

# CHAPTER 1



THE LAST TIME I SAW SANCTUARY I WAS TWELVE. NOT LONG AFTER THE FIRE and my sister Tess's death, my aunt took me away from the old mansion and the island and settled me into a boarding school in a remote area of Maine.

"I can't see beyond the trees," I told her as she tried to get into the cab. "I can't see the ocean."

I clung to her like a small child would, despite being the taller of the two of us, burying my face in her hair, thinking it smelled of the sea. She'd untangled from my grasp, her delicate face set and grieving, and waved out the back window as the cab pulled away. At her yearly visits after that, her hair smelled of lilies and sadness, but never the sea. I longed to see the sea again, but longing was intertwined with tragedy like thorny vines. So I'd made myself forget.

On my aunt's last visit before her death, as I walked her to the door, at seventeen and no longer the child, she'd been the one to reach for me, with an almost desperate clasp on my hand, whispering fervently: *Don't come back to Sanctuary, Cecilia. Ever.* Her nails dug into my skin, and her eyes were frantic. My aunt had seen the wildness in me, the part of me like my mother and my sister, and it frightened her.

Now I was in a boat in the middle of the open bay, the green-gray of the sea in chaos around us. I'd missed it so much. I wanted to reach for the water, feel its coldness stun my fingertips and its seaweed twist about my wrist. The salt thick in the air made me think of my aunt's hair, full and flowing and smelling of the sea. So one thing I loved had been given back to me, but only after another had been taken away.

The island was growing larger, a dark blob in the gray dusk. I tried to remember it now, to bring back the joy of early childhood, running our forested and rocky island with my cousin Ben and my older sister, Tess. We

were wild children. No one cautioned us against the perilous high cliffs above the sea or the devilish rip currents while swimming. We were an afterthought, but free to do as we wished, gone from the manor all day, returning only when hunger brought us scrambling to the kitchen.

Tess had always been the leader, taking us on adventures to find pirates' lost treasure or the ghosts of Sanctuary's dead, with me following her, and Ben following me. Ben was the oldest, but slower in mind and body. Tess and I watched over him.

Tess's death abandoned me to roaming the island alone, the pain so raw and lonely I didn't know how to feel it. I'd pretend she was still with me, so I could cope. Walking along the windy cliffs alone, I'd talk to her as if she were still beside me, my child's imagination holding her fast to me. But after my aunt forced me to the boarding school, I could no longer catch Tess in my mind. She twisted away gleefully, eluding my grasp. Now I was returning to find her again—or at least I thought it was Tess who yanked at the rope wrapped around my heart, pulling me back to Sanctuary. I could already hear her saying, *Our home, is it?*

Uncle was at the helm of the boat, Ben beside me. My stomach rolled with the waves. I wasn't used to the motion anymore. But the sea lapping against the boat seemed to be welcoming me home, even if my uncle wasn't.

Uncle looked back at me, but I couldn't see his face in the low light. I knew he was glaring. At the bus stop, I'd been startled by the vicious look he gave me. My memories only had him hovering off to the side in a vague, tense way. He was at the forefront now. The lines in his face had deepened in the five years I'd been gone, especially the ones around his tight mouth. I wondered if my aunt's recent death had sliced them deeper.

Lights were sprinkled along the mainland we'd left behind. The small village of Lady Cliffs was much as I remembered, but I'd noticed a new filling station on the corner. In its window was a poster with a yellow crown above the words *KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON*. When Uncle saw me looking

at it, he barked, “English fellow trying to bring the war to us.” But the war in Europe was far away. Only the dangerous pull I felt toward Sanctuary was real. I didn’t know what I would find there, and I was fearful of who I would discover myself to be.

We pulled into the harbor. I spoke silently to my aunt, almost like a prayer: *Watch over me, Aunt Laura*. I could feel only her displeasure.

Ben jumped out of the boat and secured the line while Uncle barked needless orders. I was paralyzed by a sudden bout of fear, sitting in the boat as it rocked on the waves. I thought of the men who took my mother away and feared I would end up like her. My cousin looked at me with a question in his eyes, but didn’t speak. We were quiet people anyway. Uncle made a disgusted smack of his lips as he looked at me and, without a word, turned away.

Ben grabbed my suitcase with one of his large hands, giving me a final look of concern before he followed Uncle down the pier and up the white gravel footpath that I knew led to Sanctuary.

Still unable to get out of the boat, I looked again at the Maine shore. My hands trembled to start the motor to return to the mainland and my boarding school in the trees and my dear friend Elizabeth who’d replaced my lost sister.

It wasn’t Elizabeth’s calming voice I heard; instead Tess’s taunted me as only an older sister could: *But, Cecilia, this is what you wanted, isn’t it?*

A terrible feeling stirred deep and true inside of me, that if I stepped out of the boat, I would never get away. Sanctuary wasn’t visible from the harbor, but I knew the house waited for me. I stood, wavering just a little as the boat shifted on the water, and stepped out onto the pier. I was home.