Ladye's palms pattered and the Lucky in her mouth bounced and smoked. Seemed to me people were awful excited over a bridge nobody wanted it in the first place. As the bridge began to roll back around, even Gin let out a big whoop.

When Nobody finally got back to being a bridge, there was nothing much to see. Dr. Mrs. Armistead was snipping the ribbon on the mainland side of the Narrows. I guess her bridge, her party. So the some-hundred islanders just stood on asphalt getting an earful of the shrieking fish-hawks. And after a time, the gates shivered and rose up.

"Here goes!" Ladye said. "Keep count, girls!"

Shiny cars and silver trailers started crossing the Narrows, honking all the way, and the islanders yelled out the count—"1, 2, 3, 4!"—as they kept right on coming, one after the other. Soon as the wheels of Dr. Mrs. Armistead's shiny white Lincoln hit the island side, I realized it was the first time in my whole fourteen years of life I'd ever seen a car I didn't know on Rip's dirt, from Mud Neck to Foster's Wharf.

“None leaving!” I shouted at Gin, feeling like I’d won a bet.

“No,” she said, “not yet.”

CHAPTER 2

“Wavy, you ain’t sleeping,” Gin said, and she was right. I could hear the chug of the deadrise fleet headed up the Narrows, Bay-bound, and that meant four o’clock, the hour late and early smacked. But with the drum of Gin’s heels against the headboard rattling my brain to oatmeal, I wasn’t about to sleep.

“You stop kicking and I might start,” I muttered, cracking my eyes in the hot dark. I could feel Gin sprawled beside me, head at the wrong end of the bed and big feet thumping nowhere miles up and down old pine. Dora died birthing us in this bed, but that didn’t stop my sister from putting her dirty soles all over it.

A floor below, Great-Granddaddy Loop’s clock bonged in the entry. I counted the tolls: 1, 2, 3, 4.

Gin planted both heels against the frame, bouncing my skull. “You know you’re not about to sleep with me gone so might as well admit it to your dang self and come along,” she told me. When I didn’t answer, she rolled herself onto my back with her hard belly to my spine, toes pinching my shins, and nose in my ear. “Wavy-Gravy,” she sang.

No point trying to sleep. I tipped Gin off me and kicked the sweaty sheet down.

Outside, the baby swallows were already cheeping in the porch eaves while their mommas went swooping through the yard. I eased the screen door back into its frame, hushing the steps as they whined under Gin’s feet. It was useless; she never made it out of the home place without a bit of noise. Today had proved no exception; she’d thumped around the bedroom every minute it took me to get presentable in the dark. Gin didn’t bother with primping and it’d be a waste if she did. Blink once and she’d drag her hem, twice and she’d smear her front with blackberry blood. Then there’d be hell from Ladye, same way there would be if we messed with her sleep.

The air was still day-thick and hot, but the patchy grass was cool on my ankles as I crossed the yard. Ahead, Gin went skipping over the drive, crunching the oyster shells with her bare feet. Her heels flashed white. She stopped at the road, her teeth shining back at me in the dark. When I stepped from the shells onto the holey dirt of Mud Neck Road, I let out the breath I'd been keeping since the front door. "You aching for a switching?" I hissed at Gin.

Gin laughed. "You know Ladye's never switched a bottom in her life."

The bullfrogs stopped bellowing all at once, like they hadn't noticed us until they heard her voice.

"Doesn't mean she never will," I told her, "and might be I'd rather not be the first."

I kicked a shard of oyster shell up the grassy hump between the tire ruts with the toe of my Ked, trying to keep its bounce straight. Whistling, Gin stomped through a tire rut full of tidewater. Mud rained. A lightning bug went blinking its way through the black an inch from my nose and I stopped, cupping palms around it. The bug flicked on and off in my finger-cage. As a little thing, I'd stuffed jelly jars with fireflies, circling around under their favorite gum trees until I got myself fall-down dizzy. Gin didn't bother with bugs. "Just things that bite and crap," our gran would say, eyeing the terrapins and cottontails my sister hauled home. Ladye didn't stop her, though, because after a few days feeding the rabbits chunks of carrot, cuke, and lope and tempting the terrapins out of their shells, Gin let them free.

Me, I'd keep those jars screwed tight until every firefly stopped flickering.

I opened my hands. The bug bumbled into the trees on loopy wings. I watched it go as I walked smack into Gin's back.

She spun, hushing me with a finger to my lips. It smelled salty. "Look," she mouthed, turning with her arm stuck out and that finger pointed right at Bric-a-brac Place. The left-house's

weather-stripped siding shone like bone in the moonglow, same as ever, and I was just about to throw a shrug Gin's way when I saw what she was on about: a car. It sat beside the house half-sunk in kudzu, a fool place to park a car if you didn't want to have to hack it out come morning. A station wagon, in cream and tickweed yellow.

Gin bounced her eyebrows at me. In the dark, her freckles were ink spatter. I was scared thinking she'd want to get a closer look, but then she curled a finger at me and slipped on up the road. I followed, heart hiccupping in my ribs. It felt like the left-house's black windows were watching us go.

Past Bric-a-brac, a clump of stubborn orange daylilies sprouted at the overgrown turnoff to Hollow House, bright as grave bouquets. Gin took a sharp left into the brush and I followed, thanking my socks.

Hollow House would be safe, I told myself. Its lane hadn't been a lane for a good while. Without someone cutting them back, the pines had come in thick and close. Any car that tried would get stopped about ten feet in, and who would bother anyway? We made do on foot given we didn't mind the cobwebs we'd end up wearing for our trouble. Just a few strides in and I could feel spider's thread prickling across my nose and cheeks. A raccoon chattered and trilled somewhere in the loblolly branches. Holly leaves cracked under my Keds.

Up ahead, Gin wrapped one arm around a loblolly trunk and swung under it, popping up on the other side with bark in her hair. I followed crawling.

The gap in the trees above the lane was splitting open, and before long I could see the boxy shadow of Hollow House up ahead. This left-house wasn't all that different from the home place—tall and skinny and pine-sided, the way islanders built places on Rip's before brick got to be the thing. But where Ladye's house was stuffed to the roof with the clutter of Loops alive and

dead, we'd found Hollow House empty as a gourd. Its bareness made it huge, and Gin and I took it for ours. For years we'd packed the corners of its hollows with our treasures. Gin stacked the mantle with tide-shined oyster shells. I took the cupboards for my left-house china, teacups and plates and butter dishes I jig-sawed and pasted from the broken bits we found strewn over floor and dirt. There was nobody could say we shouldn't.

And still wasn't: this brambled driveway was still empty. I let loose a sigh.

Gin's tangle of hair made her look like a bit of dandelion fluff blowing up the porch steps to Hollow House's front door. She put a shoulder to the wood and heaved; the door popped, screaming on sticky hinges. Heading straight for the stone piles she'd been building up the staircase, she turned out her short pockets. Pebbles hailed. She plunked her skinny butt down on the bottom step and started herding rocks along the molding with her flat palms. I stood over her, arms crossed.

I didn't want to be the one to mention the car. Like by talking about it I'd make it real.

"They'd look nice all lined up," I said, watching Gin. The little stones rolled back down her hills quick as she built them. "Like pearls on a string." Pebbles tapped the foot-beat pine soft as drizzling rain on the home place's tin roof. I knelt to turn the knob on the old kerosene lamp we'd dragged out of Ladye's attic.

"I like them how they are, thanks," Gin said.

The wick flamed yellow inside the glass bell, smoking black. The walls flickered. "Just thinking I'd help," I sighed, bouncing on my heels. The floorboards whined.

Gin flicked a black pebble at my Keds. "What's got you all twitchy?" she said, glancing up at me through her knotty curls. "Ain't like they're moving in here."

"Who?"

“Whoever’s car’s getting grown over right this second,” Gin snorted. “Must be come-heres, parking in kudzu.” Then she popped up, and, brushing her palms, chirped, “Tah-dah!” After weeks of work, her rock project was done; there was a pebble pile for every stair. It made Hollow House look like it was coming apart at its edges, a stone crumbling to sand.

“You think they’ll find this place?” I said. I couldn’t stop fidgeting.

Gin let out a heavy sigh. “Guess I better go scout the woods for lost come-heres.” She winked and walked out the front door, whistling at the starry sky.

I left Gin to her expedition and got to sorting the new china shards we’d swept off Bric-a-brac Place’s kitchen floor into mounds of blue and white, yellow, and plain cream. It took weeks sometimes, getting together enough pieces to start gluing them back into whatever nice shape they’d made. In the time it’d take me to puzzle together an old saucer, Gin could dam whole creeks, plant gardens of dandelion and tickweed, and pack Ladye’s refrigerator full of butterfish and pot-bait. But I liked the time it took parsing. It seemed right fixing what most people would call trash. I wondered what Bric-a-brac’s new owners thought of what they’d found.

Gin had named Bric-a-brac because that’s what it was full of: chipped Hummels and porcelain doll arms, ratty clamshell mobiles and frayed wicker bottles, cloudy snow globes and broke-legged Breyer horses. I’d gone right for the plates, Gin for a great fighting conch shell, its caramel swirls and turrets glossy as a pearl. “Listen,” she’d said, clapping it over my ear. I’d tried to hear the sea she said was in there, but all I had heard was my own thudding heart. The conch was here now, stowed in the vanity cupboard over Hollow House’s rust-streaked sink. The thought of all the china we’d left scattered over Bric-a-brac’s floor made my heart twist.

A half hour had passed as I sorted and matched when Gin came bursting into the little

mudroom off the kitchen, right through the stuck door we'd never bothered forcing. Bits of molding shot from the frame when the door busted open; she'd splintered the jamb. She stood there in the doorway, smiling down at me so hard I thought she'd split her cheeks.

"Lord, Gin, there's a front door."

Gin's wild-eyed look didn't waver. "Come on, come on," she chanted, grabbing me by both wrists and jerking me up from my seat on the kitchen floor. I kept myself between her and the china; my sorting piles were near perfect. When I asked where we were going, Gin just smiled wider, yanking me along. "Come on!" There was nothing to do but snatch the lantern on the way out the back door.

I followed her past the ramshackle boathouse and down along the dark waterfront. Here there were no fireflies, only stars and brackish water breaking the moon into shining scales. Broken pylons spiked from the tide in rows; way back, Hollow House must have had a dock. Across the thin inlet, the sandbars were white dashes in the purple black of the Chesapeake before dawn. Wolf Trap light was a flashing dot of white in the inky Bay. My Keds sunk in the wet sand, but I tried to keep up with Gin as she vaulted driftwood and mounds of eelgrass. In my lantern's bouncing light, the salt grayed limbs of dead pine were bodies and bones and water moccasins. I jumped more than once, yelping, only to hear Gin laugh somewhere in the dark. Finally, she stopped, feet planted before a great black mass. I raised the lantern.

"Tah-dah!" Gin yelled, throwing her arms wide. "Ain't it something?"

It was something, alright. A boat, probably a dinghy once, half-sunk in sand and green with rot. Buckled boards jutted from its sides, sharp as snapped ribs. This boat hadn't been a boat for a long time.

"Storm must have brought it in." Gin was babbling, hands flying. "Figure it don't need a

motor, even. Just fit it with a sail and whoosh.” She slapped a palm on the dinghy’s rotten flank. “Thinking I’ll bring in a bigger catch, maybe make more than buttons off what I haul.”

“In that?” I swung the lantern at the boat. Its splintered gunwales flashed yellow. “What good’s money if you’re bay-bottom, full up with water?”

Gin smirked. “Scared?”

Being scared seemed pretty smart to me. Ladye had seen to it that Gin and I never learned to swim, pointing out that “going in the water’s how you get drowned.” Most islanders never learned, and truth was I’d never thought twice about it until right this minute, staring through the gaps in the dinghy’s salt-beaten sides. But I wasn’t about to fess up to Gin. “Worrying’s for folks with warts,” she was always jabbing. “You got warts?”

“What you need money for?” I snorted. “Gonna buy yourself some lipstick?”

“No,” Gin snapped. Then she sighed and squinted at me like she was looking for something. “Don’t you ever want to get off?”

My tummy twisted. “Off?”

“Rip’s.”

I stared at her. I couldn’t make it work in my head, like I was trying to fit two pieces of china snapped from different plates. We were islanders born. Gabby and roundabout as Rip’s could be, what I’d heard of the mainland didn’t have me aching to jump island anytime soon. Let Dr. Mrs. Armistead and our brass bound bastard of a father have their dry dirt.

“No,” I mumbled. “Guess I never thought about it.”

“What, on account of it being so great?” Gin scoffed. “Whole dang world out there waiting and all you want’s to stay holed up in the mud with Ladye.” She shook her head and smashed a clod of sand beneath her foot. “Well not me. I ain’t sticking around, no way. Getting

off this island first chance I get.”

It felt like someone had hooked my ribs and jerked. She’d leave me, easy as that. Take off and never come back and I’d be alone, just Wavy, no Gin.

“Well that’s just fine,” I said, something swelling up my throat, hot and sour as sick. And then I was shouting at her. “I don’t care! Go off in your shipwreck and sink! Hell, without you racing around like a dang fool maybe Loops’ll stop being the laughingstock of the island! Maybe they’ll let us be. Ever think of that?” I stopped, panting, out of words. I wasn’t any good at yelling. Gin was always the yeller. Now she just stood there in front of her broke-down boat, blinking at me. My eyes were aching and the dinghy and Gin and the starry water behind began to blur and run, quick as soaked ink. I wouldn’t have her seeing me cry, so I played tough and mumbled, “Be better off, won’t we?” as I turned my back on her. My shoulders tried to shake but I wouldn’t let them. Not if she could see.

Gin was saying my name like I was being a real dummy, the same way she did nights I got sad over Dora dying and us not knowing her, and I didn’t want to hear it. And all of a sudden I was kicking up sand, the old lantern rattling so hard in my hand that the flame drowned sputtering. I was left running in the moonlight.

I crashed into the woods with my hands out flat, smacking away the low branches of gum saplings, huckleberry, and persimmon. Brambles tore at my socks, but I kicked and swore my way through, so mad I was acting more like Gin than me. When I couldn’t make out the sparkle of water or hear the lap of tide through the trees, I finally stumbled to a walk. My face was sticky with cobwebs and salt and I rubbed my raw eyes with my knuckles until I saw bursts of purple and red in the black behind my lids. Gin hadn’t chased me; I’d been running from nobody. A real dummy after all.

There was a blush in the sky; soon the sun would peek over the Chesapeake and torch it, red and gold, and the fuzzy tops of loblollies would blaze up and down Rip's eastern edge. I headed for home, racing sunrise. Ladye would be waking soon, and I wasn't keen being the one she caught sneaking back in. Let Gin bear the brunt whenever she showed up. If.

I was making it fine when I heard it: a sound I'd never heard in these woods. It came bouncing through the tree trunks and into my ears, the clink and smash of glass breaking. And then it stopped. Bric-a-brac was right there—a handful of holly trunks away. I crept through the prickly leaves, holding my breath like it'd steal the sound of my feet.

And then, through the parasol ribs of holly limbs, I saw him.

His hands were full of china. His hair was lit gold in the creeping sunlight as he waded off Bric-a-brac's porch and into the kudzu leaves. The boy sunk waist-deep into lobed green vines, stopped, and winged half a broken plate into the air. It exploded like a china firework on the grassy ruff of Mud Neck Road and scattered white shards over the sandy lane and ditches. It set the whole clinking, as if the clouds were raining glass. Soon as it'd quieted, the boy lifted another plate and let it sail. The sound made me wince. But this boy, this beautiful, horrible boy, he just watched my china shatter and smiled.

CHAPTER 3

“Gin out there?” I asked, plopping in the wicker porch chair beside Ladye’s swing. My eyes swept the Narrows. The blue sooks were molting; I’d woken alone. It’d been two days since the boat, since the boy.

Ladye nodded toward the bay, sipping from her lipstick-edged mug and checking the corners of her lips for drips with the tip of her finger. She never used the jigsawed teacups I brought home, never asked how they’d ended up sitting in the kitchen cupboard with the ceramic mugs, broke-winged egrets in her brace of sturdy ducks. I suppose teacups were less trouble than some of what Gin had turned out of her pockets in thirteen years’ ramblings: tree frogs, sugartoads, osprey eggs, bird lice, swamp snails, terrapins, cicada shells. Ladye had never had much to say about those things either, even the time she found a gaze of chattering coon kits stashed in the attic, swaddled in one of Great-Gran’s minks.

“No peelers yet, far as I can see,” she said. The field glasses at her elbow, those Isadore had saved from his wartime, stared blindly out to sea. “Think she’s toeing for butterfish while the tide’s slack.”

I plucked the field glasses from the table and trained them down Rip’s southern tip to Hole in the Wall. Without the glasses, the sandbars weren’t much more than skinny yellow lines drawn right along the spot where blue sky hit blue water. But through the glasses, I could see the bare spines of drowned cedar sticking from the dunes and the osprey nests caught in the crooks of their dead limbs. The bars were ringed in a bushy stubble of cattail and wild rice; that’s where she’d be hunting crab. I found her walking the horizon, brown legs sunk to the thighs in blue as she toed the salt-steeped sand for clamshells. A bushel basket lashed with four of the lost pot-buoys she weekly claimed from the tide line bobbed in the waves behind her. I dropped the glasses and the world shrunk.

Gin used to take me along on her hunts. We'd follow the muddy shore all the way south to Rip's new tip, down where storm tides had punched through the old tip of the island to form the sandbars. The salt water stretching between Rip's and Hole in the Wall was shallow enough at low tide to ford on foot. It was a gull roost more than anything, and we'd wade it for butterfish. Or, Gin would. Gin made it look easy. I'd see her grin, feeling a shell with her foot, and a minute later she'd kick a leg out the water and there it'd be: a three-inch butterfish folded tight under her long toes. Wasn't long before I stopped trying and took to wading, watching the water's ebb. Plenty to see: skates glided round my knees, their gray wingtips breaking the waves like shark's fins, and terns would scream and dive at the flashing schools of menhaden. For a time, I followed along like that, useful as a fat barn cat. Then she stopped waking me to go, which I figured was maybe her way of telling me she didn't need me along.

I squinted without the glasses, trying to see Gin. She was nothing but a speck of dust at the sky's edge.

"You gonna fess up and tell me what-all's got you girls fighting?" Ladye asked, smoothing her sewing across her knees. She bit a threaded needle with a click and pinched a white button to Gin's stained shirtfront. Judging by the eye-stinging smell wafting out the mudroom this morning, I could guess she'd already bleached the cloth to high heaven, but the brown and green of mud and moss clung in the weave bad as grease. Ladye stabbed the needle through the button's eye. I didn't know why she always fixed what'd get ruined all over.

"We ain't fighting," I said. I couldn't tell if I was lying. In the two days since Gin found the boat, when we'd talked it'd been of nothing: weather or chores, "Morning" or "Night." I didn't mention the boy and Gin didn't mention leaving. If we were fighting, it wasn't like any fight we'd had.

Ladye snorted, easing the needle through the threadbare cotton by its silver eye. “And I’m the Queen of Sheba.”

“Ask her if you don’t believe me,” I grumbled, grabbing Ladye’s button jar.

“Would if I could catch the girl.” Ladye smiled. “I swear, if she’s not scaring the liver out me popping out of nowhere, she’s poofed, gone in a blink. Lord knows where she came by it.”

I shook the button jar between my palms, watching the colors kaleidoscope. Little brass buttons settled to the glass bottom, big plastic buttons to the top. I didn’t see a single pair that matched. “Momma wasn’t that way?” I asked.

“Your momma? Lord no,” Ladye clucked. Her eyebrows bunched above her skinny nose. Seemed like just talking about Momma got Gran wrinkling. “Dora’d count the steps before she lifted a foot to walk them.”

“You mean she was careful?”

“Why you two were such a dang surprise. I never could figure it, Dora getting herself into trouble. One second she’s got me pinning pink ribbons on her socks. Next thing I look, there’s four feet kicking the back of her bellybutton blue.” Ladye knotted off, clipping the dangling tail of thread between her teeth. She hung the mended shirt over the back of the swing, lit a cigarette, and used her bare feet to push off the porch. The chains whined as she swung through her trail of smoke. “But truth is, girls in love ain’t girls anymore,” Ladye muttered. “And my momma always said it’s the quiet ones’ll get you.” Then, frowning but looking pretty doing it, she spat a loose shred of tobacco from her red lips.

“What was he like?” I said.

Ladye’s jaw went hard under her powdered skin. I was breaking the rules. “Bad news,” she muttered.

I didn't know my father's name, but between the island gab and years of staircase eavesdropping, this is what I did know: he was a come-here, a mainlander. Dora loved him and guess he didn't love her, seeing how once he'd got her knocked up, he left. And she died.

Bad news.

"Why'd he leave her?" I asked.

Ladye was tilting her head like she was thinking about how to answer when she suddenly smiled. "Now who could that be?" she said, rising from the swing. I saw the cloud of white shell dust coming off the drive: there was a car pulling in. But it didn't sound like Isadore's: there was none of his old Ford's rattle and groan. Ladye stood from the swing, slipped her feet into the navy house pumps she stowed by the screen door, smashed her cigarette with her right heel, and booted the crushed butt into the hydrangeas by the porch. Islanders could say what they would about Gran, but she wasn't one to be caught without her face on. "Fix your hair," Ladye told me sideways, centering the 'v' of her green-checked Simplicity housedress over her sun-browned chest. Gin wasn't around to see me, so I looped a piece of hair about my finger and curled it in front of my left ear. But as soon as saw the yellow and cream station wagon pull through the loblollies, I mussed that curl right back in. I could make out a woman I didn't know behind the wheel. Beside her, the bright yellow head of that awful boy.

The woman pulled the station wagon off the drive and parked it in the patchy grass, straight like she thought she'd been pulling into in a paint-lined spot in an asphalt lot. She popped from the car, flapping her plump arm over her teased hairdo as she cooed, "Hello!" The boy stepped out with his right hand raised flat, like a movie Indian. Ladye threw an eye my way. I shrugged; far as she knew, I'd never seen either of them. The woman ducked, wiggling inside the car a moment before backing out with her hands clutched about a dish. The jiggling Jell-O

mold on it was so bright and green I could have seen it from Hole in the Wall. She took bendy-kneed steps through the shattered oyster shells. The boy trailed a step behind her with his hands open at his sides like he was planning to catch the woman when she went tipping over backwards, chunky heels over head.

By the time she reached the bottom step, she looked ready to flop. Little beads of sweat had sprung at the edges of her done-up hair. “Deirdre Hatch,” she said to Ladye, thrusting her hand up the steps. “And my son, Tyler.”

Tyler Hatch: a come-here name if I ever heard one. Any islander could have told you that there was no “Hatch” chipped in any headstone sticking out of Rip’s Cemetery’s dirt.

The boy dipped his chin. Mrs. Hatch’s hand hung in the air.

No islander I’d ever seen shook hands; with everyone knowing everyone, there wasn’t much of a need for introductions. Mostly on Rip’s we just nodded and got on with talking about the tide or the fish runs or, nowadays, Nobody. But Ladye tried.

“Ladye,” she told Mrs. Hatch, palming her hand and moving it around a bit. “And this is Wavy,” she added, tipping her swirl of hair my way. This was a lure, her not telling Mrs. Hatch our relation in hopes she’d guess it wrong. Ladye didn’t get to dangle this much on account of there being nobody on Rip’s Island who didn’t know us on sight.

“Your daughter?” Mrs. Hatch exclaimed, beaming at me. Ty eyed me from the dirt below the porch, offering a smile.

“My granddaughter,” Ladye chuckled, elbowing me in the ribs. Mrs. Hatch had got herself a life friend there.

“Hi,” I said, looking straight past our guests to the marsh behind. A heron was stalking minnows in the reeds under the scraggly wild cherry tree.

“Well, I’ve just moved in down the road with my son here, so I thought I’d come on by and bring you this jello, just a little ‘hello neighbor come on by’ thing I like to do, putting up my white flag so to speak,” Mrs. Hatch jabbered. When she talked her mouth looked to be getting away from her. “I can’t stand it, people keeping to themselves so much these days. As if everyone’s too busy for a nice sit-down talk! ‘Love thy neighbor,’ I always say. I think it’s nice knowing your neighbors, don’t you?”

“Real nice,” Ladye said. I knew she was thinking on Louise Callis by the way the straight of her nose scrunched. “You’re moving from?”

“Oh heavens, Philadelphia of all places, for my husband’s work. Of course, the city’s no place to raise a child if you ask me, but try telling that to him, haha! Have you been?” Mrs. Hatch cocked her puffy head, waiting for Ladye’s reply. But even quiet, her lips were still mouthing, like it was all she could do to keep from answering herself.

“Can’t say I have,” Ladye told her.

Mrs. Hatch nodded like Ladye’d made the best choice she could think of. “I’m leaving my husband,” she said suddenly, like she hadn’t realized it before. Powdered face crumpling, she held out the trembling plate of Jell-O to Ladye. Sickly looking pineapple rings dotted with red maraschino cherries floated on the bundt of lime Jell-O, lifebuoys in a algae-choked sea.

Ladye slid her palm under the dish and lifted it from Mrs. Hatch’s shaky hands. “Why don’t you two play out here while we have us a grownup sit-down,” she said. I bristled when she said “play,” as if it was something I was little enough to still do, but the way she met my eye told me right away there’d be no arguing she’d care to hear; she wasn’t asking. Balancing the Jell-O on one hand and splaying the lacquered fingers of the other over her the woman’s soft shoulder, Ladye steered Mrs. Hatch into the house. The screen clattered shut behind.

I was left with Tyler Hatch's smiling face. Just looking at him, I could hear those plates smashing. I thought about what it'd be like to punch out his teeth, like in the beanbag-toss at the mainlander's fair. You threw the bag hard as you could and the squares of whitewashed ply flew right out of the gap-toothed clown's head, snap snap snap until there wasn't a shiny white tooth left in his laughing mouth.

After about a minute of me staring at him, Tyler Hatch coughed. "Ty," he said from under that golden mop.

I frowned at him. "What?"

"Ty," he said. "Call me Ty."

"Reckon I don't have to call you anything," I snapped. I was being rude and there was no one there to tell me I couldn't.

The boy didn't seem to care. He just tilted his head at me, that shiny smile stuck fast in his cheeks. You'd think I'd said something funny, the way he was looking at me, and that got me madder.

"You live with your grandmother?" Tyler said, nodding up at the home place. He talked wrong, with his words dipping and turning up in off spots.

"Ladye."

"Why?"

I snorted. "Can't see it's your business."

"I get it," he quipped, nodding. "My dad's a bastard."

The way he said it—easy, like we were talking tide—made my face go hot. I didn't know what to say, so I just stared down at the soft dirt. Between my feet, a fiddler crab was easing from his muddy hole, claw raised.

“It’s a drag being an only child, huh?” Ty said.

I liked it, him having me wrong. “Got a twin sister. Gin,” I told him, trying to sound like he had—easy. But he nodded like being twins didn’t matter too much, so I opened my mouth and told him, “She killed our momma. Being born, I mean.”

That got his attention. “Wow,” he said. “Where’s she?”

I didn’t want to tell him, but he had those eyes fixed on me so hard it was making me nervous. “Out crabbing.”

Finally, his eyes dropped to the fiddler between my feet. “You can eat those?”

I liked knowing something he didn’t. I glanced out at Hole-in-the-Wall; Gin was still a speck. “Don’t even know fiddlers from blues,” I muttered, shaking my head like he was a real dummy. “Guess I better show you.”

We watched the crabs for more than an hour, trailing them as they scuttled from hole to muddy hole, stopping only to shovel out new holes between. I showed Ty how the crabs froze stiff when you moved a muscle, but took off skittering when you were still. We jerked our way across the sandy yard together, halting and stepping while the crabs ran and froze. Every few steps, Ty would glance up at the door of the house like he was expecting his momma to come squeezing out the door, but she didn’t. Having a momma who busted up crying every few seconds seemed like work I wouldn’t want. Ladye was easy; you’d see her mad before you’d ever see her cry, and her kind of mad tended to end in a little glass of Cherry Heering and a bout of whooping laughs. I hoped that whatever Mrs. Hatch and Ladye were up to in there, they were making a dent in the Jell-O. I wasn’t too keen on having to choke any of those green-edged pineapple rings down while Ladye waste-not-want-notted at us. Sugar made my teeth ache.

“What do they eat?” Ty asked, teasing a meaty-looking crab with a bit of red pine straw.

The fiddler flailed his one big claw over his head, snapping at the needle but too slow to catch it.

“Mud,” I told him. I didn’t have any idea.

The skinny fiddler I’d trapped with my feet ping-ponged back and forth between my soles on its spidery legs. Its gray goo-ball eyes twisted on their stalks, watching me as the points of its shell hit rubber again and again. I was glad I spent my life with my eyeballs pointed forward, same as my feet.

“I guess they don’t spend much time hungry then,” Ty said, planting the tip of his finger in the center of the crab’s hard shell and pressing him into the mud. His fingernail was clean as the rest of him. The fiddler wagged its toothy claw as its legs bent, trying to get a snap on the tidy finger holding him down. It was having about as much luck as we had trying to kiss our elbows, but it kept right on clacking that claw. I had a shudder up my spine watching him pin that crab, same way I did October nights when you could hear Callis’s hunting hounds baying in the woods, the gunshot ringing.

I lifted my feet and my little fiddler took off sideways, scuttling as fast away from me as its stick-legs could carry its shell. It slid into the first hidey-hole it hit and was gone. Just when I was about to tell Ty to let his crab go too, he lifted his finger to shade his eyes. “That your sister?” he asked. I looked up and saw Gin wading up the shore, her bushel basket bobbing along behind. It sunk low on its buoys; she’d brought in a good haul. She cupped her palms around her mouth and gave a whoop.

Ty threw an arm over his bright head, waving windmills. “Hey!”

“Who’re you?” Gin hollered. She grinned at him and, bending to wrap her arms around her catch-basket, stepped from the reedy shallows onto the low, holey dirt of the yard.

The come-here was already up and walking away, towards her, babbling about who he

was and his name was Ty and what did she catch, could he see? Between Ty's empty shoeprints, the fiddler stayed pressed low in the mud. Cracks made a star from the center of its shell to the sharp tips; it was too late to let it go. He'd smashed the crab dead.

CHAPTER 4

Three days and Gin had Tyler Hatch shucked.

His momma's aunt was a yankee come-here; Bric-a-brac was her summer place before the tides drove her out. His middle name was Clark after the man with the skinny mustache whose pictures his momma liked. His favorite food was bananas, but only when their yellow got brown and spotty and the fruit turned to slime inside their skins. His parents were getting a split and he was glad. He'd never had a fur pet—only turtles he named people-names, like Harold. He'd chipped his front tooth when his chin hit brick. Back in Philadelphia, he'd been in a yellow taxicab not once, but twice. He gagged eating almonds and mayonnaise. He wasn't scared to drown, but he was to burn.

"He's something, ain't he?" Gin whispered beside me in the sweating dark of our bedroom. I could hear her smiling in the dark and didn't like it one bit. I didn't like her liking the mainlander, and I didn't like him liking her. Hadn't been half a week since Tyler Hatch climbed back in that station wagon beside his momma, but seemed like I'd heard his name a year's worth. Ty this, Ty that, ain't Ty something? Apparently, being from somewhere other than Rip's was all it took to make a person something. Me, I looked at him and didn't see much: just a toothpaste smile and a towhead. He stuck to my sister tight as a shadow and I followed behind. Guess it was the same as it'd always been, with me on Gin's heels instead of her on mine, but now there was the boy, the slack in our line.

She took him everywhere: the crawl under Irvin's General where Arnold Keeble's runaway chickens roosted, the boarded-up back shed where Mr. Sadler kept his dead momma's creepy baby doll collection, the graves in the wild persimmon grove off Pit Road marked with pine stakes so old the names had worn away. Told him our secrets too. By the end of the first week, he knew our middle names (Sissy and Hilligan), how Momma died (us, Gin said), and

who was older (me). She even told him about Great-Grand shooting out the back of his skull. Hollow House was the only thing she kept her big mouth shut about, and I was sure even that wouldn't last.

The come-here, meanwhile, swore he had no secrets of his own. He'd just listen to Gin gab, leaning in so close I could smell the syrupy Co-cola on his breath.

Me, I didn't believe him a minute. I saw the way he twisted, bristling at the skid of tires on the sandy roadway, the sputter of a tailpipe. He was squirrely as Mr. Callis's coonhounds before a Nor'easter hit, straining on his chain and keening at what we couldn't see coming.

Bad news. But Gin was too happy over him being there to care.

And Ladye was just as silly over Mrs. Deirdre Hatch, who'd been showing up every afternoon to "collect her son" and staying right through supper, mouth flapping to Ladye the whole dang time. Ladye liking every minute. She doted on Mrs. Hatch, feeding her nips of Cherry Heering and patting her shoulder until she stopped snuffling and managed a laugh. And Mrs. Hatch, no surprise, took to Ladye like a flea to dogflesh. She fawned after Ladye, ooing and awing at her fabrics and thread and buttons all afternoon, or, in the evening, rocking Isadore's chair and babbling the sun down.

Seemed like Mud Neck was thicker with Hatch's than mud.

The bed was doughy under my back and I wanted to punch it down, flatten it to the floorboards, but didn't. This was Momma's bed. I wished for my china pieces, sharp until they fit. But they were back at Hollow House, a room from the floor Gin's scattered pebbles had made a creek bottom.

The clock in the entry bonged ten. I kicked the damp sheets down the mattress, frowning to myself. The breeze off the Narrows wasn't a bit cool on my hot skin.

“What’s got you so sour?” Gin asked.

“Nothing,” I lied. I rolled away from her, folding my elbows around my knees and tucking my hands against my bumpy ribs.

She sighed. “You still mad over that boat?”

“No.”

Gin scooped across the bed, getting so close her knees knocked my heels. She pressed into me, filling the space between my neck and spine with her skull, and whispered, “Time was there’s this fool girl who finds a boat.”

“Not in the mood, Gin,” I said, holding my elbows in, away from her. Gin’s hair was tangled up in mine, prickling my neck and ears. It was a game we’d played since we were little—one telling the start to a story and the other one finishing—but I didn’t feel like hearing the stories Gin liked, the ones about adventures in places I’d never heard of.

“This fool’s thinking she’ll take this old boat out and have herself a big-time adventure. But the girl, being a dang fool I guess,” Gin said, shrugging, “goes and drowns trying. See, she can’t swim.”

I frowned. This was a new story. “Where was she going?”

“Off-island. But she doesn’t make it, on account of drowning.”

“Sounds like a real dummy,” I muttered.

“Yeah. But she’s got this sister who ain’t so dumb. Who told her not to go in the first place.”

“The girl should have listened,” I said. “Stead of getting herself drowned.”

“Yeah, but she didn’t.”

“So what happens?”

“Don’t know. Guess it’s your turn.”

I sighed. I knew what she was doing, giving me a chance at telling this story, but I couldn’t help it. It was the only time she’d listen.

“So her sister goes out and stands on the shore there, looking out at that water,” I told her, pointing out the window at the Narrows. The waves were breaking the moon up in shiny scales and driftwood made twisted black snakes on the shore. “Islanders tell her, ‘Come on home,’ but she’s not budging on account of missing her fool sister so awful. She just stands there still as a heron and looks and looks. Soon enough, she’s in mud up to his ankles. Tide’s coming and going all the time bringing more Bay bottom. That girl’s up to her waist in that black muck. Still just standing there, smelling to high heaven. Same way you stink, tromping around in that muck all day long,” I muttered, but it wasn’t true. In place of the fish rot and wet salt of marsh, Gin smelled like a thunderstorm a mile off: damp dirt and raw hay. As far as I could tell, I didn’t smell like anything but sweat and hair oil and skin—person. Gin grinned, butting my skull with her forehead, and I kept telling.

“Comes one day she can’t blink her eyes and she can’t breath either. But it’s all right with her, ‘cause her sister’s dead, see, and living don’t matter much to her. Her skin’s turning hard and cracking and she keeps on standing, mud round her neck, hermit crabs and butterfish digging tunnels between her toes. Can’t move her arms or legs, so she quits trying.”

Gin’s fingers wiggled and her soles bounced against the mattress, like her body was just making sure they could.

I kept still, not wanting her to see me copy her. But my toes buzzed, wishing.

“Ain’t long before a Nor’easter comes squalling and takes her out to Bay. She floats, bobbing like a pot-buoy on the waves. This girl’s no pot-buoy, though, so no crabber comes and

yanks her out. Tides pull her past lighthouses and under steamships and over dolphins and keep on pulling. Nettles stripe her red all over, worse than I got strung that time, but she's not crying the way I did." Her hip bumped mine, like it was saying sorry for me getting stung, and for laughing at me for crying when I did.

"There's nothing pains her," I told her, poking my finger into Gin's thigh and pressing down with each word. "This girl just floats along, sun and salt bleaching the pink from her until she's dry gray, pits to toenails. Her arms turn to branches, legs to a trunk, and water rubs her smooth all over. And one day, she rolls up on that muddy shore out there, knotty eyed and kindling-fingered."

Gin got it now. "She turned to driftwood," she said, lips to my nape.

"Yeah," I told her. "Only she's still this girl, but there's no hurt to it now."

"That's a good one," Gin said.

"Nice how she stayed," I whispered. "Her not leaving her sister, I mean."

Gin wiggled her fingers into the gaps between mine and I thought about having butterfish between my toes. I rolled away from her and closed my eyes. I felt waves rocking the mattress and turning my skin to pine.

Just as I felt myself floating off into the black, I whispered to her. "You won't take him to Hollow House?"

"Promise," she said.

I pulled the blanket tight under my chin, like the cotton sheet would keep her there. And I slept.

Day came hot and Tyler Hatch came whistling, same as the morning before and the

morning before that.

It was Friday, and Gin wanted to take a trip up Ferry Way to try hawking her catch, so Ty piped up and offered to pull her barrow of butterfish and blue crabs. Gin didn't ask me to come along, but I was going whether she needed me or not. I wasn't staying home with Ladye and sure as heck wasn't letting them go off on their own.

I trailed along behind them up Mud Neck Road, feeling a bit sour about the whole thing and sweating straight through my blouse collar. Gin and Ty babbled the whole mile to Ferry Way, my sister pointing to terrapins' hidey holes and the best deer paths and Ty tearing the leaves off the low limbs of the gum trees, humming a song I'd never heard. The cardboard sign—"SOFTS \$1 APIECE"—Gin had scrawled out and fixed to the barrow flapped and wilted and tried to fly off. At the mouth of the road, hanging pound nets made a maze of Isadore's patchy lawn. Gin and Ty waved at the porch, where our uncle sat tucked in the shade, and kept right on walking, the weight of the barrow pulling Ty along as his feet pedaled, trying to steer. The icebox was sloshing; the ice was melting quicker than we could walk. Near drowning in my own salt, I plodded across the yard and up to the crooked porch.

"Hot out for hawking, ain't it?" Isadore said, eyeing my red face from the rocking chair beneath the eaves and pushing his water plastic jug towards me. The old chair creaked under his weight as he bounced heel to toe, heel to toe, rocking. Our uncle wasn't a big man—lean in his long arms and narrow across the chest, the way watermen tended—but as heavy as he walked you'd think he weighed a whale's worth. Anchor-footed, islanders called it. "She got softshells in there?" he asked.

"Yep. Keep telling her they're gonna die and spoil by the time she sells them," I huffed, plunking down on the edge of Isadore's porch, beside the cracked screen door. Even the painted

cinderblock was griddle-hot under my shoes. I lifted the jug over my head, wetting my scalp with a sigh. The water wasn't cold, but it was cooler than the air.

Gin had turned off Mud Neck and was headed up Ferry Way while, heaving, Ty yanked on the cart's rusty handle, trying to pull it up onto the tarred road. Isadore squinted at him. Our uncle always had a narrow look about the eyes, a leftover from years spent on a deadrise deck, staring into bright water. The wind and salt on the Bay had a way of getting in a waterman's skin, and it sure hadn't spared his. His face was knotty as a pine burl.

"That the neighbor boy?" my uncle asked, nodding at Ty, who'd gotten the barrow up over the hump and was dragging the whole mess past the gum trees and out of sight.

"Ty," I told him.

"Looks like Gin's getting on with him good. You like him?"

I didn't know how to answer. "He's a mainlander," I said, shrugging.

Isadore grunted and fixed me with the look he got over Ladye's man-of-the-houseworks—the leaky kitchen basin or poling nail-head in the bottom porch step. Like I was a problem that needed fixing. "Mainlander's people too," he offered.

Nothing seemed too funny, but I laughed. "Like my father?"

Isadore bucked his stubbly chin and said, even as a deadrise keel, "Him too."

That surprised me. I'd never known Isadore to say anything at odds with Ladye, and the only thing Ladye would call my father was a brass bound bastard. I eyed Isadore; he hadn't been by for dinner since the bridge opened, and he looked beat. "Ain't seen you much lately."

"Figure Ladye been too busy," Isadore said, clapping his big palms over his knees. Each trouser-leg let out a little burst of grit. "New neighbors and all."

I shifted on my feet, scuffing the rubber edge of my Ked against the lip of the bottom

porch step. Gin and Ty's voices were wandering off down the road; they hadn't stopped to wait for me. "She'll come back around," he said, finally looking away, past me into the hollies. I couldn't tell if he was talking about Gin or Ladye. "Y'all blood," he added.

I didn't know what to do but nod. "Guess so," I mumbled. "Well, I better catch them."

Isadore lifted his hand just long enough for me to see the ridged calluses feet upon feet of wet ropes had left crisscrossing his palm before I turned and took off after my sister.

I caught them quick; Gin's hollering made them easy to find.

"Jimmies and peelers!" she yelled, moseying along the edge of Ferry Way's deep ditch as Ty fishtailed along behind her. I didn't know who she thought she was selling to. The houses here were new: neat brick squares with close-clipped lawns and marigolds in rows and porch chairs with no one sitting in them. But Gin kept on: "Clams, fat as butter!"

Ty grinned at me, sweat dripping from his chin. His shirt was soaked clean through to his skin; I could see the sharp points of his angel wings. I looked away. A big winged Cadillac cruised past, the stranger behind the wheel slowing to eyeball our cardboard sign.

For all the poo-pooing I'd done over people thinking Nobody would change Rip's, I couldn't deny it had. Car after car had passed us, and half the cars I'd seen I didn't know. Used to be the only people you saw driving on Rip's were islanders on their way to Foster's Wharf for work, Rip's Post Office for their mail, The Softshell Diner for Kidd's corncakes, or Irvin's General for butter and bread. And they'd lift a hello-finger from their steering wheel no matter who you were. These new drivers gripped their wheels like ladder rungs and sped on by. The Post Office talk was come-heres were buying land island-side faster than the bay could rise up to drown it. Rip's land, low and wet as it was, was cheap, especially the plots right on the Bay, and everybody knew come-heres liked looking at water. Water and us—every car that passed slowed.

I looked at my sister, her ragged hair and black feet, and Ty's sweat-wet shirt, and wondered if they were laughing at us, calling us dirty Rippers. Gin just waved.

We were walking ten minutes before the houses got old and Galoris Sparrow called out from her porch rocking chair. "Take a pound of butterfish here!"

"Yes'm!" Gin said, bouncing her eyebrows at me and Ty like we were hers to boss. Ty didn't argue. He just dug his bare hand into the icebox and dumped a handful of sandy shells into a brown paper bag. Then, looking more like he'd been born on a deadrise deck than some yankee hospital bed, he tested the weight with his dirty palm and handed the damp bag over to me, nodding. His fingers brushed my hand; they were gritty with sand.

I walked the clams up the tidy stone path between the rust-flecked marigolds to Mrs. Sparrow's screened porch. "Thank you, Loop," she told me, standing to slide three crumpled bills into my palm before I'd had a chance to tell her "Wavy." Behind her, the rocking chair had kept on rocking without her. Its rounded legs creaked and smacked the porch slats. "And tell your grandmamma hello," Mrs. Sparrow added, flashing her long eyeteeth.

"Yes'm," I muttered as I left her, rubbing sand from the whorls of my fingers.

By the time we'd walked the mile to Rip's Post Office, I could smell the softshells from five feet away. I'd been right: the she-crabs had died and gone ripe in the heat, a waste. We stopped in the shade under the post office's wide eaves, Gin grumbling to herself, "Three dang dollars." Gin's nose wrinkled and she kicked the icebox like it'd made the day hot. The top slid off and right away we were all clapping hands to our noses, gagging on the stench. Gin stomped out into the road and cussed.

"Who's that?" Ty coughed at me, nodding to the post office.

I glanced through the glass, swallowing a heave. Louise Callis was there, perched in the

office window with the kind of disgust look on her face Ladye got wiping up after Gin's biting, crapping terrapins. "Postmistress Callis," I said.

Frowning, Ty righted the lid of the icebox, smacking the top down with the flat of his palm to check it'd sealed. "What's her problem?"

No point lying. I shrugged. "She don't like us."

"Huh." A funny look went creeping across his sweaty face. "Why don't we leave her a present, then?"

"What kind of present'd we want to give that goat?" Gin said, still sounding sour over her rotten catch.

Ty grinned at her, pinched his burnt nose, and lifted up the lid of the icebox. Gin and I stared as he fished around a second before sliding his hand out, fingers pinched around a softshell's slimy blue claw. Then, holding it out in front of him like it'd still bite him, the come-here jerked his head at the bright blue mailbox stuck on the wall next to the post office's shut door.

Right away I was shaking my head no, but Gin was already slinking up to mailbox. She lifted the blue handle and the hatch gaped, wailing, and Ty flung the crab at the dark slot. I stood there, gape-mouthed, watching the softshell miss the box and hit the post office window with a soft splat. The crab slid, painting a streak of stinking brown guts on its way down the clean glass. "Go, go!" I heard a yell, and spun to see Ty and Gin hauling off up the road with the icebox bouncing along behind, the two of them shrieking like seagulls. And I felt a hand close tight round my wrist.

"A Loop," Louise Callis hissed, face so close to mine I could see her stubby brown lashes. The door of the post office jingled shut behind her. "Why am I not surprised?"

I twisted under her hand like a hooked croaker. “I didn’t—”

“Now you listen to me.” Mrs. Callis jerked me up by the wrist, standing me straight, and pointed a blunt fingernail between my eyes. “I know Ladye Loop might let you tear around down there in that mud, but I’m telling you boys like that, boys from over there,” she said, aiming that stubby finger out south, to the mainland, “they’re nothing but trouble.” She looked at me like I was something to feel sorry for. “Think on whether you girls aim to end up like your poor dead mother. Because that’s where Ladye’s got the two of you headed, letting you hang around with that boy. You tell that sister of yours that.”

I ripped my arm from the postmistress’s hand and stumbled back, spitting, “You don’t know a thing about my sister.”

Louise Callis’s cocked her bony head and smiled and said, “No, but I know Loops.”

That was all I heard before I was running as fast as I could up the road, away from her, my soles slapping the boiling asphalt until my toes hit the barrow’s long shadow. Gin caught me between her hot arms and slapped me on the back, whooping in my ear, “Showed her, didn’t we?” I held her tight as I could, feeling like my heart was about to burst and blow us both to smithereens. Behind Gin, Ty fished a dripping Co-Cola out of the stinking icebox and, knocking the cap off against the cart’s wooden lip, raised the bottle to his lips and drank. I watched the lump in his throat jig as the cold sugar slid down his throat. Heard Louise Callis’s voice in my head and thought, you’re wrong, you’re wrong. You don’t know Loops at all.

Then, wiping his lips with the back of his hand, Ty winked at me.

I shut my eyes and tried to breathe in the straw smell of Gin’s hair as she bounced me up and down. But all I smelled was rot.

I woke that night to the far-off drum roll of thunder in my bones. Gin was gone.

I slapped a hand down in the empty sheets beside me. Her side of the bed was dry and cool. The fan whirled and clicked on the ceiling, pushing the stale air in circles. I lay there a minute, watching the blades flash over the cracked white paint, before I rolled into Gin's hollow, turning so my skull thumped at the bed's foot and my soles slapped the headboard, just how my sister liked. The wood was slick as a skipping stone under my toes, the splinters all run smooth.

She had snuck out to see him. I knew it.

Outside, the first rumblings of a thunderstorm were rolling in from the east. I squinted at the window. On the other side of the Narrows, white light bubbled in the low clouds above the spiky tree line and turned the loblolly branches and trunks to black scribbles on the sky. It'd be at least an hour before the thunderstorm hit Rip's, plenty of time to catch Gin at Hollow House. I'd make it.

I tumbled from the creaking bed; the air was cool on the sweat-slicked back of my nightgown. Not thinking, I flipped my back to the bed when I peeled it from my skin, hiding the sore, silly mounds that'd started swelling over my ribs. Like Gin would see them and laugh. Dressed in yesterdays crumpled dress, I snuck into the hall, lifting hoof over the floorboards I knew as creakers and past Ladye's bedroom door, which the tilt of the house nightly coaxed from its jamb no matter how hard she slammed. I could hear her snoring in there as I slid past the crack, holding my breath.

Outside, the moonlit holes of the fiddlers' homes looked like a handful of quarters scattered in the grass. Above, the moon was a yellow scythe slipping behind the clouds. Thunder climbed my spine. I hurried up the road, walking heel-toe in the rut all the way to Bric-a-brac, where a shard of white plate cracked under my heel. The left-house, dark windowed and gray,

was creepier looking now that I knew Mrs. Hatch was in there, fast asleep, no idea her son was out getting into Lord knows what with my sister.

They'd be at Hollow House, no mistake.

A minute past Bric-a-brac, I jumped the ditch and headed up the left-road.

Up above the loblollies, the clouds were blowing up. The tall, puffing chimney of storm cloud finally gulped down the moon and the road went black. I squinted, willing my eyes to catch up. Without moonlight, everything lost its edges. The first hot raindrop glanced off the tip of my nose. The last thing I wanted was getting caught in the woods in a storm. I started plowing the tangled thicket out of the way with my splayed arms, crashing through the trees. Mosquitoes whined in my ears and a mamma possum went snarling across my path, her eyes like two blank moons. A veil of silvery cobweb threads tickled my face. The dip of the old tire ruts told me I was still on the driveway, but I couldn't see a dang thing, couldn't even tell if I was headed the right way. I stumbled forward with my fingers stretched wide, like the dark was just a drawn curtain I could part.

Then lightning cracked over my head and in the flash I saw Hollow House: a bright white box through the mess of holly trunks and thrashing limbs. When the sky went dark, I could see the open door lit with the flickering yellow of the old kerosene lamp. She was there. "Gin!" I yelled, stumbling between the last twisted trunks, across the brambly yard, up the porch steps, and through the open door.

No Gin.

The lantern sat burning in the middle of the parlor floor, its wavering flame lighting the peeling wallpaper gold. Her rock piles were there on the stairs, just as she'd left them the week before. Leaving the lamp, I creaked across the parlor and up the pebbly stairs. The second floor

of Bric-a-brac was all Gin's, which had always been fine by me. Tromping around a left-house's upstairs was just asking to go through the floor, and besides, Hollow House's gave me the creeps. Nothing up there but dark little bedrooms, square and tight as cubbies, and the naked, rusty skeleton of a rotted mattresses. At the top step, I peered down the dark hall. The floorboards gave and screamed under my feet soon as I stepped off the stairs. "Gin?" I called. No answer but wind rattling the windowpanes and the growl of nearing thunder.

Back on the first floor, I went from parlor to sitting room to kitchen. I ran a finger over the near-finished china saucer I'd left waiting on a cupboard shelf and it came away downy with dust. And then I felt a draft whisper through my messy hair and cool the sweat dripping down my neck. I peered through the narrow door of the mudroom and got a facefull of hot wind. The door was open: I knew where she was.

I ran until I found them.

If not for the frayed skirt of Gin's old sundress, no way I'd have known who was who. They dug together in the dunes like dogs, hands paddling the beach from the dinghy's split sides in sprays of shell and grit. Their skinny limbs were caked with wet sand and their pale hair stuck from their scalps in salty knots. Ty sat up on his heels, lifting his open palm to his face. He tapped Gin's shoulder with his fingertip, so lightly you'd think he thought it was a moth he was touching, not my sister's gritty skin. When it came away, I saw his finger had left a perfect circle of brown in her coat of sand. He held his hand out to her and I saw the shell: an angelwing, scalloped and perfect and white.

I was thinking I wanted to smash it in his hand when the air up and turned to rain.

I could feel the water streaming over my skull in warm rivers through my hair. Gin and Ty started right in carrying on like this storm was the thing they'd been waiting on. Sand ran in

murky rivers down their legs and arms, slicking cotton to their backs. Whooping, Gin planted her feet in the dark sand and spread her arms wide. She opened her lips to the pouring sky.

Ty twisted round to watch her and saw me. My dress was so wet I felt like I wasn't wearing a thing but rain, and I folded my arms over my chest, grabbing onto my shoulders like that'd keep me from splitting down my middle. Ty tilted his head at me and then I saw his lips shape, "Wavy," but I couldn't hear his voice over the booming sky. Gin must have, though. She spun round, wide-eyed and lightning-lit. Her lips made a dark circle in her dirty face; her arms dropped to her sides and hung. I could feel my feet sinking down in the sand.

"You promised," I said. The thunder ate up my words.

I left and she let me.

CHAPTER 5

The Hatch's were coming for dinner and I hoped they'd choke on it.

"We'll make it real nice," Ladye told me, cranking the flour over a heavy brown bowl of fizzing yeast. "Set with china, like a real supper party."

"Just great," I mumbled, snapping butter bean pods while Ladye sifted. It'd been nearly two weeks since Gin broke her promise, since she didn't stop me leaving, since I gave up trying to follow, since we'd even spoke a word to each other, and the last thing I felt like doing was sitting down across from Tyler Hatch. But Ladye wouldn't hear it: they were coming.

After a few more minutes cranking, she shrugged and dumped the rest of the flour in the bowl of Crisco, sugar, and yeast and started working the sticky roll dough over with the old wooden spoon. A line of flour streaked her pale cheek. I could smell the yeast bloating as she stirred. It was Great-Gran's recipe, the one we usually saved for Christmas and Easter and Isadore's birthday, and it seemed wrong, Ladye making yeast rolls on account of the Hatch's. Beat me why, but she seemed nervous. She'd rolled her hair fresh for the occasion and her voice got higher the more words she said in a row.

I split another pod; butter beans flew. "Isadore coming?" I knew he wasn't; she hadn't invited him. She never did when Mrs. Hatch was coming over.

"Oh, I'm sure he wouldn't want to," Ladye clucked. "Not his thing."

"He say that?" I was pushing and I knew it.

Ladye shot me a pointy look, smiled too sweet, and asked, "Where's your sister got to?"

I cracked the last brown pod, spat, "How should I know?" A hail of mealy beans, pale as maggots, dropped into the metal colander.

"Enough!" Ladye smacked her palms on the kitchen table. Flour burst white into the air. "I don't know what had you so sour, but you best get over it before they get here. I have had it,

you hear me?"

"Fine." I stood, fixing to storm off, just as Gin came skipping through the back door, whistling Ty's tune. She made a trail of sand around the table and stuck a finger in the roll dough, never looking at me once.

"About time." Ladye smacked her hand away from the bowl. "Mrs. Hatch and Tyler are coming for dinner."

Gin chirped, "Deedee's making a Jell-O," and made a face at Ladye like they were in on a joke. Ladye laughed and the rollers on her head jiggled. I squeezed around the table without touching Gin and left the kitchen, fuming. Calling her Deedee, like the woman was blood. I crossed the entry and, glancing over my shoulder like they'd take a break laughing to wonder where I'd gone, slipped past the ticking grandfather clock and into the parlor. We never used the telephone, hadn't wanted one at all. "Don't see what I'd use it for," Ladye had told the salesman, leaning forward to let him light her Lucky. "Anyone I'd want to talk to I can summon with a yell." But when he'd shown her the receiver, smooth and pink as a conch shell, she'd been sold.

I lifted the dusty telephone from the cradle on the side table and pressed it to my ear, spinning the rotary until I heard the ring.

"Dare," Isadore said.

My voice came out high. "Ladye wants you over for dinner." I could feel the receiver trembling against my face.

"Wavy?"

Isadore always got us right.

"Wavy!" Ladye yelled from the kitchen. "Get your bottom back in here and help Gin set the house straight."

I stammered, “Yeah. Six o’clock,” and hung up.

Gin took the front porch; I took the dining room. Ladye stayed holed up in the kitchen whipping up a feast she deemed worthy of a supper party: spoon bread, fresh-trawled flounder dredged in cornmeal and fried, boiled butter beans, red slaw, and her sticky pecan pie—the one she liked to call “famous” even though the only people who’d ever had a slice were dead or living in Mud Neck. I beat the entryway rug clean, straightened all the chairs and tipped faded portraits of dead Loops straight with my fingertips.

The grandfather clock tolled four, four and thirty, then five. Ladye set the table with china—five places, one short—and disappeared upstairs to unroll her hair. I frowned at the porch. Gin, who’d spent all of ten minutes brushing the wicker rocker seats off with her bare palms before she plunked down on the top step, was watching the new flock of shiny come-here boats zip by up the Narrows. Getting ideas, no doubt.

At six o’clock on the toll, I heard the rattle of Isadore’s truck. Ladye, who’d only just come swaying down the stairs, went pale under her rouge. She was at the door before he’d had a chance to put his knuckles to the wood—the quick rap-rap that’d always let us know it was Isadore calling. I hung at the door of the kitchen, peeking around the frame.

“Isadore,” Ladye said, like his name was a question. She didn’t open the screen for him, just talked through it. “Don’t you look nice.”

Through the window I could see Isadore was fancy: he’d combed back his steely hair and even put an iron to his supper shirt. I must have been leaning from the kitchen door an inch too far because right then Isadore saw at me, and in the hard line of his mouth I saw he knew what I’d done, and felt sick. For a horrible moment I thought Ladye was thinking she’d leave him standing on the porch and shut the door, but finally she said, “What a nice surprise,” and invited

him in. Isadore brushed past me without saying a word. Ladye went straight for the dining room. I heard the clink of china.

Mrs. Hatch arrived a few minutes later, another big Jell-O mold jiggling between her hands and Ty trailing behind her. Her hair wasn't teased the way it'd been the first time. Instead, it swirled over her forehead: she'd tried to do it the Ladye way. But with her mousy locks, it was more like scat than meringue. Except for his burnt limbs and sun-bleached hair, Ty same as he had the first day I saw him. Gin came zipping round the side of the house to walk them up the porch steps. Ladye met them at the door and swept them inside, cooing over Mrs. Hatch's hairdo. They found Isadore and me standing in the entry.

"You know Wavy, of course. And this," Ladye said, sweeping an arm, "is my brother, Isadore."

Mrs. Hatch's mouth popped open. She gaped at me and Isadore like she'd stumbled on a couple of magic unicorns. "Well, aren't you two just the spitting image?"

Gin swallowed a snort and Ladye looked ready to put a sharp elbow to her side. "Let me take that," she said, stepping between us to take the Jell-O from Mrs. Hatch's hands. "You shouldn't have, Deirdre." When she turned, I could see the mold shivering on its plate. Isadore and I followed, quiet as mice. But I caught myself eyeballing him as we walked, the pokey ears and bony bird wrists and mud-brown eyes.

Ladye sat Mrs. Hatch at the head of the table, where she liked sitting, with Isadore down at the far end. I wasn't in my chair; everything looked strange. Mrs. Hatch's eyes darted at Isadore. Her face went pink. "I just love pudding!" she said, touching her fingers to her blotchy cheek as she ogled the spoon bread.

"Spoon bread," Gin muttered, not bothering to hide her grin behind her hand.

Mrs. Hatch's face went pinker.

"Don't guess you see a lot of it up north," Ladye offered. "Me and Isadore grew up eating it." Isadore was staring hard at the pan of flat meal with a rippling, browned crust. "One of Momma's specialties." Ladye sawed a crisp corner of spoon bread from the dish, the piece Gin and I'd usually fight for, and slid it onto Mrs. Hatch's plate, pushing the butter dish her way before serving up the next square to Ty, who dug in before anybody had gotten round to mumbling grace. Ladye, who'd usually slap your neck if you even took a sip of water at that table before you'd thanked the Lord for it, didn't say a word.

"Now I bet you think Ladye here makes it just as good as your mother, isn't that right Mr. Isadore?" Mrs. Hatch asked Isadore, leaning over her plate and talking like his ears didn't work right. Isadore opened his mouth and closed it.

"Ain't his mother," Gin said, mashing spoon bread between her teeth. I could see the yellow of it on her red tongue. "He's a Dare."

"Oh, now, I knew that!" Mrs. Hatch said. "The lady at the post office said something about that just last week." She herded a butter bean around her plate in circles with the tines of her fork. "She seems to know just everyone you could want to know. Now, what is her name? You know, don't you, Ladye? She always asks me after you."

"Louise Callis," Ladye said coolly, pulling her spine straight against the chair back. The silver edge of her knife dragged through her flaking flounder, squeaking against the good china. The sound made my teeth hurt.

"Yes, that's it!" The wayward butter bean, stabbed through with a tine, found its way into Mrs. Hatch's mouth. Didn't slow her talking though. She chewed busily, but managed to stop her jaws long enough to add, "Such a pleasant woman."

Ladye set her knife across the edge of her plate and was opening her mouth to speak, a mild smile tacked in the corners of her lips, when Isadore laughed and said, “Louise Callis ain’t worth the time it takes to say her name.”

Gin let out a sound stuck halfway between a snort and a laugh.

“Isadore,” Ladye sing-songed, a rashy blush creeping up her neck beneath her fresh-pressed dress collar.

“She’s always been perfectly nice to me,” Mrs. Hatch clucked, smiling nervously.

“Don’t mean she’s nice to everybody else,” Isadore said, staring across the table at Ladye. “All I’m saying.”

Ladye didn’t look at him. Her eyes were stuck on the blue, limp hydrangea Gin had bothered plunking in a glass a few minutes before our uncle had come rumbling up the drive. She reached out and tried to lift its head, but its stem was too weak to hold it. Gin’s eyes slid over to meet mine and her eyebrows bounced. I looked away.

Ladye lifted her chin; her eyes were tired. “Isadore,” she said quietly. “I wish you’d go.”

“Oh, he doesn’t need to leave!” Mrs. Hatch cried. She twisted her napkin in her soft hands, eyes wide. I saw Ty reach over and touch her shoulder, softly, just so, and his mother’s mouth shut.

Isadore let out a little laugh and his throat rattled like he had a piece of flounder skin stuck in there. “And I ain’t said a thing you haven’t said a hundred times over,” he said to Ladye, voice light but a touch cold. “And you know it.”

Ladye didn’t answer, didn’t even meet his eyes.

“Well, I ain’t staying where I ain’t wanted,” he said, rising from his chair. His skin was on his bones. Nodding once at Mrs. Hatch and once at Ty before throwing a wink at Gin and me,

he left the table. No one said a word until the crunch of truck tires on the oyster shells told us he was gone for good.

It was Mrs. Hatch that finally broke the quiet. She chuckled thinly, “Funny sort of man.”

Ladye tipped a splash of Cherry Heering into her glass. “He’s a Dare,” she said flatly, like that’s all he ever was.

My mouth was open before I knew what I was saying. “Isadore’s good through,” I told her stubbornly, my voice ringing too loud in the narrow little dining room. “You’re wrong, making him go.”

Ladye took a deep pull from her glass and dabbed her mouth with her napkin. Her lips left a smear of red. “How about a toast,” she said, smiling brightly, “to Nobody Bridge?” She lifted the near empty glass of dark Heering. “For bringing us all here together here in Mud Neck.”

All around the table, they clinked. “Here here!” Ty said, knocking edges with Gin’s glass of milk. Me, I left my cup sitting on the tablecloth, water beading and running down its sides to wet the tablecloth in an ever-growing stain.

When dinner was done, Ladye and Gin walked the Hatch’s to the door. I carried what was left of the Jell-O straight to the kitchen and let it slide into the trash.

Ladye came wobbling in, legs loose under her dress. She’d drunk the Cherry Heering dry. I thought about Isadore sitting alone in his kitchen and felt like spitting at her.

“Look at her running after that boy,” Ladye chuckled, pointing at the window. Out the smudgy glass, I could see Ty pressing his palms flat on the back glass of the station wagon while Gin chased it down the drive, the soles of her feet flashing white as gull’s wings.

“Why do you let her?” I muttered.

“Let her?” Ladye snorted, scraping a china plate over the waste bin and handing it over to me. “Couldn’t stop her if I wanted to, and why would I want to? Perfectly sweet boy like Tyler.”

I added the last dish to the stack and sat at the table, arms crossed. “Sweet my foot.”

Ladye’s penciled brow wrinkled. She dropped a spoon into a glass to soak; it landed with a sharp clink. “Don’t be silly.”

I thought of Louise Callis and my face went hot. “Letting her run wild way you do.”

“Y’all are kids, Wavy. What you think, he’s gonna get her in trouble?” Ladye laughed.

“You just don’t care.” I kicked the table leg hard, sending the stack of serving dishes wobbling.

Ladye grabbed the edge of the table, stilling it. “Course I care!” she spat. “But I think you’re making mountains out of mole hills.” She gave me a warning look.

I muttered, “If you cared you’d stop her.”

That got her angry. She yelled at me, pointing in my face, “Sometimes caring’s letting someone do what they want.”

“Like Momma?” I shouted back.

Ladye smacked both hands on the tabletop and cried, “Stopping your momma’s what killed her.”

I heard a dish crack. I stared at Ladye. I didn’t know what she was talking about. “What?”

Ladye sighed, dropping into a chair. “Wavy, your daddy didn’t leave your momma,” she said, her voice scratchy and strange. She ran her finger along the edge of the big serving dish, the one her momma had left her. A wiggling black line now ran the length of it. Ladye looked like she was fixing to cry. “I drove him away. They wanted to go off together, but, well they were so

young. Too young. So I stopped it. Made him leave.”

I was shaking my head. “No, he left her and went—”

“No, baby.” Ladye put her hand on mine, drumming my knuckles with her fingertips.

“He wanted to take her with him and I wouldn’t have it.”

And she’d never said a word. I wanted to catch her long fingers and twist them until they popped and snapped. Out the window, Gin was skipping back through the shell cloud left by the station wagon’s tires. Her lips were puckered and I didn’t have to hear her to know she was whistling Ty’s song. Her swinging arms made swirls in the white dust, wingbeats. Dora’s spitting image, Ladye’d said. It didn’t change a thing, her telling the truth. Dora was dead either way. Dora was dead because Ladye hadn’t stopped her running around, hadn’t stopped her loving a bad news boy, hadn’t stopped him ruining her, hadn’t stopped her dying. And wasn’t even going to stop my sister from doing the same dang thing.

Nothing but trash born of trash.

“Well maybe she wouldn’t have gotten in trouble in the first place if you hadn’t taught her to be a whore,” I hissed, jerking my hand from under hers. “Carrying on with Isadore like people don’t know.”

She had me by the wrist, dragging me out the front door and down the porch steps, before I’d even felt the slap she’d laid cross my cheek. I hit the patchy grass on my knees, felt a fiddler’s roof cave under me. Gin was standing over me, white to the hem with shell.

“Fetch a switch,” Ladye told her, dropping my arm. Gin didn’t move; her powdery toes were sunk in mud. But Ladye barked, “Now!” and Gin walked to the marsh’s edge, where the wild cherry tree kept trying to grow in salt dirt, and ripped a skinny branch from the sapling. The tree gave it up thrashing. Gin walked back to us slow, eyes on the dirt, and placed the branch in

Ladye's flat palm.

Then Gin looked down at me and mouthed one word: run.

I wouldn't. I wanted her to see it, what she'd done to me.

"Don't you ever speak that way again, Wavy Loop," Ladye said. "I will not have it." It was almost dark and above her head I could see the first stars coming in, pinpricks in the black. Gran's hand shook bad as her voice as she raised the switch and I saw what Gin had picked: green wood, soft and skinny as a whip.

I curled my fingers in the sandy ground and smelled salt. The switch coming down whistled like wind through the branches of the pines and snapped against my legs over and over until the wood bled sap and I bled blood and Gin sobbed, "Stop it, just stop."

It was past midnight when the pebbles tapped the windowpane. I woke with my legs on fire; they felt stung, like I'd been sleeping twisted up in a sea nettle. Gin wasn't there; she'd never come to bed. I squeezed my eyes tight and held still as stone, hoping if I did everything would stop—the pain in my legs, the tapping on the window. But the pebbles kept right on pecking the glass, long past when I'd have given up trying.

Downstairs, I heard the porch screen whine. The staircase creaked.

I felt the mattress shudder: Gin.

Gin threaded an arm behind my skull and pulled me upright. Her nose brushed mine but I kept my eyes shut. I didn't want to look at her. "You gotta wake up, Wavy." Another pebble pinged off the glass. Gin rested my back against the headboard and scrambled away. The window rattled open and I heard her whisper, "Come on!"

I opened my eyes, frowning at her. She slid back onto the bed and whispered in my ear,

“We’re getting you out of here.”

“And going where?” I mumbled, stifling a cry as Gin stripped the sheets from my sticky legs. “Timbuktu?”

“Hollow House.”

The hinges of the door whined. Ty stepped through the gap. “Hi, Wavy,” he whispered, lifting that flat Indian hand.

I pulled my nightgown down, twisting it around my toes.

“Let him help,” Gin commanded, putting a shoulder under my arm. Ty slid in place on the other side. His pale hair brushed my cheek. They lifted. My legs unfolded under me and my bare feet hit the floorboards; I felt fresh scabs split their seams up and down the backs of my legs and let out a little cry. I glanced at Ty, scared he’d heard.

“She told me,” he said softly. “My dad, he used to do that sometimes. Bastard.” His breath tickled my ear. “You ready to walk?”

I could smell his hair, like warm bread and woodsmoke. I nodded, and together they carried me from the house and into the night.

CHAPTER 6

I woke with their voices in my ears. Ty and Gin. For the second before I opened my eyes I thought we were all in Momma's bed, Ty stretched out between us, sinking his own dent in that old mattress.

But I was in Hollow House, twisted up in the tangle of moth-eaten quilts Gin had laid on the kitchen floor, alone. The back door was open; I could hear them laughing out there. I planted my hands and pushed myself up off the floor. The raw-striped backs of my thighs stuck to my skirt and I winced, hissing. I hobbled through the mudroom, peeling the cotton from my legs. It came away striped with yellow and pink lines.

The air howling through the open door felt dry, like the wind had blown the wet right out the July sky. I leaned my hip on the splintered doorframe and scanned the shore. There were white caps peaking out on the Narrows, and even more down towards Hole in the Wall. The sky was clear blue, but looking at the waves breaking between the mainland and Rip's, you'd think a Nor'easter had come squalling. But it didn't look like wind had Gin and Ty worried none; they'd gotten the broke-down dinghy overboard. A canyon of sand marked the keel's path into the water, where the boat now floated between the barnacled pylons of the old dock, bobbing and strained against its lashings. The thing was ugly as sin, patched and mismatched and mangy as a possum. The sail was a coffee-stained sheet of muslin I knew Ladye'd be missing in a week, and the mast was twisted trunk of driftwood, branches and all.

But they'd finished it. And looked like they were fixing to sail it.

The mainsail was pulled taut from the mast, and Gin was aboard stitching a hand's length seam in the already patchy muslin sheet. Ty was standing right beside her on the deck, tacking an oar under the gunwale. He had to duck his head to keep from knocking the lowest branch still sticking from the dinghy's tree-mast. They looked busy, but easy with each other, and watching

them I knew I'd be danged if I was letting the two of them sail off without me.

"Gin!" I shouted, waving.

If the dinghy didn't up and sink right there, it'd be off that dock and sailing for Bay waters in under a minute. The patched sail whipped loose and wild as Gin jerked the boom loose. Ty was trying his best to tease the ropes off the crooked pylons. The wind off the Narrows whipped her name right back in my face. She didn't turn. They were going to leave without me.

Trying to hurry, I eased down the screaming steps.

Soon as I left the cover of the house, the wind across the sandy dirt came at me so strong I stumbled, thinking I might fall. The marsh-grass and jimsonweed along the shore flattened and whipped. The tidewater in the muddy caller's holes rippled with wind while the fiddler crabs themselves hid down below. A ripple was probably a crashing wave to a fiddler, and I couldn't blame them hiding when I felt like holing up inside the home place myself. But Gin saw me coming and lifted a hand from the rippling sail.

"Come on!" she hollered. I got to the dinghy with the wind tearing my hair.

"It's blowing a gale out here!" I shouted at Gin.

"What?" she yelled back.

"It's blowing a gale out here!" Tyler shouted.

Gin nodded at him, laughing. Her ashy snarl of curls stood straight from her skull; she looked like dandelion the second before its blown to smithereens. "Gonna be wild!" she shrieked, smacking the graying gunwales with her palm. "Won't even have to get the motor going. Wind'll take us straight to the Hole."

"You sure it's safe?" I yelled, watching the waves rise and break against the marsh's edge. The clouds were broom-swept across the sky. I thought of my project back in the kitchen:

the pretty piles of china. Broken things waiting for me to fix them.

“Now you promised,” Gin told me, grinning, “you ain’t gonna cry. No babies allowed.”

Ty smiled at me. “Wavy isn’t a baby,” he said.

“Let’s go,” I told her. The line where the blue sky met the water was rippling and white.

“I ain’t afraid.” I was, but I was stubborn too. They weren’t going anyplace without me, not ever again.

I stepped aboard the dinghy’s gap-boarded deck and felt hard land give way to the swaying, unsound hold of water. We Loops weathered water, but truth was this Loop didn’t love being on top of it. Boats made my teeth feel loose and my bones go bendy inside me. Watermen called it the wobbles, something no self-respecting islander would admit to having. Wobbles were for mainlanders and landlubbers and babies like me. I sunk down to the deck, tucking my knees inside my arms and heels to my butt as my guts flipped somersaults inside my ribs. My legs stung where my skin pressed to skin, but I held tight.

The bile bubbled up in my throat as Tyler unknotted the last rope from the pylon and the boat went ripping from the dock, mainsail full to the batten with the battering wind. Gin whooped, bracing her shoulder to the tiller to keep the rudder straight as the dinghy tore over the Narrows, a fresh-shoed horse loosed in green pasture. Wind-tears streamed from my eyes and down my throat, but I found myself laughing. The gale whistled over my ears. Spinning the boom, Tyler aimed Gin’s dinghy for Hole in the Wall. “Maybe we’ll see dolphins!” he yelled down to me, free hand miming the curve dive of a diving dolphin’s spiked back.

But halfway to Hole in the Wall, the wind turned mean. It came roaring from the south, and all along the island’s shore the loblollies began to thrash their furry branches. Wayward Canadian geese flew in v’s above our mast, honking as their feathers beat fast as Carter

Sparrow's fence-geese, the painted wooden ones he made with the pinwheel wings. On the Narrows, it was as if some great giant had taken a spoon to the salty pot and stirred and stirred. Walls of water cracked against the hull, spraying the lot of us with stripes of gray foam. The surf was getting bigger, and instead of splitting the waves, the dinghy started riding them. The bow bucked mountains and dove into watery ravines; all I could hear was the slap of water on water. I twisted my arm in the spare rope making coils on the deck and splayed my legs wide, planting my soft soles against the inside of the dinghy's shallow hull. Toes to the gunwales. The boat bottom-smacked a wave and I heard the motor snap. The halyard lashing the boom whipped loose. It came swinging.

Gin was shouting something but the wind sucked the voice right from her mouth. Nothing left her lips but spit, and I could see the veins pop and wiggle under the thin skin on her forehead. Ty dove at the boom rope, missing and missing again as the wet eel snapped through the driving spray. Ty was shouting too, or maybe he was just screaming. I couldn't tell. I snarled my knuckles in the coils of ropes like a hand held and tried not to close my eyes, even as the bow hit the hard sea again, again. "No," I told it, "please." The water swirling over and under the dinghy's sides was gray and brown and blue as bruises; the sharp spray picked tiny holes in my cheeks and eyes. Without the mainsail stretched and full, we had no direction to go but down the sloping sides of wave and water. We went screaming. If the seawater hadn't washed down my face and stolen my voice, I'd have been wailing like a throat slit piglet, butchered, blood pumped clean as tears from the slick chambers of its thumping, dying heart.

But hollering couldn't stop the water or wind, and the boat was plunging through the waves, hull smacking and surging up only smack down again. The violence of the up and down shook me from my wedged spot beneath the gunwales and my legs went flopping through the

air. Gin skittered across the deck beside me, hands scrabbling for a hold on the centerboard. The bow bucked on the swell of a huge wave. We slid towards the stern.

“Hold on!” Ty shouted, and I did, but it didn’t do me good.

Gin landed on top of me, a tangle of bones and wet skin. Water dripped off the tip of her nose and onto my cheek. Then, above Gin’s head, a gale came howling. The mast snapped like a switch. The loosed mainsail turned into a white egret and flew up and away into the sky, flapping its great muslin wings. When the rope knotted up through my fingers and around my wrists jerked me, I knew. I screamed my sister’s name, but she couldn’t hear me. The rope dragged me from beneath Gin’s body. I tried to grab hold of her, scrabbling at her arms, but my fingers slipped over her. I screamed her name. But I was pleading with the roar of ruining air, the crack of boards coming apart beneath her bare feet, the bellow and squeak of Ty’s half-grown voice.

I whipped from the deck and into the air, overboard. Gin didn’t grab me; Gin didn’t save me, and when I hit water I knew I’d die in it.

My sister was screaming my name. The water was swirling around me, pulling me under even as I held my arms above me, reaching for the sky, but I saw her. Ty had her by the waist as she hung half over the gunwale, her face stretched and gaping and arms popping from their sockets. Her hair was slicked to her skull. I saw it now, my face in hers: our ashy manes and tan skin and brown eyes, and our long, bony hands. Picking fingers, Ladye called them. Picking blackberries, picking hard crabs, picking pickles from the jar, picking noses, picking willow switches, picking pansies. Picking at each other: a pair of sisters.

Gin was a hooked shark in Ty’s hands, fighting to jump in after me, but he held her too tight. Those knobby fingers of ours splayed long and grasping, like she thought there was still time to grab hold of me. But there wasn’t; I knew.

In another life, it might have been me reaching for her, but this wasn't that life. Gin and I were born thundershook. Me first; Gin second.

I saw my name leave her lips. She wailed wind.

The water swallowed me whole.

Beneath the waves there was a quiet that held me. The roar of the wind and water dulled until it sounded to my ears like the coppery insides of Gin's Bric-a-brac conch, just the low pulse of blood in my ears. Salt seeped in my thighs and stung me to my bones. The warm water tugged at my legs and arms as I spun through the dark, down, down. I should swim, I thought, but when I tried I was climbing rain; there were no rungs to hold. The water slipped through my fingers smooth as my sister's body and I was left sinking down, away from the wind and the boat and Gin. Deeper, the water was cool and calm. Sand tapped my cheeks. Bubbles burst from my mouth and surged up towards the fast-dimming light, racing for the sky I couldn't see.

Behind my ribs I felt a fire spark and grow, burning my guts black. I opened my mouth to put it out and the Bay filled me up with salt and sand and water.

I didn't turn to driftwood.

I drowned.

CHAPTER 7

The grandfather clock doesn't stop tolling on the day I die, like in the old song, but it does stop. The hands tick their last second; the pendulum hangs behind the doors, deadweight. No one notices at first. Gin and Ladye move through the house as they have every day of the week since I died, Gin watching the water from one window, then the next, and Ladye pacing in her curlers, until one, bumping the other's shoulder in the hall, says, "It's so quiet." And when they look at the clock, it's stopped, hour hand on four and minute hand on thirty-two.

Great-Grand's clock was never much. Just a skinny chimney of pine, two doors, the pendulum, its weights, and a moon face. It didn't chime on the quarter hour and its sides and hands were plain as white paint. The clock's stood in the home place's entry, right where Great-Grand stuck it, tolling time every half-hour since the thundering day we were born. In the clock's tenure, the Loop house has never had more than thirty minutes of quiet. Now the quiet fills the rooms, thick and real as the cobwebs taking root in the corners.

In my living life, I was about as scared of that clock as I reckon a person can be of something. Bong, bong, bong, it'd toll, and my blood would curdle like milk in vinegar. It was that old clock song that got me, the one Ladye used to sing us on nights Gin or me couldn't get to sleep. Ninety years without slumbering, tick-tock, tick-tock, his life's seconds numbering, tick-tock, tick-tock. But it stopped short, never to go again, when the old man died. Ladye would tap her nails on the headboard when she sang the ticks, tap-tap, tap-tap, and Gin would laugh. I never did. See, what had me so scairdy was in this song, the old man's clock stops ticking when he croaks. But Great-Grand's clock didn't stop. It kept right on tolling. I used to think that meant he wasn't dead at all. That the dead-him was still here in the house, watching his clock tick away, waiting.

Funny to think it'd scared me, way things are now.

Here's how it happened: I was stuck in the mud for days I couldn't count.

No sun or moon down there, no sleeping or waking. No heart beating in my dead chest. Just my limbs flapping willy-nilly in the tide, the bones slipping from my soft sockets, my hair swirling off my skull in clumps, rot setting in.

Me, I became bloat and bones: potbait.

The crabs ate my eyes first but I didn't feel a dang thing. Just lay there while their claws clicked in my sockets. I worried a bit thinking I'd go blind, but turns out when you're dead, you don't need your eyeballs to see. There was plenty to watch down there, too: stingrays, white as kites, nettles and eels. Menhaden sparkled and flashed in great clumps and flounder skim the mud, nipping. And when it got murky, I listened to the crabs under my ribs, the butterfish between my toes. I listened to the tide pound.

I listened to that storm come roaring.

The current dragged me out of the mud, jerking my hands and kicking my feet, tearing the last shreds of collar from my slack neck. The water folded me in half and spun me round fast as the whirligig at the County fair, the one Gin made me ride. Alive, the feel of that made me spit up my scrambled eggs. Dead, I started feeling loose in my corpse. It got going at my fingertips. I felt my knuckles slipping out my skin like a hand from a stiff glove. And funny, that's all it took. I peeled out of my body. Wallpaper off an old wall. Just fell right out of myself. I tried to grab on, to get a grip on what was left of me, but the water tugged that body back down into the slimy black and me, or whatever you want to call me now that I'm not in myself, I floated for sky, buoyed on the angry storm tide.

I came up under a thunderclapping cloud. There were no stars—just black sky and

crashing brine. No sign of land, either, with the water that high. I got it in my head that I'd swim myself to shore—like I knew where shore is, like it made a dang difference where I was, like knowing how to swim comes with dying—but moving my arms and legs didn't do a thing. I could feel the edges of me, sure, but seemed like nothing else in the world could. Waves went through me without so much as a ripple to tell you I was there. I bobbed along on the swells, watching that storm crackle and flash overhead and the raindrops zing through me and splash, and I thought, If Gin could see me.

I thought about Gin a lot in that water.

I couldn't say if she was dead. Reckon I thought she could have been there on the bottom, caught in that same tide. But even if she had been, I didn't know if she'd be dead like me—still around, I mean. I thought: could be she's just-dead (the way they still think I'm dead, even if they've never found that body I lost track of) or could be she's alive. Could be she's already gone, left Rip's running the minute she and Ty washed up on shore.

Could have been, but wasn't.

The storm passed quick for all the fuss it made coming. The clouds opened up and the water went smooth as glass. I bobbed along, easy as a pot-buoy, watching the sky. The stars barely had a chance to get back to twinkling before the sun came creeping over the watery edge of the world and the sky went from blue-black to pink. And I felt a sandbar catch me, sugar-coarse and solid beneath my palms.

I came ashore on Hole in the Wall.

I felt my used-to-be toes sink into the sand and, thinking I might slip straight through the earth to China the second I tried, I stood up. It worked, even if I couldn't see myself doing it. Under the waves, the sand was smooth and footprint-less. Baby fish glinted in the shallows and

didn't dart off when I lifted my foot to take one step, and then another, walking up that sandbar until I was out of the water that drowned me.

Everything looked the same: the storm-stripped loblolly trunks, the tangled osprey nests, the muskratty swamps. I'd come ashore on the Bay side of the sandbar; Rip's was tucked under the rippling spine of dunes running the length of the bar. I headed up the highest dune but I was almost afraid to look, like the island would have sunk in the time I'd been dead, Mud Neck swallowed up by tide. I'd find eelgrass whipping about the headstones and water moccasins slipping through the mail slots, the home place empty, left.

But Rip's was there. And between me and it: the dinghy. Or what was left of it. I peeked over the gunwale, thinking maybe I'd find her curled up in this nest of splintered pine. But: nothing there.

So I went home.

Passing like wind through the jingling door of Rip's Post Office, I keep close to Ladye's heels. We find Louise Callis and Francine Irvin hunched over the counter with their noses near bumping. It's been a week since I went belly-up.

"Ladye!" Louise Callis gasps. She eyeballs Ladye's still-lit cigarette. "So good to see you out and about, and so soon. I was expecting Gin?" Her tone is sugar cut with sharp lime.

I was expecting to be following Gin here too, but Ladye couldn't find her. When I left my sister, she was holed up in Hollow House, fiddling over the soup tureen I didn't get to finish piecing. She'll stay hunched over that pile of broken china all day with or without me there, and watching her try to fit pieces that don't over and over makes me want to tear my hair out my skull. And besides, it's Monday, and like Gin used to tell me, mail's got no legs to fetch itself.

“Louise,” Ladye mutters. “Francine.” She nods her head without looking up and goes straight for the post box. Her cotton dress back is slicked to her spine with sweat; since Isadore and Ladye’s supper party fight, Ladye’s been too proud to borrow Isadore’s Ford.

“Hear those Hatch’s up and left,” Mrs. Callis says at Ladye’s damp back. Her tongue tips up at the end of the sentence, like it’s a question she’s asking. When my Gran doesn’t answer, she snorts to Mrs. Irvin: “Silly woman, Deirdre.”

“And how are you holding up, Ladye?” Mrs. Irvin asks, a little too loud.

Ladye slides a bundle of lady’s magazines and another stack of “sorry for your loss” cards, the same kind islanders have been dropping in our post box all week long, out of the metal slot and pockets the brass key. “Just fine,” she says, but even I can see her face looks strange, like she’s penciled her brows in crooked over her eyes.

“Ladye’s always been strong,” Mrs. Callis tells Mrs. Irvin, as if the woman hasn’t been living on this same spit of dirt as us all her life. “Why, I can’t think what I’d do, losing *two* children.” Ladye’s shoulders go ramrod stiff under her damp dress. “First Dora and now poor Wavy, but Ladye here just bounces back every time. Isn’t that right?”

“Yes,” Ladye says. “Guess so.” And she leaves the door’s bell jangling in her wake. I linger, because I can.

“Terrible thing to lose a child,” Mrs. Irvin clucks soon as Ladye’s out of sight. She rifles through the wicker basket of bright dum-dum suckers with the points of her nails.

“But she didn’t really lose the girl, did she?” Mrs. Callis huffs. “It’s not losing if you keep on losing the same thing again and again. Carelessness, I’d call it.”

Mrs. Irvin giggles high and nervous. She twists the crinkling wrapper from a holly-red cherry pop. “You are so bad.”

“Truth, isn’t it? Letting those children run around like a couple of red Indians. You’ve seen them.”

“Yes, but to have one die. I just can’t imagine,” Mrs. Irvin whispers. She actually manages to look sorry over me dying, even with the cherry sucker poking a hard ball through her thin cheek.

“Isn’t the first time, is it? Think of poor Dora.”

“Dora made her bed. Shacking up with his like.” This disgusts Mrs. Irvin; that’s plain to see. My dirty Momma, dying like she deserved, blood run from the hole between her legs as her little babies cried and cried and the house thumped away.

“Dora had to learn it somewhere, is all I’m saying.” Mrs. Callis’s lips bunch up tight, like she’s bit a lemon.

I get up real close to them, so close I can see the powder clinging in the little hairs over Francine’s thin lip, like ash. Louise’s skin is too smooth, fresh cream beneath her thick powder. She’s poreless as sheet tin.

“Honestly, Louise,” Mrs. Irvin says.

Mrs. Callis rolls her eyes. “Whatever their lineage, it’s a shame. And Lord, to drown of all things.”

Can’t argue there.

Drowning kills you, but not so fast that you don’t know you’re dying. You draw the water into your chest and feel it there, too hard to breath, and the seconds tick tick tick. You die full of the thing that kills you. And so you drown a long time.

“Well, she came by it honestly.”

And I think, What—dying? But I reckon that’s true.

Islanders like their ghost stories. To hear them tell it, Rip's is just crawling with dead folks: the headless light-keeper that walks Shoal in fog, a crying baby left in Keeble's cornfield, the dead redcoats digging for King's gold in the cedars by Diggs' tidemill. And they might well be here. I am. But I'll tell you straight: nothing dead gets to be anything but dead. Dead is dead, and I'm staying this way. There's no amount of rattling doors or howling that'll bring me back to life, and far as I can tell, I can't do those things besides. What I can do is leave my corpsy place in the marsh and pass right through mud and water and walls and dirt and windows. That dang heron doesn't even hear me going. You can see a lot when nobody sees you, but even that's not as fun as you might think it'd be. Seems like for all I'm dead I mostly spend my days and nights doing the same dang thing I did living: following.

Forever, forever, following.

When she gets back to the house, my Gran doesn't bother stepping over the dead flowers on the porch. Pausing a beat, she crushes what's left of a white rose into the plank with my threadbare Keds, the pair I left by the bedroom door. She's taken to wearing them since I died. Then, throwing open the screen, Ladye yells for Gin. But no one's home.

Being Loops, Ladye and Gin didn't put on a big funeral for me. We're not much for pomp, and besides, there was no body. Stuck a coffin in the dirt and got it done with. Islanders sent flowers to the home place anyway—big bouquets full of stiff looking pink pom-poms and nodding rosebuds—but Ladye didn't bring one stem inside. That porch filled up in a day, the bouquets bright and smelling sweet as Ladye's good perfume, but by week's end, the flowers were wilting. Roses dropped their limp petals; pink pom-poms turned brown and got a sour stink to them.

The porch isn't the only part of the Loop house going to seed. It takes some doing

keeping a house, especially one that's sinking. Cleaning was always me and Ladye's game; Gin's more for making messes. But Ladye's stopped fooling with it, and in a week, the home place has gone from tidy to hurrah's nest. Between Gin's muddy feet and pocketfuls of pebbles, scotch bonnets, and cicada shells, Ladye's sewing what-have-you, and the everyday busywork of all the spiders, mice, and salt water always squeezing in the old walls' many cracks, it's getting a run-down look around its edges. A trail of black mud runs in footprints from the front door, up the staircase, and into our bedroom. The faded wedding photograph of Great-Gran and Great-Grand hangs crooked on the entryway walls, gilded frame tilting at the water as if the tide's dragging them in.

Walking through the house, Ladye doesn't seem to notice any of it. Going for the pantry, Ladye stands on the rubber toes of my Keds to reach the top shelf and drags the square bottle from behind the mason jars of peaches she put up last August, before salt got in our old peach tree's roots and poisoned it dead. The syrupy Cherry Heering slaps the bottle's insides.

Plunking down at the supper table, Ladye pours a slug into her little glass. It's the color of croaker blood—brown-red, and thick. When she lifts the glass to sip its base leaves a ring of brown wood in the dust. Closing her eyes, she tips the Heering down her curving throat. She sets the glass back in its ring, lining up its edges just so, and then she brings her open palms down on the tabletop, smacking the wood so hard the empty glass topples and the dust bursts from the grain in a cloud, like smoke. She keeps on slapping, just beating the heck out of the table until I think her palms must be smarting bad as my legs had under her switch. And then Ladye's crying, black filling the wrinkles she hides in the corners of her eyes. Specks of dust sift through the air to settle as if they'd never flown.

I find Gin at Hollow House. She tries to fit one china shard to another, again, again.

Spiky marsh-grass shoots up between the oyster shells on Mud Neck Road, then soft baby loblollies and holly and gum. A wild persimmon tree opens its broad leaves between the ruts of the lane, and slowly the rut stops being a rut; the whole roadway turns to brushy grass, like nobody ever rolled a tire down here at all. Gin stops using the lane and turns to favoring the deer paths winding catawampus lines through the thickets, over creeks, and under the trunks of dogwoods. She adds her footprints to the hoof marks the quiet island herd presses in earth and sand and runs her fingertips through the rut lines the young bucks carve into the rough bark of the pines. My sister doesn't seem to sleep at all anymore; she runs the nights through while Ladye sleep-breathes away until morning, when she'll rise to unroll the brittle curlers from her hair, preparing always for the islanders she no longer leaves Mud Neck to see. Every Monday Ladye goes through the same pile of mail, the fashion glossies she's read ragged and the bills that never did get paid, and thanks Gin for the mail-fetching she doesn't do. But Gin fetches home other things: crabs from her pots and persimmons from the wild trees and oysters pried from the breaker rocks—whatever she can find. Ladye makes meals of her bounty and that's how they live, scraping the land and water to fill their bellies. When the electricity flickers off and the lights go dark, Gin drag Grand's lanterns from the attic and Ladye lights the wicks. They eat suppers by flame. Dust falls over bookcase, table, and chair: a gray mold that grows by the day. The thick cobwebs in the corners aren't budging. The crust of salt streaking the windowpanes is starting to steal the sunlight from the rooms. A field mouse has laid its pups in the pocket of Ladye's mink; they curl like pink-eyed-peas in a nest of pulled fur and shredded magazine.

When Gin isn't hunting food, she hunts rocks—gray and white and black and brown and red. Gin rakes them from the dirt beneath the holly trees with her bare fingers, tearing her long

nails to splinters. On her hands and knees, she mines the creek bottoms of their pebbles. Merciless, she leaves the schools of bitty minnows without their hidey-holes and the bumpy bullfrogs without their spots to sit and bellow. Gin stalks the shallows of the Narrows and folded stones between her toes. In the marsh, she sinks shoulder deep into the sludge and pulls pebbles from the sucking black above my coffin. Rocks knock the metal pail's bottom too many times to count.

When Gin has stolen all the stones Mud Neck's mud and dirt and sand had to offer, she surprised me. She lugs buckets and buckets back to Hollow House, up the wobbling stairs to what had been a bedroom, and empties them onto the old mattress on the buckling floor. She fills the bed full of stones. Gin works through the night, and after the moon's rise and set and many, many stones, the rocks stop being piles and start being me. She builds a Wavy. It has rock arms and legs and fingers and toes, a body of stony dunes lying in the place I lay when I was a flesh Wavy. My eyes are two shards of white bayglass and my lips are chunks of broken brick. The mattress swaybacks under the weight of stones. When she's piled all the rocks she has, Gin stretches out in her own empty hollow beside the rock me with her feet propped against the headboard. She tells the stones, "Night." And only then my sister closes her eyes and sleeps.

With Gin sleeping, I feel free to wander. The staircase steps make no sound beneath my soles as I slip from Hollow House, passing through wall and door.

A barn swallow swoops through my throat chasing a firefly. I don't feel a thing. It's still summer. The gum trees fill in the space between the pines, their soft green leaves blocking out the moonlight: Mud Neck Road is starless. But dips in grass and bramble mark the lane's old ruts, and they're easy enough to follow now I can go straight through the holly and loblolly trunks, never having to duck under or climb over. Not even Gin could keep up. Lightning bugs

draw bright dashes through the black and the holly leaves don't prick my feet. Deep in these new woods, a doe steps into my path, black eyes glossy as coat buttons. The doe's white-tipped ears tremble and flick and I smell the mossy fur of her sides as I slide between her hot ribs and away into the dark. I keep going.

Bric-a-brac's door is boarded and nailed, but I've gone in. In her hurry to get off Rip's, Mrs. Hatch had left most of what she'd brought right there in the house, the bulk of it still boxed and taped in the dusty cardboard towers choking the parlor and entry. I've walked the halls of this left-house, thinking I might find something he left. I saw only broken china—a mound of shards with smaller piles of ringing it: yellow and white, cream and red, blue. He'd been sorting them for me. But I feel no need to stand in his bare room and look at what I can't fix, and walk on by.

I pass the turn-off to Hollow House and keep going. She'll sleep until morning, watched over by the rock-me she's built. I mean to take a gander at this island we've been keeping from. But first thing: I'll look in on Isadore.

Near Mud Neck Road's mouth, the grass has gone from the ruts and the holly and gum keep to the forest side of the ditch. I can see the stars: Gin's ladle, the blinking firefly. The moon is a white swipe sliding west behind the loblollies. Isadore will be awake by now. For all he'd been off a deadrise two years, the man could never shake waterman's hours.

But when I round the bend to Isadore's, I stop, cringing at the bright white beaming from the bulb clipped high on a pole over his driveway. It casts a halo of light big as a house over the ground, stealing color from everything it touches. The grass is gray inside its ring, and for a second I think if I step inside it I'll see my own hands, gray and long-fingered. Course, this is a fool's thought—I have no hands to see—so I keep going.

But it's all wrong.

Isadore's house slouches to the dirt, roofline swayed and porch columns crooked. Pound nets still hang from the lines in the yard, but they're frayed and yellow as the dinghy's muslin sail. His stacked crab pots are red with rust; they've been in dry-dock for a long, long time. And there's that prickle in my skull, the one I felt the day Nobody's gates opened—the day the foundation broke beneath us and began to sink.

Isadore is sitting in the rocking chair on his back porch. The bright flood lights his face gray. I'm afraid to look at him, afraid of what I'll know. But I draw close, crossing the tattered screen to kneel before this man who found what was left of me. Isadore's eyes are open but he seems sleeping. A bottle rests in his lap, half empty, and more beside his gnarled feet. And he's old. Only a spit older than Gran but he's old. Wrinkles carve rivers in his cheeks and his blood is black under the paper skin of his knuckles. What was a squint are now two slits etched in his hard face. I wonder if he can see. It's been years, more than five—that's plain. I think of Gin, same as the day I died: flat across her front and narrow-hipped as Ty. Her freckled face a girl's.

Time's slid by us.

It's supposed to pass me by; there's no dragging the dead along. But Gin, Ladye: they've been left. The clock's stopped.

Isadore shakes in his chair. He is dreaming. His eyeballs dart and roll. They find my standing spot in the dark and fix on me, staring. I slip through the screen and away.

I walk the island. The roads are lined with houses I've never seen, doublewide and brick. Green paint peels from Nobody Bridge. At Foster's Wharf, half the deadrise slips sit empty. I find the crabbing boats dragged ashore, rusting up and stripped of their chugging motors. The tidemill's wheel is off its axel. In the parking lot of The Softshell Diner, the smell of fry-oil fills

the air, but I don't find Karwin Kidd scraping the griddle, but in his place John Kidd, his son, the spots smoothed from his cheeks and thick muscle stealing the lankiness of his limbs. I can't taste the corncakes whose yellow batter hits the greased stovetop, spitting. On Ferry Way, Mrs. Sparrow's marigolds bloom, red and yellow as flame. Louise Callis sleeps in an empty bed, snoring through lips puckered by age. Two coonhounds whine in the cage behind the house, muzzles white and brown eyes rheumy. Mr. Callis I find in the cemetery, headstone driven into the highest ground. His bones are bare beneath the dirt.

In my coffin I find nothing at all.

In our momma's bed, Gin sleeps, breath rifling the pale tangle of her curls. Rock-Wavy lays heavy in my hollow. The clock stands quiet in the hall. Morning turns to night. I forget how long I've been dead.

Days pile like stones.

CHAPTER 8

My sister wakes with the sun. She stretches with her soles flat to the headboard and tummy bowed. The knobs of her back grind and crack like knuckles.

The momma osprey shrieks outside the window and Gin answers it. There's a pair of them building a nest on the chimney. They drop pine and driftwood midflight and branches chatter down the molding shingles to pile along the grassy eaves. Top of the house looks fit to nest in, but I guess the momma bird's set on that chimney. Lucky for them winter doesn't come to Mud Neck anymore, or Gin and Ladye would be feasting on smoked fish-hawk.

"Racket's bad enough without you adding to it!" Ladye yells from downstairs.

Gin yanks her ratty nightshirt off and drops it as she walks to the bureau, shouting back, "Maybe I'm telling them to scram." Her nipples are flat pink nickels over her ribs, same as mine the day I died. Still feels wrong looking, so I drop down through the floorboards.

"Maybe," Ladye mumbles, sitting at the table tapping her lips with two fingers. Her Lucky pack's been empty for years, but old habits, I guess. I can almost see a cigarette pinched between her fingertips, lit and burning to ash. She folds her waist to reach a run in the ankle of her hoes. The tied-off darns of old runs dot her calves and thighs. Dangling tails of cut thread press to her skin beneath the hoes like wiggly white veins.

"You hunting today?" Ladye shouts at the stairs, pinching the netting from her shin. She slides a needle against her skin and out, stitching the tear shut. "Don't know about you, but I'm sick of filleting those skinny little croakers. More bone than meat."

"Yeah," Gin says, landing flat-footed at the base of the staircase. "Should be I can get us a bunny or two."

"A feast!" Ladye smacks her lips. Her hair is full of cracked plastic curlers.

"Two people's not a feast," Gin snorts, slipping a coil of rusty wire around her wrist.

“Isadore coming?”

Ladye tucks her bottom lip under her front teeth. “I don’t know.”

“Well he sure ain’t coming if you don’t ask him,” Gin said, rolling her eyes as she popped the latch on the back door, “you being the one who kicked him out and all.” The screen slaps shut behind her. I’d wince if I had a way to: I’ll never be used to them thinking no time’s passed.

“Hell,” Ladye mutters, knotting off her thread.

I follow Gin.

She takes the deer path through the marsh. She hops from tuft of wild rice to cordgrass to dirt, messing the five-clawed paw prints of coons and possums. I trail her along the shoreline through stands of showy jimson weed, bayberry, and marsh elder, until, at the mouth of Collier Creek, she cuts inland. I see we’re tracing her steps through the brush, flattening grass that’s sprung back since last she crushed it. My sister sets her first snare at the edge of a huckleberry thicket, kneeling first to rub away the smell of human on her hands with soil. It’s just a wire halo balanced in two notched sticks, its tail looped about a gum sapling’s trunk. She lines the snare up with the flattened trail so any cottontail on it will bound right through the wire loop. It’s a trick Isadore taught her—snaring game. Used to be I couldn’t abide it: limp, broke-necked critters that hung over Gin’s arm when she came bursting in the door, blood dribbling on heart pine from their slack jaws, my guts twisting.

Dead, I figure we all got to go somehow.

Snare set, Gin makes a beeline for Mud Neck Road. She’ll head for Hollow House now. It’s not china that has her eyes now; she’s started in on Ty’s room.

Grains trickle when Gin’s feet shake the floorboards in the little bedroom. The sand coats

the floor of the room, a desert under a sky of paper vines. Dunes of sand swell from the bowing pine. She's smoothed buckets of stolen beach into drifts, forming hills and hollows and creeks. Gin's built Rip's. At first I didn't see it: the tadpole shape, the broken line of Hole in the Wall's sandbars at its tip, the low, holey point of Mud Neck. But when she built Nobody, lashing branches with dry grass to make the roadway and bending willow switches to form its trestles, I saw what she'd done. The whole island, pieced of a million grains of sand.

Gin's moved to trees now. She pricks her island with twigs and sticks, riddling the sand with groves of dead brush. While Gin plants the cedars by the tidemill, the holly woods around Isadore's pebble house, I pace lazily through the walls and floor.

Never thought you'd get bored, being dead. Guess I never thought you'd get anything.

Reckon Gin could live forever and never mind.

Gin hums nothing-songs while she works away, a line of twigs pinched between her teeth the same way Ladye keeps her sewing needles. Looks like she's breathing tree. I go to the window and peer through the gaps in the twining honeysuckle and kudzu. Used to be winter would kill off the creepers, but now the vines snake up the walls and over windows, choking the whole house. It's near noon, but Gin had to light the lantern just to see her sand. Flames flicker on the dust that sifts through the air like ash. Outside, the cicadas fill the forest with radio static. Gin used to tell me that if you listened hard enough, their whining song would start to beat with your heart. Never could hear it. Fool thing to try with no heartbeat to speak of, I know, but I still do sometimes.

And that's what I'm getting myself ready to try when the cicadas shut up. A murder of crows bursts from the hollies, cackling. And I hear a thing I've not got an ear of for a long, long time: the rumble of an engine on Mud Neck Road.

Gin stabs a witchy crepe twig in Louise Callis's front yard, humming.

I go straight through the sand and floorboards and door and trees, racing until I hit the ruts. Somewhere up the road, tires churn. Branches crack. A buck bounds through the holly trees, mossy antlers wreathed in leaves and brown eyes showing white. "I don't know," I tell him, but my words have no mouth to leave and he passes me and is gone.

My nowhere-body's buzzing; I'm afraid with no reason to be. Wavy-Gravy: dead as a doornail, scairdy as a penned coon. "Get on, Gravy," I say to myself, and head straight for the noise. I hear a hollow knocking and the squeal and snap of limbs falling to earth. As the thicket thins, I see the car. It's one I don't know—white, boxier than any car I've seen. Its engine's running, but the car's not moving a bit. The tires under its smooth sides are sunk in mud with its silver grill near pressed to a fallen tree. And a man, arms thrown wide.

Closer, closer, I go, a prickle climbing up the rungs of my ribs and into my skull. I know before I see him. I know sure as I knew I was going to die the second that telltale jerked in my hands.

And then there he is, Tyler Hatch.

"Come on," he grunts, bracing his shoulder under the loblolly's trunk and pushing. His shiny shoes pedal and slide in the mud; the log doesn't budge. His white shirt streaked with moss and dirt, and tucked in its pearly buttons and sleeves, he's a man.

A boy left.

Now I get up so close to his face that I can see the dark of stubble poking out the smooth skin on his sharp chin. Ty's neat, bright hair is now shorn to a dull brown fuzz shot with gray at the temples; through it, I can see the blue of blood coursing over his skull. His body smells like laundry soap and salt. I'd guess him forty—old enough that his skin has settled over his cheeks

and long nose. Even so, I can see the echo of the boy he was, colt-limbed and nervous. The come-here's come back and my body is bones in the mud. Truth is I want to pinch him right there, where feather-soft hairs coat his nape like goose down. Pucker my lips to his ear and whisper, "I'm here." It's a crying thing, to want.

Cursing, Ty reels back to kick the trunk with his muddy shoe. I remember Gin in Hollow House, kneeling in the sand. And I can't think what'll happen should this man see my sister, every bit the spitting, freckle-faced girl she was the day Deirdre dragged him north. If he even can. No one else ever has.

But before I can figure out there's not a thing I can do about it, Ty stomps back to his car and gets in, slamming the door so hard the crows take off flapping a second time. Black wings burst from the holly trees all around the car; they've been watching. The car's brakes groan and Ty tries to reverse from the tree, mud spewing off the tires in lumpy sheets. Churning, the tires shudder and pop from the ruts to roll, crushing branch and bush, to turn back. I follow the taillights through the thinning woods. The car flies by Isadore's house with me at its bumper, and I see Ladye's curtains flutter in Isadore's kitchen window. One half-Loop still living, then. But I carry on following until Ty slows to a stop at the turnoff to Ferry Way. Mud Neck Road's sand now gives way to black tar dashed with yellow lines: a real road. Ty's lit a cigarette and smoke draws a web above the cracked driver's window. Behind the glass, he's sitting stone still, the cigarette pursed in his lips. I watch through the back window as Ty lifts his Nobody-green eyes to the rearview mirror, staring straight through me and into the forest he's left. He can't see me, but I lift a hand.

His eyes drop. The car bucks onto the pavement and I'm left standing in the settling dust. Tingling, I make my way home to Gin, past Isadore's and Bric-a-brac and into Hollow House's

open front door. My sister's should be here, smoothing palms down the sandy coast where the dinghy was tied the day I drowned, past the pebble home place and the pebble graves, where I'd bet a little pebble dead-Wavy is tucked under black sand. But Gin's gone; her sandland stretches over the floor, still and strange in the lightless bedroom.

I head first for the Loop house, but find only Ladye busy over the same dress she's been busy over for years, adding lace and buttons and darts only to tear them back out and start again. A lifelong dress, never worn. From there I cross the marsh mud and follow the deer path into the woods, to the snares I hope Gin's just gone off to check.

The sun is sinking around the curve of the blue sky when I find her kneeling in the rabbit run at the huckleberry thicket's brushy edge. Between her knees she's caught a baby cottontail with its neck wrapped in wire. The snare failed to kill it, but the little rabbit's spine is broken. It bound through the halo and tripped the branch. The halo proved a noose, snapping the critter's furry neck as it ran on through. It never knew it'd goofed until it was too late to take it back. The bunny's legs jerk in the air as it stares up into my sister's face with its big black eyes, whiskers jittering.

Gin touches the rabbit between its soft ears with the tip of her sandy finger. "Fool thing," she says, stroking its ruffled fur flat. "Why'd you run this way?" Then my sister wraps her fingers round the baby's throat and snaps its chin towards the tips of its ears. I hear the skull pop from the spine. The bunny's head lolls against her bare knees. Sliding her hand beneath the neck it just broke, Gin stands. She cups the little rabbit in the crook of her palm and makes her way into the marshland with the rest of her kill slung on her other arm. Halfway round the mud-sink, Gin stops. She stares down at the rabbit curled in her palm. If I didn't see it killed, I'd think the baby napping. Gin's jaw works under her freckled skin. Then, she reels back her arm and flings

the rabbit into the marsh. The limp body hits the mud with a gloopy ripple and sinks into the black. Company, I think. Gin ducks her head and walks on. Long rabbits' feet bounce with her gait.

Soon as she walks in the door, Ladye greets Gin with a hello that turns shrieking as soon as she sees the warren of dead cottontails over her granddaughter's bloody arm. "This girl's a hunter I say!" she cries, watching Gin dump the game on the table.

Ladye folds her dress over the chair back and gets down to the messy business of stripping the rabbits of their skin. Gin races up the staircase on her hands and feet and shuts the bedroom door tight behind her. I step into the entry to follow Gin but stop, staring, for there on the grandfather clock's long-frozen face, the minute hand has ticked.

CHAPTER 9

Ty's back the next day. I'm there waiting for him under the crooked signpost at the mouth of Mud Neck Road when his car dips off Ferry Way's smooth asphalt and into the uncombed dirt. I knew it wasn't done; I knew he wouldn't let us alone. It's him coming that got that clock's hand moving, and even if it was only a minute ticked, it means time's inching in forward without me.

He drives Mud Neck Road quick, like he's afraid the trees are growing in thicker every second his tires spend getting wherever he's headed. His tires whomp through potholes and rain-beds, past Isadore's sagging porch and over the creeping brambles. The car's white is piebald with sandy mud by the time it gets to the downed loblolly and rolls to a stop. Unfolding from the car to stand tall, taller even than Isadore, Ty drops his cigarette and grounds its butt into the dry brush with his toe. I settle in to watch him go at that trunk; it won't budge, but the idea of seeing him fail trying the same dang thing twice pleases me some. And with Gin busy softshelling the eelgrass on the Narrows shallow shore, I've got no worry of her stumbling on him today. Sneaky as they are, those shedding sooks will keep her cussing and casting for hours. Nothing to do but tuck in for the show.

Ty props an elbow to the car roof for a moment, eyeballing the fallen pine. He's dressed for dirt this time: frayed-kneed denim and an old t-shirt. Whistling, he rounds the car and pops the trunk. He's brought an ax, maybe, or a saw. With any luck he'll cut himself in half before he ever makes it through the many rings of the dead pine's trunk. But Ty doesn't pull an ax. He heaves a suitcase from the trunk, beat and stuffed to the seams, closes the hatch, ducks under the loblolly, and strides straight into our forest. The cicadas stutter into song.

In the dozen or so years since he left Rip's, the come-here's forgotten what Gin taught him about running the woods; that much is clear. When cobwebs tangle over his face, he flinches

from the silvery thread like they've stung, but the mosquitoes that flock to his bare arms and neck he lets suck at his veins unslapped, pinprick bodies bloating with hot blood. Sweat winds through the downy hairs behind his ears to sneak past his shirt collar. Wandering from the ruts, Ty sinks a leg thigh deep into the ditch's sucking mud. He groans and lobs his bag onto the road. Planting his palms smack dab in a three-leafed tangle of poison oak, the come-here drags his leg from the hole it's dug. The denim comes from the muck black with ooze and rotting gum leaves. He's stinking like a salt swamp at low tide. But Ty keeps going, eyes hard and mouth set in a tight line.

Ahead, I see the bright orange clump of daylilies at the turn for Hollow House's grown-over road. Ty's dark eyebrows draw over his thin nose and I see a flicker of something like knowing creep through his face. It's no good. Gin isn't there, sure, but her work is: the soup tureen, the Thorn Room sandland, the garden of tickweed that blossoms bright gold beside the porch all winter long. He'll know someone's been there.

But he passes the daylilies without turning; he's going home.

Bric-a-brac Place's sheet metal roof peeks hail-pocked but sound from the choking kudzu and honeysuckle that's clambered up its porch and along its folded eaves. The yard that on the day he and his mother moved in was full of cardboard towers is head-high with the leggy saplings of gum and oak. An orange square glows from the dark behind the porch's shredded screens: the "No Trespassing" sign county men nailed to the door back before the road grew over. Ty stands beside the holly tree at the edge of the house's overgrown yard and runs a hand over his buzzed hair. Watching him, I can hear the burst of china hitting packed dirt, see his impish grin split his cheeks. The shards rain; my palms are wetting against the smooth bark of that holly trunk. The smell of dry leaves fills my nose.

Ty coughs; I'm dead. Shrugging his bulging duffel over his shoulder, he winds his way through the brush to the porch. He tests each stair with his mud-sopped foot before stepping down, and lifts the curtain of torn mesh and dry vines to duck through what's left of the screen door. He wedges his fingers beneath the scrap boards nailed across the front door and pulls. Loose nails shoot from splintered pine. Digging a loose key from his back pocket, Ty plunges the silver teeth into the knob and jiggles. Hinges scream. The door swings in. No one's been in the house since the Hatch's flew north. If you want to call me no one. Wallpaper peels from the ceiling in icicles; Bric-a-brac's floorboards ripple and gap. Inside, the air is tight and smelling of caves. Ty sneezes, groping at the light switch. The bulbs stay black in their moldy shades. "Jesus, Mother," he says, giving me a start. His voice is deep and strange, like someone took cracked-voiced Ty and stuffed his mouth with cotton balls. "Thanks a lot," he rumbles. His breath swirls the floating dust.

Ty works downstairs through the morning, dragging the ramshackle furniture and trash from the house and tossing it over the porch rails. Junk piles in the brushy yard, crushing bramble and baby tree. By the time the mid-afternoon heat has set in, close and wet, the house looks like it's upchucked. I keep one eye on Ty and one on the woods. If Gin has early luck with the softshells, she'll pass right by here on her way to Hollow House. Ty moves upstairs to clear the bedrooms—his and Mrs. Hatch's. His mother's cracked door he doesn't push aside, but quickly pulls shut, sealing in her vanity and clothes—the ridiculous dress she wore the night of the supper party that hangs moth-chewed and faded on the mildewed mirror.

Ty stops just inside his bedroom door. Frowning, he presses his knobby knuckles against the hole his boy's fist left in the flaking drywall; his hand is too big to fit. He uses the same hand to tip the dusty twin mattress from the wall. It hits the floor with a bouncing smack, springs

ringing. The shards in the china piles clink and settle. Ty drops his bag beside the bed; he's staying put.

The Softshell Diner is busy but I know less than half the cars shored up in the lot. The sight of Karwin Kidd's Plymouth, even rust-spotted and junky as it's gotten in the years since I last clapped eyes on it, makes something inside me twist. This whole island of people dragged along by time without us, like a ferry left dock before all the passengers step aboard.

Ty pulls his mud-spattered car into a spot facing the waterfront, right under the reaching branches of the loblollies Ladye and I stood beneath the day Nobody opened. Above, ospreys roost in their messy nests and I wonder if these are the grandchicks of the chicks who swooped above us that morning, screaming. The bridge still straddles the Narrow's brown currents; orange streaks its trestles and the house perched in them. Somewhere on Hole in the Wall, the dinghy's beached gunwales and hull rot in the sand. The snapped mast rolls over sand under the waves, the bark and branches smoothed from its trunk.

I follow Ty through the diner's swinging door. It's changed too. A long bar stretches the length of the restaurant, its stools heavy with the hindquarters of young watermen and a new crop of old-timers. Come-heres fill the window front tables, red-shouldered and wincing with sunburn. The bar-sitters swivel as Ty comes in the jingling door, mouths crooked in frowns under fraying brims.

"Seat down here!" a grunt comes, and I see Karwin Kidd's grease-striped arm raised over the line of grim, hatted skulls. We walk the length of the bar to Mr. Kidd, who pats the stool's splitting seat with his welted palm. Ladye would say the man looks like week old bread: all crust, no sponge. But he's got a smile carved in all that gristle, and Ty sits, thanking him.

“Karwin Kidd,” Mr. Kidd says, slapping Ty’s back harder than I think Ty was ready for.

He jerks, trying to grin but grimacing instead. “Tyler Hatch,” he offers.

“Hatch,” Mr. Kidd muses. “Hatch.”

“My momma had a house in Mud Neck,” Ty says, shrugging.

“Mud Neck, huh?” Kawin frowns. “Didn’t think anyone had a house down Mud Neck anymore.”

That gets my ear, and Ty’s too.

“Yeah, I noticed. The road’s pretty grown over.”

“Well no one been down there in an age, I’ll tell you,” Karwin says, face folding over his brows. “Not after the little girl died.”

Wavy Hilligan Loop, fourteen years of age, drowned.

Ty gets a crumpled look about him but nods. He asks the waitress, Kitty Diggs, the crow-haired girl I can feel pinching my arm in the schoolyard like it’s a week since, what’s good.

“Softshell special,” Kitty tells him, aiming her smudgy eyes past his head. Nobody’s spinning open. The horn sounds; a sailboat, sail down, slides between road and span. “Got stewed apples,” she adds. Ty nods, and Kitty’s through the swinging kitchen doors, bony butt snapping like a copperhead under her apron’s dangling ties.

Ty turns back to Karwin, trying hard to look like he doesn’t give. He’s failing, far as I’m concerned. Looks like he’s seen a dang ghost, white as he’s gone. “And the family that lived down there?”

“Loops?” Mr. Kidd says, scratching the steely scruff on his cheek. “Long gone.”

The man sitting on Ty’s other side rattles his throat and swivels. You could bowl me over. It’s my uncle, looking loose in the bones and long in the jowls. Isadore fixes Karwin Kidd

with a griddling kind of stare.

“You don’t know a thing about it,” Isadore mutters, cracking a fried softshell in two with the tine of his fork.

“Mr. Isadore!” Ty says, jerking back like he’s been bit.

Mr. Kidd laughs like he’s said something funny. “That so?”

Isadore pinches the crab’s backfin leg in his fingers and shoves it through his teeth whole. “Ain’t gone no place,” he says, cracker meal crunching in the back of his mouth.

“That so?” Mr. Kidd says.

“Yep.”

Kidd leans back on his stool with his arms crooked over his chest. “Funny we ain’t seen boo of no one.”

“Ain’t looked, have you? No one has.” It gives me a start, him saying that. He’s right. A whole family falls off the map and not one islander comes calling. Us being Loops, I guess.

“Like this boy says, road’s too grown up to go nowhere. ‘Sides, nothing left down Mud Neck to see but mud.” Kidd laughs, elbowing Ty in the ribs.

Isadore mutters at Ty, mouth curdled. “Come back then, did you?” His words are running. “Last time wasn’t enough for you?”

“How’s about we get you home, Dare?” Mr. Kidd says, throwing Ty a wink. His hand claps on Isadore’s curled shoulder. “Been a long day, ain’t it?”

Isadore shrugs his hand off, stumbling off his seat. “You stay away from them,” he barks at Ty, pointing that same salt-callused finger. “Done enough.” He sways to the door. A table of come-heres giggle over their neat white burger buns. His bad leg drags.

“Don’t pay Isadore any mind,” Mr. Kidd tells Ty. “Man’s got rotgut for blood.”

Kitty Diggs plunks a steaming plate in the middle of Ty's paper placemat. Softshells slide across the scratched china, spidery legs stiff and golden with batter. The apple slices slosh over the rims of the ramekin and syrup pools under the crab's claws. "Tartar?" Kitty demands, arms crossed tight under her hard chest. Pecky as a mockingbird, just like I remember.

"No, thank you," he mumbles, shooting eyeballs at the diner door. But Isadore's already gone.

The drive home to Mud Neck is lit yellow by porch lights. But soon as we turn off Ferry Way, the porches let up. The hard white of Isadore's flood is the only thing hitting the sandy ruts of Mud Neck Road. Isadore's windows are black. Passed out, I'd wager. I know Ladye would skin my uncle if she could see the way he's turned out, but truth is, for all he's a drunk, Isadore Dare's the only one thinking of us—those trash Loops the islanders call dead or run-off or both.

Ty turns a dial on the dash and music crackles. It's a song I've never heard. I can't feel the seat beneath me, even as the car jitters in the ruts. The headlights catch on the branches and leaves that scratch across the windows and whip away into the dark. We shudder to a stop so close to the loblolly I can see the shape of the headlights in the bark. Ty twists to reach the backseat; if I had a body he'd be brushing its arm, but instead I just feel the hot blood winding in the veins from his heart to hands.

A flashlight casts a shaky white circle on the roof of the car. "Here goes," Ty mutters, stepping from the car and into the warm night. The beam from the flashlight jerks over trunks and brush, lighting circles in the black left by the still moonless sky. No lightning bugs, even; just the squeaking chirp of crickets. Ty starts in, ducking the loblolly's trunk.

We're just passing Hollow House's daylilies when I hear the crunch of leaves in the holly

thicket up ahead. Ty goes stiff and lifts the flashlight's beam to the glossy leaves. They shine like stars. The light's circle is shaky, and I can hear Ty's breath huffing from his mouth in bursts, like he's running while he's standing still. With my ear to his chest I bet I'd hear the hollow knocking of his heart beating his ribcage. "Hello?" Ty calls, then again, louder, "Is someone there?" It makes me want to grin. Whatever deer or possum or coon is holed up in that brush isn't about to answer.

There's a crash. Ty whips the flashlight across the forest. The white circle catches the edge of something—a critter with hair pale and weedy as straw—that darts from sight soon as the light touches it. Not a deer, not a coon at all. It's Gin. Gone, no more than a flash in the dark, my ghost. But he's seen her.

"Wavy?" Ty breathes. There's no answer but the creak of branches and flutter of leaves.

Ty hits Bric-a-brac's porch running. The air wheezes from his gaping mouth. He slams the squealing front door behind him, pressing his spine flush to the heavy wood. It's pitch black but for the circle of light on the floor beside his foot. Ty lifts the flashlight, sweeping its beam across the dark room like a sword. But he's alone.

Ty follows the circle of light up the staircase and into his bedroom. Crossing his arms in an X over his chest, he peels his sweat-damped t-shirt over his head and kicks the jeans from his furry legs. The knobs of his spine ripple and shift as he crouches beside the mattress to unzip the edge of a sleeping bag. There's a flat mole in the center of his back, a shirt button dot right between the twisting points of his shoulder blades. I want to press my fingertip to it and keep pressing until his those bony wings touch. Instead I count the studs of his spine to the elastic band of his white underpants and the rungs of his wide ribs.

When Ty is a shut-eyed cocoon, I go to the window. The moon is a pale balloon floating

up over the black trees. A pebble taps the window, soft as rain. Ty hits Bric-a-brac's porch running. The air wheezes from his gaping mouth. He slams the squealing front door behind him, pressing his spine flush to the heavy wood. It's pitch black but for the circle of light on the floor beside his foot. But he's alone.

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I go to the window. The moon is a pale balloon floating up over the black trees. A pebble taps the pane.

Ty's eyes snap open.

Below, Gin's face is white with moonlight. A Cheshire grin splits her face. She's a girl, no question, still a girl. I drop through the floorboards and walk through walls to rush at her, hands thrust out to grasp her shoulders and drag her into the woods. I shudder as her hot heart beats its way through my ribs; I can't hold her. I can't do a thing. She's laughing.

"Ty!" she sing-songs, banking a second pebble off the glass. "Ty-ler Haaatch!"

Ty's face appears in the pane. His grown-up frame fills the window, wide and tall and bare. There isn't a drop of blood left in his face. Ducking, he lifts the window; the glass comes up clattering. Ty's lips part but looks like his tongue's turned wood in his mouth. He babbles

nothing at the air, eyebrows making a run for his thinning hair above his skinny nose.

Gin bounces the rocks in her palm. Her toe taps the dead grass. “Well get on, then,” she hollers up at him. “Ain’t got all night.”

“Gin?” Ty forces out.

My sister barks a laugh. “Well, yeah,” she scoffs. “Hit your fool head or something?”

“No,” Ty mumbles, fingertips touching his temple. Then, louder: “No, I don’t think so.”

“Well, let’s get going, then.”

Ty’s skull bounces on his spine like a dashboard bobblehead. “Right,” he says.

“I’ll be out front,” Gin tells him, pointing around Bric-a-brac with her eyebrow cocked, like maybe he won’t get where the front of the house is. Ty’s face leaves the window.

I follow Gin around. A minute later Ty comes out the front door dressed and tiptoeing, like he thinks she’s going to startle.

“Swear my Gran gets ready faster,” Gin lies, laughing. “And what the heck’s that for?” she adds, pointing a finger at the flashlight he’s strangling with his right hand.

“Right,” he says, flicking the light off and setting it on the top step.

“Right,” Gin says. Then she spins and heads into the saplings, their whippet-thin branches snapping to in her wake. Ty follows, staggering through the gums like a man still sleeping. The limbs that Gin meets face-high slap his chest.

Our left-house looms from the dark, a ship half sunk in a green kudzu sea.

Ty, who hasn’t spoken a spit since Bric-a-brac, says, “Hollow House,” like he’s just now remembering. He stands in the brambles and stares at the house slack-faced.

Gin ignores him, heading up the sagging porch steps. Ripping his mud-caked pant leg

from the thorny vines, Ty does the same. Inside, the old kerosene lamp flickers to flame and the windowpanes go orange under curtains of lobed leaves and white-tongued suckle. The come-here steps through the doorway and into the warm light. Gin's soles pound the stairs. The house smells of treacle and rot, and Ty breathes it in, chest puffing under his t-shirt. Him being here is even worse now, when I can and can't be, than it was when I was living. I can feel my hate in my mud-buried bones. And my want, reeking.

"Up here!" Gin shouts.

Bounding, Ty takes the stairs two at a time; the planks groan under his greater weight.

When he creaks into Thorn Room, Gin twists the second lamp's knob and the oily wick lights. All across the pine, the sandland glitters and burns. Ty stares, his eyes moony and strange. Sleepwalking, he must think himself, or dreaming a beautiful, horrible dream. The kind that you wake from wishing but glad.

Those I can remember. No dreaming, dead.

"Well," Gin says, "what do you think? Figured I'd work on it some while Ms. Jell-O got herself cooled down. Didn't reckon you'd mind."

She's forgotten.

"Mrs. Jell-O?" His face is wrinkling around the eyes like he's trying to see her clear. I can about hear the wheels in his skull grinding.

"I mean, can't rightly blame your momma being riled over Uncle Isadore calling her a silly blabbermouth and all even if he's right," Gin says, grinning wide when she adds, "Was a hoot to watch, though, huh?"

"My mother's dead," Ty says, voice catching like he's saying words he's not used to saying. I get it now. Deirdre's left him Bric-a-brac.

I think maybe Gin will say, “Like Wavy.” Maybe she’ll tell him, “My sister’s dead.”

But Gin shrieks like a seagull, laughing. “That ain’t funny, Ty,” she snorts. And it’s not. She’s forgotten.

Ty’s face eases up around the eyes. He nods; he sees there’s no use arguing with her, this impossible child-Gin. “Right. Sorry.”

“So?” Gin says. “You like it?”

And he says yes.

It’s near dawn when she leads him, yawning and rubbing sleep from his eyes, under the trunks and over the thorny thickets of blackberry vine home to Bric-a-brac Place. He raises a hand as he shuts the front door on Gin’s hollered, “Tomorrow, then!” She slips away through the holly trunks, whistling, and I let her go. Ty crawls the steps to his old bedroom to peel the shirt from his back, zip into his sleeping bag, close his eyes, and sleep.

CHAPTER 10

Day comes stifling. The window is open wide, and the dripping heat creeps over the sill to fill the room. Ty's skin is sweat-slick by the time he wakes, jolting from sleep as if from a bad dream.

"Jesus," Ty mutters, drawing thumb and finger along his sandy eyelashes. Wincing, he holds his hand open in front of his face. His palm and fingertips are red and bubbly: poison ivy. A short laugh bursts from his lips but doesn't leave him smiling. He's hollow in the eyes, gray in the skin. The curly sprigs of dark hair on his chest are wet with sweat. Ty slides from the sleeping bag and frowns at his jeans, forehead creasing with deep lines.

Downstairs in the kitchen, Ty tries the knobs on the range. Burners spark and crackle; a ring of flame springs on the front right. He's lucky; the gas tank's still got some juice. Ty fills the kettle with yellow well water from the rattling pipes. Boiled, it goes straight in a mug of grounds. Grease rings rise with the clumps of coffee grind. It's a cup of swamp. Ty heads for the porch, muddy brew in hand and a cigarette tucked over his ear.

The cicadas in the holly trees drone. Coughing, Ty settles his butt on the top step with the coffee steaming beside him. He flicks a match and slipping the cigarette between his lips, lights the tip, deft as Ladye. He's mid-first puff when he stops, tobacco smoke leaking from his open mouth. The flashlight sits perched on the step next his coffee, right where Gin made him leave it. "No," Ty says. "No, it's not possible." He looks up at the wooded yard, jaw slack. And then we see it together: the glint of metal in the roots of that big holly tree at Mud Neck Road's edge.

Ty's face is white by the time he makes it to tree. The come-here's come barefoot, and winces when the prickly leaves stab in his soles as he winds his way through the holly's low limbs to reach the metal oyster pail perched on the knee of the bulging holly root. We peer into the pail, me groaning as Ty stares, bug-eyed, down at the pile of live blues. The crabs snap at his

face, jabbing at the air with their toothed claws. It's a bucket full of clatter and pinch. They're Jimmies, and mean, and Gin's left them for him. No question about it.

"Gin," Ty says, testing the name on his tongue. I can see him waking up to the night before, the pebbles on the pane and Gin waiting in the dark down below, a girl.

Squirrely-eyed, he loops his palm around the pail's handle and lifts; the bucket swings. The crabs skitter and jab for his knuckles, clacking their claws. Beautiful Jimmies—blue as cornflowers at the elbows, red at the tips of their pinchers, and a shiny gray-brown on top. On the barrow they'd fetch dollars apiece. She's showing off.

When Ty gets to the house he storms the porch, all tight strides and ramrod spine. He dumps the pail out in the dry kitchen basin. The top Jimmies crack against the porcelain, lying limp-legged a beat under the others before they right themselves. Clicking, they zip back and forth from side to side. Their pinchers wave. The fool reaches his hand into the sink, trying to grab one. Right away, the big Jimmie's claw snaps shut on the joint of his pinky. Ty shouts, flapping his hand. The blue's arm breaks; it drops back into the sink. Wincing, Ty twists the claw from his pinky and throws it into the basin, where right away another Jimmie snatches it up and waggles the lost limb above his shell. The dent in Ty's knuckle is deep and red.

Ty reaches over and grabs the still-steaming kettle from the stove. Jaw twitching, he aims the spout over the sink of live crabs. Boiling water slaps their pretty shells, painting the gray and blue with wiggling streaks of orange. They die whistling; Ty watches. I remember the little caller crab in the mud, its shell crushed under the boy's fingertip. I think him savage.

When the Jimmies have stopped twitching, Ty goes to the porch and plucks his dropped cigarette from the step to relight its ashy tip. He sits and smokes and drinks his coffee, eyes on the road. I count the studs of his spine. He stands and pees into the brambles. I look away. I can

hear it spatter in the dirt. When he's dry the come-here heads inside to dress. I stand in the kitchen and wait. Bric-a-brac stinks like the Loop house did on days Gin would empty her pots and Ladye would have Isadore over to crack crab, with paper bibs and wood mallets. Gin never bothered with the metal picks; she sucked the flaky meat straight from the legs while I scraped and teased every last bit from their bodies, piling up the pearly shreds of backfin and lump in the corner of my tray. "Pick pick pick," my sister would say to me, her chin flecked with shell shards. "What the heck you waiting for?"

The front door slams; he's leaving.

I catch up with Ty storming through the gum saplings with a stubborn set to his bristly face. When he's hopped the mucky ditch and hit the ruts, he doesn't break right, towards his car and Ferry Way and Isadore's sad house, but left, into Mud Neck. He's hunting her down.

The forest is easier going in the day, even hot as it is, and he makes good time. It's not long before the reek of marsh mud is creeping between the trunks. The persimmon sapling that's sprung in the rut's grassy middle marks the start of the driveway; persimmons, the same that have been on the limbs for years, hang hard and green under the long leaves. Ty rips one from the branch as he passes and lobs it through the trees. I hear the heron's strangled whoop. Almost home.

The ruts give way to oyster shells so old they've been pounded almost to a powder under rain and feet and fallen tree. The drive cracks like china beneath Ty's soles. The trunks part, and there it is: the Loop home place. Ty slows, fear creeping in the edges of his stubborn look. Seeing the house now, beside this man, I see it new: branchy roof and weedy eaves, sinking porch and hail-pocked tin roof, sand duning at its front steps and windowpanes shattered by wind. It's left-looking, but its not been left. Gin's crab pots tower in stacks up the house's salt-

stripped walls and on the line, Ladye's yellowed under-things whip. Pantyhose like pinned snakeskins. The house is an unearthly thing, live and rotting as the water laps its foundation, wheedling.

Ty forces himself forward, dragging his stalling feet on wooden legs over the shells and sand and stair to the screen door. He raps his knuckles against the mesh-less frame. "Hello?" he yells into the house.

"Isadore?" Ladye sings. "Gave up did you, mister?" Her voice rings from the kitchen and her hair follows, pale gold shining in the shadowy hall.

"Mrs. Loop?" Ty says, like he doesn't believe in her.

"Oh, Ty, dear! Wasn't expecting you!" she coos, stepping into the light let in by the doorway. Her eyebrows are painted swooping and thin above her gray eyes and her figure is willowy in her bubblegum pink housedress. Watermen would be whistling. Beaming at Ty, she pops the sticky frame from the jamb. Then her face creases a bit and she asks, "Your momma know you're here?"

"No," Ty says, fast, like the quicker he says it the quicker it'll be over.

"Well," Ladye sighs, "come on in. Gin's out dropping pots. Funny, not a Jimmie when she pulled them this morning. But that's men for you." She winks.

Ty follows my Gran into the kitchen and lets her wrangle him into a seat at the table, stuttering when she pushes a warm Co-Cola into his hand. "Icebox's on the fritz," she tells him, shrugging. "Been that way near a week, but with Isadore keeping himself scarce I can't get it fixed. Stubborn as a stump, that brother of mine."

Ty takes a sip of the soda and gulps it down, hot and flat. "It's good," he coughs. His eyeballs flick around the kitchen, over the chunks of plaster missing from the ceiling and the

ripples and cracks in the linoleum floor. Tide lines stain the shredded wallpaper. His eyes land on my Gran's smiling face. "I could take a look?" he offers, addle-eyed as a nest-hopped chick.

Ladye chuckles, lifting a slender hand. I cringe, thinking she might pat his shorn skull, but she just touches her fingers to her collar and laughs, "Why, what a man you'll be!"

Funny thing to say, seeing as he's not much younger than Ladye. The two of them sitting at the kitchen table look like two grownups talking. It's a table I'd have felt nervous at, living. No place for a mumble-mouthed little girl.

But before Ladye can point him to the refrigerator, Gin shouts from under the window. I hear the rattle of pots.

"Got a bushel!" Gin hollers, "Big ones!"

Ladye grins at Ty. "You hungry?"

That afternoon, Gin, Ladye, and Ty crack crabs on the porch, sitting in rocking chairs with their trays set across the arms. Mallets pound. Shells fly, lobbed at the marsh but landing in the muddy holes of caller crabs and swells of sand between. Their fingertips orange with Old Bay and oil, the three of them eat the flesh plain—no melted butter or cocktail sauce. Just crab. Gin sucks meat from the legs. Ladye taps at joints until they pop. Ty is quiet, but in moments that Gin and Ladye look away, he glances up from his messy tray to stare at them, as if he's checking they're really there—that they're real. My sister and Gran are easy, laughing as a mallet-struck crab shoots off Gin's tray and into the hydrangea bush. I watch the Narrows ripple into shore. I play that I'm not dead, but the breeze whistles through me, and I know it's a lie. I wonder if they're eating the crabs that ate me.

When the steam-pot's empty and Gin's done dumping the trays in the marsh, Ty stands

and thanks them for the meal.

“See you, then,” Gin says, face drooping a bit.

“Tell your mamma hello, will you?” Ladye asks.

“I will,” Ty lies. He turns his back on the porch and heads for the road. Crab shells crackle under his feet. I follow him, one eye stuck on the porch and the other on his back. Ladye rises from the chair and carries the steam-pot through the screen, but Gin stays, watching him go. She’s cocking her head the same way the rangy dock-cat at Foster’s Wharf used to sitting while the watermen fillet their daily catch, waiting for heads and fins and spines to fly its way. At the head of the drive, Ty glances over his shoulder. “Better be here tomorrow, Hatch!” Gin hollers. “You promised to teach me swimming and don’t you be thinking I forgot it!” Ty stares at her a beat before he nods. I wonder if he’s thinking about me drowning. I wonder if he’s wishing he’d taught me how to swim. Then he raises his hive-speckled hand, and what could be a smile or a sob tugs at the corner of his mouth as he rounds the persimmon tree and passes out of sight.

The sky is pink slipping into black by the time Ty walks through Bric-a-brac’s front door. Soon as he’s inside, Ty retches, body heaving at the floor. The house smells like the tide line after a storm, reeking of croaker spines and beached stingrays. The crabs in the kitchen sink are rotten; the heat found their shells and curdled their half-cooked meat. One hand over his nose, Ty uses his other hand to scoop the leaking bodies from the basin and back into the metal pail they came in. He runs the pail from the house, swinging it as hard as he can from the porch so it flies over the yard and into the woods, scattering crabs over the leaf-slick ground. Dinner for coons and possums and muskrats. Ty is sick then; on his knees he spews chewed crab into the kudzu, shaking.

That night he drags the mattress from the still-stinking house and stretches out on the

porch. He crooks an arm under his skull and stares up through the holes in the porch roof at the stars. A water-cooled breeze comes whistling through the hollies. “Gin’s ladle,” he whispers, pointing into the black to trace stars with his fingertip. “The blinking firefly.” And when Ty sleeps he does so soundly that, if I hadn’t put my ear to his chest and listen to the bum-bump of his beating heart, I’d have thought him dead.

Ty goes back the next day. In the morning I watch him work at clearing Mud Neck Road to his car, snapping gum saplings off at the root and dragging them from the ruts. He saws into the fallen loblolly trunk’s thick bark, slapping at the mosquitoes that prick his neck and arms. Only when his t-shirt’s soaked clear with sweat and the sun’s casting no shadows on the dirt does he head for the Loop home place to give Gin her swim lesson.

Soon as he gets to the house, Ty strips his wet shirt and hangs it on the porch rail. His skin shines. Angry red sunburn makes a hard line at the nape of his neck. Gin comes bounding out the screen door wearing the same threadbare cotton shirt and shorts she’s always wearing; Ladye never would make us swimming suits. I see her eyeing him as he bends to untie his shoes. Gin tiptoes up behind him and curves over him like she’s fixing to kiss the knobs of his spine. But she’s my sister, so instead of puckering up she lifts the her right hand and smacks it across Ty’s seared skin with the flat of her palm. “Come-here’s got himself a sunburn,” she laughs, leaping away as Ty snaps straight, wincing.

“Sure feels like it,” he mutters. Slipping his feet from his shoes, Ty tries to give Gin a grin. “Ready to swim?”

Ty first, Gin second, they wade out into the water, winding between the loblolly stumps and driftwood limbs that jut from the surf like the salt-stripped bones of great beasts—the ribs of

massive mackerel, the skulls of unseen whales. Eelgrass wraps their knees in slimy tinsel. The waves break against Gin's belly, grabbing at the ragged ends of her shirt. I stay on shore. To feel the currents swirling in me I couldn't abide. Even the feel of raindrops pelting through me makes me shudder.

But Gin takes to water quick as a skate. Ty leads her past the old pylons and into deeper water; they're a pair of heads sticking from the waves. I glance back at the house and see the glint of Isadore's field glasses on the porch. Ladye's watching. The sound of Gin shrieking gets my head whipping back around, but she's laughing. Her arms flap against the water, dousing Ty in white spray. I hear the rumble of Ty's voice and Gin lets her toes break the surface in front of her. Soon as she does, her head dips under: bloop. Right away Ty catches her, lifting her from the waves. She floats on her back between his chest and crooked arms, face to the sky, laughing. And he starts smiling for real, his chipped grin stealing years off his grownup face.

They swim through the afternoon. I pace on shore, watching their heads bob in the swelling tide. It's Ladye who finally calls them in. "Gonna get stuck pruny if you two don't get out that water soon," she shouts from the porch, "like a couple of moles!"

Gin breaks for shore trying to beat him, and Ty swims fast after her kicking heels, a smooth skull in her wake. Breathless, Gin staggers from the surf, her shirt slicked to her skin by the sea. Ty walks onto shore not a second later, shaking his head. "You win," he coughs, huffing for air. Gin beams, hands thrown over her head. Water runs rivers down her bare legs. She spins like a top beneath her stretched limbs, whooping. Ty watches her, and as he does his face changes. His smile slips right off his face. He drops his eyes to the holey mud, a flush creeping over his Adam's apple. He's ashamed.

I see it, what he's seen. Without me noticing, Gin's gone and gotten pretty. Her long,

snarled hair swings from her freckled cheeks and her long fingers twist and dance. Wet cotton coats her narrow ribs, clinging. Above them, the buds of breasts puff from her chest, soft and small and pink-peaked.

A fluttering flies through me, as though I've got a sparrow trapped in my ghosty ribs. My sister is growing up.

CHAPTER 11

Tyler Hatch comes back the next day, and the next. Every morning he saws at the log; every afternoon he walks the brambly road to the home place. Gin meets him in the yard and together they ramble the shores and woods and water of Mud Neck, racing. My sister grows older by the hour. Her bones stretch beneath her skin. Days winnow at her flesh as water does clay, scraping the softness from her face and carving curves into her sides. Ty haunts her steps, learning again how to be her shadow. No more crashing through the branches—only the reedy winding under and over, the quiet crackle of leaves. His eyes follow her, darting. But at night the come-here ambles home to Bric-a-brac to sleep on the sagging porch, though inside the smell of crab has snuck out the open windows and away. The frogs bellow his lullabies. Meantime, Gin sleeps in our momma's bed, curled beside the pebbles she doesn't need.

Time creases and pulls like muslin. My bones float in mud. And it's not fair.

Ty wakes to the tap-tap-tap of a woodpecker's beak against the porch's crooked column. Peeling back his eyelids, he watches its red head bob. "Least someone's working on it," he groans, stretching his arms over his head. The woodpecker flies.

Sliding his legs into his stiff jeans and feet into his fraying shoes, Ty vaults off the porch, landing sure-footed at the base of the steps. He plucks the ax from its leaning spot beside the rail and strides off into the gums, snapping a few soft saplings with a lazy swing of the blade.

Ty goes at the fallen loblolly like its bit him, smashing the ax-head down on the trunk so hard the bark bursts from the tree, coating the soil with jagged chunks. Above, crows perch in the limbs of the holly trees, watching. They caw between themselves, cocking their heads like island gossips. Ty doesn't seem to hear them, or anything else. He's made it through the pine's soft outer rings; now he's in the heartwood, bashing the tree's sappy center to splinters under the

heavy blade.

“Think it’s dead?” Isadore grunts. Ty drops the ax. The blade buries its keen edge in the hard dirt beside his foot. My uncle leans, hands tucked in his armpits, against Ty’s hood, watching.

“Mr. Isadore,” Ty says, nodding like he hasn’t just had the blood spooked right out his heart.

“Thought I’d come get a look at the giant woodpecker’s been waking me every damn morning this week,” Isadore tells him, squinting at the ax. “You seen it?”

Ty’s face wrinkles. He stutters, confused. “Woodpecker? I—”

“Talking about you, boy. What the heck you doing out here?” Isadore’s voice is clear; he’s not gotten in his bottle yet.

“Clearing the road,” Ty says, pointing at the loblolly trunk and the great wound his ax has cleaved in its side.

“Road don’t need clearing,” Isadore tells him.

“But all the—”

“I’m telling you, boy, this road don’t need clearing.” Isadore’s getting mad now. He brings his fist down on the car’s hood. The metal bends and pops. “Think it’s time you go on home.”

Ty throws his arms wide and groans, “I haven’t sold the house.”

“You ain’t spent a minute on that house,” Isadore spits. “I know what you’re up to.”

Ty laughs. “What am I up to?”

“You should be keeping away from them.” Isadore stares at Ty like he’s daring him to lie.

And he does lie: “I don’t know who you’re talking about.”

“You do,” Isadore snorts. “And they don’t need you messing with the way things are. It’s no good, you being here.”

“You’re crazy.”

“No,” Isadore says. “I ain’t. You’ll ruin them, boy.” My uncle’s voice slides low; he’s begging now. “You’ll kill them, you stay, same as Wavy.”

Wavy. Hearing my own name gives me a start. But Ty didn’t kill me. It was an accident. If he killed me he didn’t mean to. Gin would never let him. She built a me of rocks. She couldn’t sleep with me gone.

“I didn’t,” Ty says. “You’re wrong.”

“Ain’t you done enough?”

“I didn’t,” Ty says again, a shudder running through him. He steps back, the heel of his boot knocking the ax blade.

My uncle’s voice goes soft the way used to when he was talking to Ladye through the bedroom door, when she was fit to be tied over something Louise Callis or Viv Sadler or Galoris Sparrow said. “What I hear, you come by it honest. I know something about that—getting it in your blood.” Isadore looks at the dirt, scuffing the toe of his boot against Ty’s tire. But then he cocks his head at Ty, his finger thrust out, pointing. “But don’t you come calling on me to fix what you broke,” Isadore tells him. “I’m done fixing.” And he turns and limps away up the road, straight up the middle of its brushy ruts.

“You’re wrong!” Ty shouts at Isadore’s back. His voice cracks; “wrong” leaves his lips a yelp. He claps his hand around the ax hilt and swings his arm hard. The ax flies at me spinning like windmill. I feel its blade wing into my center; if I had a body it’d have cut it in two. But it

passes through me and its handle catches on a loblolly trunk, dropping it to the dirt. Ty's chest is heaving, and all I can think watching him is that he knows I'm here, that I'm Wavy.

"Ty?" I say. "Can you hear me?"

But he doesn't. He can't. I can't even hear myself. His eyes see through me, and I remember I'm dead.

Reckon it's like drowning, wanting what's not yours. It fills you until you're bursting, but you can't breathe it. You can't touch it. It fills you and all you do is sink, choking on the very thing you want. And then you're bones.

When Ty heads for Bric-a-brac I drift along behind him, a nettle caught in his current. I'm there with him when he shoulders in the door of his mother's room and stumbles inside, the breath leaving his mouth in wheezes. He kicks his way through the clutter, cursing. Boxes tumble and spill; clothes splay across the floorboards. When he gets to Deirdre's vanity he pulls the hanging dress from its hanger. It puddles on the floor. Then he puts a palm flat to the peeling wall and with the other hand, curled in a fist, smashes his mother's mirror. It shatters easy, like the frozen circle of a well around a dropped stone. Glass patters the floor and Ty's knuckles spring with blood, oozing down his wrist in ribbons. Mirror clings in the edges of the frame, and Ty catches himself in the broken glass, frown turning into a squint. He leans in, eye tracing his own face. He lifts bloody fingers to his cheek and pokes the easing wrinkles beneath his brow. His lips shiver as he follows the line of his hair from his ear to his temple. The brown is creeping back over his skull, chasing away the gray that striped his temples. His skin is smoother, his limbs thinner. Funny what you miss when you're staring at the same dang person every day, when time's gone catawampus. Gin's growing up; Ty's shrinking back down.

Ty backs away from the mirror, hands dropping to his sides. Calm now, he walks from

the bedroom, the house. He leaves the door gaping.

In the driveway of the Loop home place, Gin dances out to meet him. “About time,” she says, punching his arm.

On the porch, Ladye lifts a hand from her sewing to wave. “Ty-ler Haaatch,” she sings.

When night comes creeping, Ty wraps himself in an old quilt and stretches out on the porch swing. The breeze swirls off the Narrows to rock him. The chains squeal, dusty with rust. He doesn’t count the days. Age melts off him like wax from a wick. And on the clock face in the entry, the minute hand ticks once, twice.

It takes Ladye running dry of Cherry Heering before the come-here says boo about going anywhere. One evening she goes to the top shelf of the pantry and shakes the bottle to find it near empty, the syrupy liquor barely sloshing the glass’s square sides. She finds the flour sack wanting too, and in the sugar tin only a smattering of pearly grains. The coffee is down to a handful of dry beans.

That night, sipping the brown dregs of the Heering, Ladye confesses over a scant supper table that it’s about time for Gin to take a store run.

“I’ll go first thing,” Ty says. “I should look in on Mother anyway.” It surprises me, him lying to them so easy. Like he believes his mother’s at Bric-a-brac waiting for him to come home.

“I’ll go too,” Gin says.

“No,” Ty snaps at her. But when she balks, surprised, he softens. “You don’t want to fool with the store when you’ve got plenty to do down here, do you?”

Gin pouts. She’s never been good at getting anything but her way. “Long walk,” she says.

“Wouldn’t want you getting lost.”

“I won’t get lost,” Ty laughs, but his eyes are wide. I can see the whites all the way round the mold green in the middle. “Come on, just let me do this for y’all. Pretty please?” He’s begging.

Gin’s eyes narrow. “Okay,” she tells him.

“Okay!” Ladye says. “That’s settled. Ty honey, I’ll give you some button money in the morning.”

“Yes’m,” Ty says, taking a fork to his sweet potato. Gin watches his tines mash in the orange flesh. I can hear the gears in her skull, turning.

The swallows are up and weaving through the loblollies when Gin comes creeping out the screen door. She eases the frame back into the jamb with her eyes on Ty. The swing stirs in the wind, its chain whining, but his eyes stay shut. Grinning, Gin tiptoes down the steps and into the yard. Her bare soles sink in the sand.

I don’t try to wake him. It won’t do any good. I follow Gin.

Mud Neck Road at night holds for her no fear. The hanging holly branches she knows well as the home place’s creaking stairs—which boards to step above and which to favor sneaking. She dances through the gum trees never touching a leaf. Passing the persimmon sapling, she plucks a green fruit and drops it in the ruts. She bounces the persimmon from toe to toe as she walks, humming. A possum hisses in the brambles and Gin hisses back. Its moony eyes bounce away into the black. We pass Hollow House and Bric-a-brac and keeping going. The fireflies stop blinking in the thicket. Golden sunlight starts to crawl down the trunks of the trees.

The first thing that's wrong is the car. Gin just about runs into the fallen loblolly she's so wrapped up in kicking that dang persimmon, but she looks up right before her skull knocks its hewn side and stops. On the other side she finds the car, and I think I'm more startled by the sight of it than her. It's been sitting for weeks. The kudzu's taken it whole, twining around its mirrors and over its door until it looks less a car and more a lump of brown growing out the road. That brown is the second thing. Without me noticing, Rip's has gone and turned to fall. The new saplings that have sprung around the car's flat tires are flame-leafed and dropping. The stripe of tall grass between the ruts is dry, dead. The woods are quiet: all its cicadas sleep in the dirt. Here, even the shrieking fish-hawks are gone, flown south seeking the heat the island's lost. The air is chill and dry. Gin shivers, rubbing her goose-prickling arms. She rounds the car light-footed, as if it's a sleeping beast she's afraid to wake. A breeze sweeps through me smelling of mold and wood-smoke, and great yellow stars spin from the limbs of a beech. Gin walks on ahead, bare feet plowing through drifts of fallen leaves.

The Ford isn't in the drive at Isadore's, but it's the sight of his broke-down house that shakes her. Gin looks at the rotten nets and the fallen porch and the weedy yard and she's scared. I see her mouth moving, but she's not saying a word. I think she might turn back, that this might be enough, but she steps from the ruts onto Ferry Way, placing her foot on the asphalt with such care you'd think it burning.

My sister doesn't hum now. Drifting, she winds her way up the tarry road, past new trailers and old porches, past the places where the houses we knew used to be. A truck rumbles by, the men within strangers. The shaggy-haired driver doesn't lift a finger from the wheel to greet Gin, even when she lifts her hand to wave. Gin keeps going, past the Sparrows and Callis's and Kidds. When at last she comes to Irvin's General, its swinging door locked tight and the

shelves behind its dirty windows empty and coated in dust, her eyes go wet. Gin drags a shaky fingertip through the grime coating the sign: “Irvin’s General Store: Lee’s Got All You Need and More.” The letters turn black beneath her fingertip; her skin comes away with a fuzzy hat of dust.

She’s wiping that dust off on the hem of her shorts when just next door, the door of Rip’s Post Office jingles open and, before I even think what’s about to happen, Louise Callis comes shuffling out. Gin freezes, finger to her shorts. Mrs. Callis is bent and gray, and her face, always so thick with powder, is so folded and bony she looks more a bird than a postmistress. Looking at her now, I can feel all my hate for her, the hate I came by honestly, melting out my feet and into the dirt. She’s old, and we horrible, trash-born Loops, we’re not. Not a one of us.

“Wavy,” Mrs. Callis whispers, staring at Gin like she’s risen from the marsh right before her rheumy eyes.

“No,” Gin says, voice shaky. “No, I’m not Wavy.”

“You can’t be here,” Louise tells her. “You’re dead.”

“I’m not dead.”

“Oh child,” Mrs. Callis says, bobbing her little bird head, “you are.”

“No!” Gin cries. “You got it all wrong. I’m no Wavy. I’m Gin.” She stamps her foot when she says her name; the store windows rattle.

Mrs. Callis cocks her head. “Virginia Loop?”

“Yeah, Gin.”

“Well it’s not possible,” Mrs. Callis laughs. Her gums are toothless behind her pink-painted lips. “Been twenty years. You’re—well, you’re just a girl.”

“Gin,” Gin says, “I’m Gin Loop.”

“Then you’re devil-touched, child. You’ve no right to be, way you are.” She stares at Gin, eyes flicking over her: the tangled head of hair, the freckle-smattered face, the feet, bare and black as tar.

Gin puts a hand over the rail, long fingers reaching. “Mrs. Callis—”

“No!” Mrs. Callis coughs. “No, I’ll not have you touch me, Wavy, Gin, whoever you are.” She shakes her head. “Go, go away. Shoo! I won’t have you cursing me. I won’t be blamed, you dying way you did.” And she pulls the Post Office door shut behind her, the bell pealing like a sleigh.

Gin listens. Drawing her arms tight about her, she leaps down the porch stairs, ankle folding under her, and staggers back down Ferry Way towards Mud Neck. But the island is waking, and all along Ferry Way blinds open and curtains part. The windows are full of faces, and every one is new, or old, or changed. The marigolds in Mrs. Sparrows’ yard are dead, and the Boyd Callis’s kennels are empty but for a flipped water bowl. The wind tugs at her shirttails, whistling. Gin’s feet hit the ground faster and faster, until she’s running, black soles pelting the asphalt. I chase after her, flying; my feet never touch the tarry ground.

She zigs down Mud Neck Road, but her feet miss the step off the blacktop and into the deep, rain-carved ruts, and she sprawls, palms and knees stuck in dirt.

“You alright?” Isadore hollers. He’s pushing open the screen door of his porch. The rocker he’s left smacks the floor: bam, bam. He’s old as Mrs. Callis, time weighing on his spine heavy as an anchor. It’s dragged him down.

Gin lifts her head out of the dead grass, shaking the ashy snarl of curls from her face.

“Gin?” Isadore breathes, spotted hand catching the stair rail as his legs give under him. He sinks onto the step, knees folding. His patchy robe hangs from his shoulders as they begin to

shudder. “Yep,” he says, nodding, and looks up at the sky, where dark clouds pile and grow. His eyes close. “Gin Loop.”

Gin vaults from the ruts to run, fast as foxes, for the woods. I race after her, following the sound of her panting. Every breath leaves her as a “no,” and she keeps on saying it until she’s screaming it: “No!” at the top of her lungs, scaring the crows from the hollies. Dead and dying leaves burst from the ground beneath her feet in flaming clouds that, as she crosses into Mud Neck’s thick woods, turn to green. She’s running blind, her fingers splayed before her and hair streaming in pale ribbons. The air grows hot; the cicadas sing in waves. The sky is growing dark. The woods are full of lightning bugs and thunder.

I see Hollow House ahead, its windows like black holes between the flashing trees. I can’t feel the thunder in my feet, but I can hear it, the rumble in my ears drowning out the sound of Gin’s screaming, the crunch of Ty’s feet before he tackles my sister to the forest floor. They hit the ground in a knot of muddy limbs. The rain falls through me like stones.

CHAPTER 12

Gin goes down fighting. Ty squeezes his arms around her, trying to pin her elbows to her sides as she thrashes and bucks. “Stop it!” he tells her. The dirt is turning to mud under them.

“Why?” she shouts, bringing a heel down on his kneecap, hard. Ty grunts, and his arms loose. Gin stumbles to her feet, mud coating her front and splattering her face. “Why am I like this? They’re old, they’re all old and I’m—” She’s stuttering, babbling, her mouth running away on her. The rain runs through the mud on her face, dragging black lines down her neck and arms. The frogs are bellowing, thousands. “And the store, and Louise Callis said I was dead!”

“Gin.” Ty holds out his hands, open, like he’s waiting to catch her when she falls.

“Am I dead?” she yells.

“No, no,” Ty tells her, but his face creases. I see my name on his tongue. He shouts through thunder. “You’re not dead. But something happened, and, well, you just stopped.” Rain flies from his hair when he shakes his head, eyes wild. He looks near laughing. “You and Ladye both.”

“Something happened.” Gin frowns.

“Wavy,” Ty says.

Gin’s chin jerks like she’s been hit. “Louise Callis said—” she mumbles, eyes on the puddling ground. There’s mud in her mouth. She looks at Ty, squinting. “Ty, who’s Wavy? Who is she?”

“You know who Wavy is,” Ty tells her, slow, like saying it slower will make her remember me. Gin shakes her head. Her hair is dark and streaked by dirt. “Your sister, Gin. Wavy your sister.”

Gin starts to laugh, hiccupping. “Ain’t got a sister.”

“You did.”

Gin hugs herself. “Stop it.”

“She drowned, Gin. You remember.”

She looks at him like he’s done her wrong. “It ain’t funny, Ty.”

“We were heading to Hole in the Wall in your boat, in *The dinghy*, to hide me.”

“Let me be!” she shouts. And whether it’s rain or tears on her face, my sister’s crying mud.

“The wind was so strong, Gin.”

“No!” my sister screams. And she starts to run, blinded by water and mud, towards the left-house. I hear him shout through the thunder. But I follow Gin.

When she gets through the front door, she stops so quick I run right into her back. I come out her ribs stunned by what I see. The second floor’s finally given out, and the roof with it. The sheet metal hangs, twisted and torn, at the edges of a great hole open to the flashing sky. Rain pelts the house’s guts, wetting the sand and shattered shells and broken floorboards coating the ground floor. I see the limbs of Gin’s driftwood tent, the shattered bits of her angelwings, and not a shard of my china. It’s under sand and rubble, buried. I can hear her heart beat in time with thunder.

When Ty comes pounding into Hollow House, Gin whirls, throwing out her hands. She shoves him against the open door and smacks his chest with her palms, screaming nothing-words. Ty stares past her head at the ruin he’s made. He doesn’t try to stop her hitting him; he just stands, shoulders curling as his skull bounces against the painted pine. Gin keeps on beating his rain-slicked chest blue until her legs give and she crumples to the floor, her fingers sinking in the wet dunes. She’s saying my name. “Wavy,” she whispers, “Wavy Gravy.” She falls across the sand, pale hair tangled across the dunes like storm-torn seaweed. Ty stands over her and I

beside him, looking down at her breaking. “I had a sister,” Gin tells us, eyes closed. Rain taps her freckles. Ty sinks down beside her and touches her cheek with his muddy fingertip, smearing her freckles black with dirt, and then he’s got his mouth on hers, jaw to jaw, and I’m not supposed to be here. It’s wrong, me being here, but I don’t know where else to be. The thunder is a tolling clock. I stand there watching my sister and the come-here shed their mud-sopped clothes like skins until they’re buck-naked in the rain and sand, smooth as salt-stripped wood. And when Gin splits her legs and Ty fills the gap I know she’s gone where I can’t follow and I pass from Hollow House and stand in the thunder and want. Want so badly I can feel my heart try to beat.

It won’t.

But Gin, hers does.

And when I lie down in her, lining up my ribs with hers while Ty fills her up, it almost feels like her heart is mine, beating.

EPILOGUE

Islanders said and say the Loops all died, every one. First Wavy, then the rest. That Isadore Dare, too. And being Loops, them dying wasn't much to cry over. A shame, sure—dying's never a good thing. But maybe, islanders whispered, Rip's was better off without them. After all, Loops were what Loops were: trash. That's what islanders said and say.

But they got it wrong. The mud in Mud Neck is full of bones. Ladye died of old age, and Isadore beside her. They're sunk in the marsh with me and Gran and Dora. Gin's there too, and Ty, and all but one of the children they bore right here in Mud Neck, the girl they named for me. Now I follow this Wavy, this second me. We run the woods and sail the Narrows. We sleep in Momma's bed. Great-grand's clock tolls in the entry, ticking away time I do not live, and her heart beats in mine.

But someday, when the Loops do die, every one, I'll go. Just walk along Mud Neck Road, through ruts full of persimmon and pine. Maybe I'll even visit Louise Callis in Rip's Cemetery, that grave without flowers.

And then, just that once, I'll cross Nobody Bridge. My feet won't feel the mainland, but my eyes will see it: all those things I never saw. And Mud Neck will sink. Tide will steal my bones. Islanders will forget Loops ever lived.

But me, I'll know.

I was a Loop named Wavy.