CHAPTER 1

Sold

Hannah Halloran learned that her family's lighthouse had been sold from a text message sent by a librarian.

Your dad sold the Point. I'm so sorry you're hearing it from me. Call when you land. Also, I have pie.

She read it twice on the jet bridge in Portland, with her field bag cutting into one shoulder and a dead phone battery warning blinking in the corner of the screen. Then she called her father. It rang eleven times. Walter Halloran did not believe in voicemail, in the same way he did not believe in sunscreen, seat belts in a parked boat, or discussing anything that mattered before noon.

She had spoken to him the Sunday before. He had told her about his tomatoes. He had given her a full report on a late blight problem, and she had said "Mm-hm" in all the right places while she logged tide data on her other screen. He had said nothing about selling a sixty-two-foot tower that had been in the family since before she was born.

Hannah rented the smallest car the counter would give her and drove north with the window cracked. The air changed somewhere past Brunswick. It stopped smelling like rental-car upholstery and started smelling like what she had spent fourteen months trying to remember: cold salt, wet spruce, and a faint sourness of low tide. San Diego had its own good smells, but none of them made the back of her neck go quiet.

It was almost six when she reached Saltmere. The town announced itself the way it always had, with a stack of lobster traps outside the hardware store and a church steeple with a weathervane shaped like a cod. The Gull and Griddle had its Sunday sign out. Someone had added a second cod to the town's welcome board since last year, and someone else had drawn a mustache on it.

She did not turn toward her father's house. She drove straight out along Point Road, where the pavement gave up and became gravel, and the spruce thinned, and the sky opened up like a lid being lifted.

Then she stopped the car, because she had to.

Kittiwake Point Light stood at the end of the headland exactly where it had always stood, white granite going gold in the last of the sun. It was not a graceful tower. It was squat for its height and stubborn in its shoulders, like a man who had been told to sit down and refused. A rim of iron railing circled the gallery near the top. Above that sat the lantern room, a glass crown with no light inside it. The light had gone dark in 1986, seven years before Hannah was born, and she had never seen it burn.

But something was wrong with the picture. It took her a moment to see what.

Scaffolding. A cage of galvanized pipe wrapped the lower half of the tower, and orange safety netting flapped from it like laundry. A white pickup truck was parked beside the keeper's house with *ROURKE MARINE* lettered on the door. A dumpster sat on the grass where her grandmother's rose bushes used to be.

Hannah turned off the engine and sat very still.

She had a speech. She had been composing it since the jet bridge, and it began, *Dad, I understand you're lonely out here,* and moved smoothly toward, *but you can't just sell your father's life to a stranger.* It was a good speech. It had a nice build. She got out of the car and found she could not remember a word of it.

The wind off the water had teeth. She zipped her jacket to the chin and walked toward the tower with her hands in her pockets, and she was nearly at the foot of the scaffolding before she noticed the man on the gallery.

He was up at the top, a dark shape against the glass, leaning over the railing with a tool belt hanging off one hip. He was doing something with a pane of the lantern room, working a flat bar along

its frame with slow, careful pressure. He did not look like a man who was wrecking a building. He looked like a man trying not to wake it.

He saw her. She saw him see her. For a moment neither of them moved, two strangers separated by sixty feet of air. Then he lifted one hand, set the flat bar down, and started down the stairs.

It took him a long time. She counted without meaning to, because she had counted this tower since she was five: eighty-seven steps, and the forty-ninth one squeaked. She heard the squeak from the ground. It came faintly through the open door, a small wooden complaint, and her chest did something it was not supposed to do.

The man emerged from the tower door wiping his hands on a rag. He was tall, somewhere in his late thirties, with the sort of weathered face that made it hard to tell whether he was tired or merely out in the wind a lot. His hair was dark and needed cutting. He wore a canvas work jacket with the cuffs frayed, and on his left hand, she noticed, a plain gold ring.

“You must be Hannah,” he said.

“That depends,” she said. “Who’s asking, and why is there a dumpster on my grandmother’s roses?”

Something moved at the corner of his mouth. It was not quite a smile. It was the shadow of one, politely declining to commit. “Matthew Rourke. The dumpster’s temporary. I’m sorry about the roses. They were already gone when I bought the place. I checked.”

“You bought the place.”

“On the twelfth.” He said it gently, and she hated that. She had been ready for a man who was smug. A man who was gentle was harder to be angry at, and she was determined to be angry at someone.

“Rourke,” she said. “As in Rourke Marine. As in Declan Rourke’s son.”

“Yes.”

“Of course,” Hannah said, and laughed once, without any humor in it.

He did not ask what she meant. He did not need to. Everyone in Saltmere above the age of ten knew what Declan Rourke's name meant, and what Halloran meant beside it. They were two names that had been placed on opposite sides of the same night forty-three years ago and had stayed there, like chess pieces that nobody had the nerve to move.

"Your father said you'd come," Matthew Rourke said.

That stopped her. "He said what?"

"That you'd come. When you heard." He glanced at the road, at the little rental car with its engine ticking as it cooled. "He said you'd be angry. He didn't say you'd be so quick about it. I wasn't expecting you for a few days."

"My father said a great deal, apparently." Hannah heard her own voice go thin and crisp, the one she used on reviewers who misread her data. "He just didn't say any of it to me."

Matthew took that in without defending anyone. He folded the rag in half and then in half again. A gull complained somewhere above them, and the scaffolding ticked in the wind.

"I'd have called you myself," he said. "I wanted to. Walter asked me to let him tell you. He said he'd do it in person."

"He's sixty-six years old and he doesn't know how to make a phone call to his daughter."

"I think," Matthew said carefully, "that some things are hard to say on the phone."

"You don't know my father."

"No," he agreed. "Not well."

The wind pushed a strand of hair across her mouth and she dragged it away. She looked past him, up the length of the tower. Under the gallery, eighteen feet below the railing, there were four iron brackets that had once held the weight of a wooden catwalk. Each bracket was crusted white with seabird droppings. Behind them, on

the stone ledges, were the small cups of dried seaweed and mud that had been nests.

Her nests.

She felt the anger loosen and something sharper take its place. “You’ve put scaffolding up against my kittiwakes.”

“Your...” He turned and looked up, as if the tower might clarify. “The birds under the gallery?”

“Black-legged kittiwakes. Rissa tridactyla. Four pairs last summer, six eggs fledged, which if you’d read anything about this coast you would know is a very big deal, because they don’t breed this far south. Not usually. Not anymore.” She heard herself getting loud and did not care. “I’ve had a camera on that ledge for three years.”

“The camera,” Matthew said slowly. “The little green box bolted under the third bracket.”

“You’ve seen it.”

“I thought it was a Coast Guard thing.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I didn’t touch it. I put the scaffolding up on the landward side because Walter told me there were nests. He said, and I quote, ‘My daughter will skin you.’”

Hannah closed her mouth.

It was an extremely irritating thing to learn. She had wanted to be indignant at full volume for at least another ten minutes, and he had cut the ground out from under her with a sentence her father might actually have said. She could hear him saying it, dry as dust, his hands in his pockets, his peppermint clicking against his teeth.