

Stone Harbor

1937

Autumn descended in all its fullness, ushering in golden afternoons, cool nights, and a general slowing of days. The island seemed to reclaim itself after the hustle of the summer crowd, and in a way, time, no longer filled with parties, dinners, and social events, did too. Each day presented tasks that needed to be completed, grocery runs, correspondence, cooking, but there were also long hours when Claire could walk the beach, seeing nothing more than the glistening ocean, a swooping gull, or a single set of footprints in the sand. Colors deepened, storing up the last of the sun's glow for the long months ahead, and the echoing sounds of hammers and saws, ever-present during the construction season, grew lesser each day.

Migratory birds arrived by the thousands, stopping over for a few days before continuing their trek south. Red-winged blackbirds flitted among the trees across from the bungalow, gathering berries and seeds for the winter, and flocks of terns swooped over the ocean. Merlins and loons appeared at the Point, and once, a Snowy Owl. Claire came upon him in the dunes, and the sight was so unexpected, the regal owl with his brilliantly white coat, standing against the backdrop of the sand, that her breath caught. She watched him a long moment, afraid he'd take flight if she moved even a muscle, but he stared unblinkingly back at her with a gaze that made it clear she'd invaded his home and not the other way around. She couldn't identify every species, but George's obsession with bird watching helped. She knew it was a Peregrine that tore down the beach and sent dozens of shorebirds skittering to the air, and though she never saw it, every day for two weeks, she heard a warbler calling from the thicket across the street.

One afternoon, before the arrival of the storms that would change the season definitively toward winter, she was scouting for seashells along the tide line when she spotted a disturbance out past the breakers. At first, it looked like a large log, dipping and floating with the current. She

watched, unsure of her eyes, and then she saw a cluster of bubbles and an outwardly spiraling ripple. The creature dove deep with a flip of its curved, blue-grey tail. Claire stood rooted in place, and soon the humpback breached the surface, leaping toward the air in a cascade of water and movement, nearly its whole body visible as it leapt toward the sun and fell back with a tremendous splash. A moment later, there was a second breach and fall, the creature's yearling. She was mesmerized, and as though the mother and child knew they were being watched, they stayed in that patch of sunlight nearly half an hour, diving, leaping, spy-hopping and slapping their tails. They were frolicking, enjoying the sunshine and plentiful feeding and the joy of plunging deep into the ocean and rushing back up toward the sky. Afternoon shadows were creeping over the dunes when they finally carried on with their journey south. When Claire returned to the bungalow, her cheeks were wet with tears, but her heart was heavy with unexpected gratitude.

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When Claire had first approached Jonathan with her crazy scheme, she didn't have the slightest idea what she was getting into, nor what she was asking of him. It could be a disaster, a failure of craftsmanship and professionalism, and then, of friendship. The list of requirements alone was enough to make the average person put up his hands and say, forget it. Sketches, measurements, angles, designs, lumber, planks, planers, saw, shed, stillage, temporary frame, permanent frame, dowels, screws, nails, resin, varnish, paint, inside paint, hardware, keel, ballast, main beam, true beam, caves, lockers, bulkheads, transom, cleats, rigs. It would take her six months to learn all the terms and be able to identify them on a diagram, let alone create them from paper and wood. She borrowed books from the library, and when that wasn't good enough, from Jonathan's personal collection. She peppered him with questions. The labor, the intense physicality, the soreness of muscles unused in this way in so long, the memories themselves coming back

through the physical act, the energy and time and commitment, neither of them knew precisely where the project might take them.

Jonathan had thought carefully about what kind of wood would match the boat he'd designed, wanting it to be strong enough to withstand weather but light enough that it could still be maneuvered on one's own. He'd drawn the sketches based off a 40 foot Hereshoff creation from the early 1920s. Claire didn't need something that big, so he scaled it down to fit her needs. Hers would only have a single-mast, and a gas-powered motor, an addition Claire balked at but he refused to move forward without. They'd squared off about that one, but even though she couldn't help the anger that swept in unpredictably from time to time, setting her jaw and causing her body to stiffen with emotion, conflict still made her uneasy.

Eventually, Jonathan had leaned forward and set a hand on her arm. "Claire, it's just a safety precaution. You'd be a fool to refuse to put it in."

Her gaze had shifted downward to his hand, moved her arm just enough that he let go. They'd recently had a row about something nosy Mrs. Diller had said about his carryings-on with the town girls, and she knew, irrationally, her stubbornness now held a leftover trace of that earlier unhappiness.

Jonathan sighed. "Do you want her to get caught in a storm unable to get home because the sails can't be put up and then she gets stranded out there and gets scuttled? Or blown farther out to sea? Or flooded and torn apart so all we find are bits and pieces of the boat washing up to shore?"

Claire's face paled, and Jonathan tried to backpedal. "I'm trying to keep you safe," he said quietly. "I want to make this work for you, but I also need you to stay alive."

For a long moment, she studied him, and then she acquiesced, her shoulders sinking, her features relaxing. "Okay. You're right. She'll have a motor. But she's not mine."

On this point, Claire was intractable. This boat she was throwing herself into was a dream, but not one she was ready to admit was her own. She was building without having any clear reason for doing so. The logical answer was to sell it, so she'd have money on which to live. Even so, she remembered the feeling of being at the rail of *The Knot*, the wind and chop moving through her. The thrill was one she had buried long ago. She suspected it was a shadow of the feelings Jonathan had also worked so hard to destroy.

He had a list of requirements for the sailboat, mainly that it was highly resistant to capsizing, that it was large enough to live aboard but easy to maintain and maneuver, and that it had an easy motion under sail. She'd be a little under thirty feet and nearly twelve feet wide, allowing her a cabin, saloon, and plenty of storage below deck. He replaced the racing rudder on the original design with a single, semi-balanced one, reasoning it would be easy to handle but also would get the job done with precision and responsiveness. For supplemental wood, he chose cedar for strength and mahogany for durability.

Stanley and Jonathan had built the shed, but he wanted Claire to help with the stillage. Having her work on that would help her build the skills she'd need as well as an understanding of how the boat would come together. She measured and double-checked alignment, spaced the placement of the timbers and drove in the steel pins. They talked the whole while through the process, what they were doing now and what they were setting up for what would come. He marked the centerline on all the horizontal crosspieces, which was not a traditional inclusion, but one that would ensure accuracy later. He didn't have the machinery to hew lumber, so they ordered rough sawn cedar from town. It arrived on a truck on a bright fall morning. The wind was whipping and the flags strained at the end of their poles, but the sky was clear, autumn blue. They took it as a good sign. Stan helped them unload, which was fine, but one of the lumberyard men gave him a

questioning look, undoubtedly wondering how he fit into this scheme. Jonathan fired back at him to keep working or move off the job.

That afternoon, Jonathan brought Claire to the shed, knowing full well the work the sun and closed doors would have had on the wood. He led her inside, and she stood there, spinning carefully in the dusty, airy space, sunlight pouring through the windows. “That smell,” she said. “It’s incredible.”

“Fresh cut cedar,” he grinned. “There’s nothing like it.”

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In late September, Jonathan came off a three-day shift at the Anglesea Lighthouse, picked up Claire, and took her to the Point. “If you’ve never had a cookout on the beach, you’ve got to do it before the weather turns. Anyway, I owe you a swim.”

They had the Point entirely to themselves. The ocean had washed farther onto the beach, carving patterns into the sand that rippled under Claire’s feet like the sea floor. “It happens at the turn of the seasons,” Jonathan explained, pulling supplies from the truck bed. “The tides surge up, suck away the sand. Transitions here are never calm.”

After he’d set up a stone-lined pit and they’d gathered driftwood, he grabbed her hand and tugged her toward the water. “Come on. You don’t want to wait til next spring.” He was in good spirits and his color was high, the days alone on the Light having done him good.

The waves called to Claire, and though she wasn’t wearing a bathing costume or swim cap, she discarded her things in a pile and dashed to the waves. She stopped short at the waterline, the tiny wavelets rinsing over her feet. For so long, she’d told herself she didn’t miss swimming, but it had been a lie. She plunged ahead, crashing through the water until it reached her mid-chest, and then she sank to her neck.