Chapter 1

They said our injuries would heal: Mom's air bag bruises; a lump on my brother Quinn's head; mild frostbite on my toes, because I'd wandered away from the crash in a daze. But they couldn't explain my deafness. Every test proved my ears were fine. Except I wouldn't react to sound. All I heard was a world of buzzing silence. In school, I could see my teachers talking, but none of their words seeped through to me. Three months later, the sudden jangling of the phone jolted through me. My hearing was back. And the dream started. The one where I stand barefoot in the snow at the side of a back road as my world falls apart.

I squeeze snow with my bare toes into hard curds. Fat flakes melt like tears on my cheeks and tangle in my curls. Sparse light reflects off a white expanse. In a flash I'm in the car and something just beyond a black veil of memory has happened. Flash again and blue and red lights twirl beside a car that tilts like an abandoned toy. I splay my hand in front of my face, the thin skin between each finger pulsing red in the gyrating lights. Dark shapes merge and melt through gusting curtains of snow as they swarm over the car, lights shining on it as if it's the star in this Christmas pageant. I hear only silence.

Sometimes I wish my ears still didn't work so I couldn't hear my mother on the phone arguing with my Dad's mother, Mammo, who wants to rearrange our lives. That's what Mom screamed at her. No one talks about blame, but if I hadn't dozed off, maybe I would've seen the bridge, could've warned them, and Dad would still be here.

Mom gave in to Mammo's insistence and Quinn and I are on our way to Maine for a summer by the sea so Mom can finish grad school. It'll be easier, the adults say. So early this morning we packed the car with everything we'll need for two months. Mom added a cooler full of tuna sandwiches, bags of chips, bottles of water and apples. Enough to minimize stops on our

five-hour drive from Burlington, Vermont to Orr's Island, Maine. Sounds normal enough. Except my Dad's parents have barely ever seen us, even when we moved within driving distance for Dad's last residency. It's also curious that, in spite of living only a few hours' away, Dad never took the time to visit his parents. And they never visit us. The only photo I found of them is at Dad's medical school graduation, where I'm five and Quinn is a toddler. And I barely remember my Mom's parents. I only know them from birthday cards and one photo I found of them with Mom, where she's wearing a cap and gown. Two unfamiliar people flank her, their arms around her. Their features are rearranged into Mom's face. Her eyes are like her father's but the rest of her face mirrors her mother. Me? I'm all my father's daughter, from my dark curls (Quinn is reddish-blond, like Mom) to my round brown eyes (Mom and Quinn both have blue eyes).

I'm torn from my day dreams by my annoying ten-year old brother. "Mudhead's touching me!" Quinn screeches like a banshee.

"I did not you little shite," I say.

"For the love of God, will you two keep quiet for two minutes? And watch your language young lady." Mom gropes through a stack of maps on the front seat. "Muirgy, check the map. I don't want to miss a turn."

After three hours of driving, and a stop for lunch somewhere in New Hampshire, even I can't remember all the intricate turns on our route. But I figure we must be getting close to the Maine border. Yeah, I could pull the route up on my new cell phone, the one Mom got for me for this summer, to get driving directions. But I don't like the disembodied voice telling us where to go. It's an eerie echo of my Dad, who used to sit in the front seat and give Mom directions while she drove. Mom would talk about the new car they'd get when Dad finished his residency, with GPS and everything. Now she says that's out of the question until she finishes grad school. So I

reach into the front seat and snag the map labeled “Coastal Maine.” That’s right. I’m navigating from the back seat. For a reason. It’s Rule number one: no one sits in the front passenger seat. And not because of the air bag that left Mom with deep, purple bruises that took three months to fade after the accident. Dad was sitting there Christmas Eve. Six months later, all I remember of that night comes in my recurring dream where I stand in the snow, lights flash, and I am cocooned in silence and sadness deeper than any bruises.

I trace the road toward Maine and tell Mom, “We go through Brunswick onto,” I peer at the small print, “Route One.” I anchor the map with my hands and gaze out the window as New Hampshire slips by in a slide show of looming mountains still traced with snow, a field of Christmas trees. Mounded clouds pass in slow motion and green mile markers zip by as if they are in a hurry to be lost in time.

“Mom?” I ask. “You won’t be gone all summer, will you?” I wince because even I can hear the whine in my voice. Part of me is old enough to understand, and part of me is still a kid afraid of being abandoned. My older brain knows she has to go. There aren’t that many high level forensics programs in the country. Mom needs to get the best experience. Where, as she says, she will do something important, help other people. I don’t really know what she means by this, but I’m old enough to understand that no amount of questioning my mother will bring out any details about her work. It’s just not in her DNA. But like I said before, there’s a part of me that’s afraid I will lose her like I lost Dad.

Mom squeezes the steering wheel. “I’ll try to be back for the Fourth and then for a week in August before we head back for school.”

“I want to go with you,” shouts Quinn. “You always say Mammo is an old witch.” Quinn is still young enough to get away with that. Plus, he’s a boy.

"Quinn, let's not discuss this while I'm driving. Rules, remember?" says Mom.

The rules are new since the accident.

Rule Number One: no one sits next to the driver.

Rule Number Two: no eating or drinking in the front seat, since on car trips Dad would sip away at a beer, which often led to bickering.

So Rule Number Three: No arguing with the driver, because sometimes bickering turned scary, especially when Dad wedged in questions about Mom's work. Or when he'd had more than one or two beers, which was happening more often before the accident.

Which leads to Rule Number Four: no songs, no games, no jokes. No Dad, no fun.

The night of the accident, Mom picked up Dad after the residents' holiday party at the end of his shift. I remember wincing at Dad's smell when he got in the car. Not just the usual medicinal smell, but a staleness like a recycling bin full of empty beer bottles. Edged with something sharper and sweeter, and the funkiness of too long a shift and spent adrenaline.

Dad used to tell us stories of his childhood in Maine and the Irish folk tales his father loves. Dad said his father, Daddo, is convinced I am part selkie, a magical creature that is a seal in the water but who can shed her skin and become human on land. It's a fairy tale, and like a lot of them, it has a dark side. If you take a selkie's seal skin, you can trap her on land and make her your slave. The part I love about the story is that a trapped selkie never stops searching for her seal skin and her freedom. What I don't like is that, once she finds her skin, she will return to the sea and leave everything behind. Even her children.

I don't believe I'm part selkie. That would make me magical. The car accident proved I don't have any magic in me. If I were magical, I would have saved my father.

I only know snatches of my parent's story. Mom met Dad in Greek class in college. Dad

thought Ancient Greek would help with medical terminology and Mom just likes to understand everything from the very beginning. Even though she settled into bio-chemistry, it was the seminar on Irish Literature and Language they both enrolled in that resulted in me. It took them to Ireland, where, as the story goes, Mom became fluent in Irish, found out she was pregnant, and they got married. For the last dozen years, she's worked her way through a curious patchwork of graduate programs as Dad went through medical school, then one residency after another, first in general surgery and finally in orthopedic surgery. Each time we'd move to a different place until we got to Vermont and Dad became an official bone man. He'd bring home plastic models of joints and explain to me how they worked. Every new "appliance" as he called them – knees, hips, shoulders, ankles – fascinated him. Part doctor, part engineer I guess. Each time we moved, though, Mom had to uproot from whatever program she was in to come along with us to our next new home. I don't understand and she won't discuss, the specific work that is now taking her away for the summer, nor has she told us exactly where she's going.

In a way, losing Dad set her free, because one time, during a late-night argument (it's hard to have secrets in a small house), she yelled at Dad that she needed to be "nimble" for her career. Nimble seemed an odd choice of word, I thought, when I looked it up, because it means so many things at the same time. Quickness. Agility. Sharp thought. Astuteness. A combination of internal and external movement.

Mom's trip this summer, and Quinn and I being left with grandparents we hardly know, also has something to do with her father. He's retired, she says, from some vague government job, but it feels to me like he's always been some part of her education. I can't fit the pieces together. Like I said, she doesn't talk about herself, her work, or her parents. Not with her kids. Not even with her husband, if I can pull meaning from those overheard arguments. Believe me,

I've tried asking but each time I'm met with a flash of silence before she changes the subject, usually moving sideways into a question about my school work or something she's asked me to do that I haven't gotten around to yet. All I do know is that this trip feels like a Band-Aid being ripped off the pain of our grief. Dad talked to me a lot when he was in med school and his residencies, with me as much his sounding board as a receptacle for his memorization. Especially about pain, which he said is a major topic for a bone man. One time, we talked about referred pain, which might really be coming from your back or your shoulder, but that shows up in some other place making you think maybe you've torn a muscle or something. I've come to understand that the pain of grief is like that, too. It pops up in weird places that you don't always relate back to its root.

We moved to Burlington for Dad's ortho residency, and live in a doll-sized house one block from a park. It's three stories high, so from the attic, you can see Lake Champlain. Dad had a study in the attic, where he kept his skeleton. Family joke. Not in a closet. And all his medical texts. All of which disappeared after the accident. I have no idea who took everything away or where it went. To another med student I can only hope. Even with all visible traces of him gone from the house, he still seems to be around each corner. When I'd wake from one of my bad dreams, I often heard the whistle of the tea kettle. I'd creep downstairs to find Mom sitting at the kitchen table, clutching a mug of tea and staring at air.

As we pass over a green metal bridge with a "Welcome to Maine" sign and an unpronounceable river running beneath, I get jittery, as if something bad is going to happen, the same feeling I wake with most mornings. The pediatrician dismisses my sweaty palms and beating heart as "residual anxiety" that will heal with time. My equivalent of airbag bruises.

The sky darkens over the ocean as day presses on. Now that we're in Maine, the ocean opens out from the passenger side of the road in endless gray. We've been driving for almost five hours and according to the map, we should be there soon. I'm nervous about meeting my grandparents. They've seen me as a five-year-old, and Quinn as a toddler, but I don't think I will recognize them. Mom reminded us that Daddo is an artist, and Mammo, my grandmother, is a teacher. But that doesn't give me much to go on. What kind of people are they?

Dad told endless stories about them, especially his father's obsession with his Irish heritage. Apparently, when he was about twenty, he legally changed his name, Ronald Hughes, to Ronan O'hAodha, the Irish for "grandson of Hughes." He felt it would make him stand out from the other artists. When I was born, my grandfather had declared that he would be called Daddo, the Irish familiar for granddad, and grandmom would be Mammo. They had named my Dad, their only child, Finn, after the great Irish warrior and Daddo insisted that his grandchildren have Irish names. I was named for Muirgen, a beautiful maiden who turned into a salmon, with a middle name of Niamh, the daughter of a sea god.

My brother got off easy. Everybody could say, and spell, Quinn. He only had to suffer bad renditions of old Beatles' songs. My Dad even called Mom Aine, the Irish equivalent for her real name, Hannah, because it was the name of the famous Finn's wife. But unlike the mythic Finn, Dad did not live forever.

All of this makes me wonder what my friend Bridget is doing. Bridget's family is far closer to actually being Irish than mine, and she's my only friend who can pronounce my full name: Muirgen Niamh O'hAodha. Phonetically, it sounds like "Meergen Neeve O'HeeYou." With soft g's and breathy h's. I check my phone. No texts. I sent her one as soon as I got my phone so we could keep in touch. That was only yesterday, so I shouldn't be too hard on her.

After all, she's just about the only friend I have. Moving so much, especially landing in a new school for 6th grade, is hard on anyone but believe me, it's brutal for a girl like me. Someone who can feel lonely in a crowded room. I send Bridget a quick emoji of a smiling fish, hoping she gets the joke.

The radio warns of coastal storms and high winds. Mom switches it off, complaining that weathermen only repeat themselves. The clouds mass and bunch into angry snarls and fat rain drops splatter the windows.

"It's the next exit right?" Mom asks. "There was a sign not so long ago," she says and pulls into the far right lane.

I direct Mom onto a road that will wind out to Orr's Island. We're driving down a spit of land jutting into the ocean but all I see around me are trees. Behind the dense cover of pines on both sides, I sense the sea surging against the land.

Heavy raindrops merge into a sheet of water on the windshield and the wipers can barely clear one sluice before the next obliterates the view. As we cross a small metal bridge the water leaps into the wind. I clutch the back of the seat in front of me to give Mom directions. Her knuckles gripping the steering wheel are white and her neck tendons are taut as bridge cables. On Christmas Eve, the night of the accident, snow not rain pelted the car. The police said the accident was just due to lousy weather, not Mom. We should have gone straight home.

That's another missing piece. Why were we driving through a blizzard on Christmas Eve instead of to our house and tree and presents and cocoa? Whenever anyone asks, Mom glances at me and shakes her head. I can't remember what Mom doesn't want me to say. I only remember snow and silence. I finger the rough green fabric of my backpack that Dad gave me for my

eleventh birthday. I take it everywhere, have even before the accident. The police say I was wearing it when they found me, that I'd been thrown from the car but had no cuts or bruises. This summer, I will use my backpack to carry any treasures I find and my notebook, so I can record interesting facts and things to remember. Plus , the backpack holds my new cell phone.

The wipers slap at the curtain of water as we rattle over another bridge and up a hill toward a yellow bungalow with a large, wrap-around addition. A roadside sign announces Daddo's studio, "Dánlann Art Gallery." Mom had laughed at the name. In Daddo's Irish frenzy, he had used the Irish word for gallery so that his sign, in effect, says "Gallery Art Gallery." In a large glass window, a spotlight is trained on a sculpture of a dolphin breaching, as if it has swum underneath the gallery and burst through the floor to escape the crashing waves.

An older woman, thin and wispy with gray hair flying around her head, steps onto the porch clutching an over-sized bright yellow slicker around her small frame. Her brief, jerky waves seem to order rather than welcome us. This must be Mammo, who looks much smaller in real life than in the photo albums. She looks as if she might blow away. Instead of being frightened of this woman, who Quinn described earlier as an old witch, I feel like I should shield her from the wind and take care of her, not the other way around.

Mom lets out her breath in one quick burst. "Let's get this over with," she says. "Quinn, get your boots. Muirgy, grab a slicker. Let's make a run for it."

Quinn and I streak toward the porch.

"Inside, quick," says Mammo, "before you blow to the four corners of the earth."

Rain sluices from us as we huddle inside. Mammo peels off our coats, gives them a quick shake and hangs them on a peg board. "Boots. Shoes." She gestures to our feet. "Off with them." I know she doesn't mean my feet, but I've heard stories about Mammo. She's powerful for such

a small woman. She reaches out stiffly and embraces Quinn and I in a brief hug. Quinn hates to be touched by strangers and squirms out from under her arm. I resist the urge to waft away the sweet sour winey smell from her breath. She steps back to look at us, head tilted to one side.

"Not that I've seen either of you much, but heavens, Muirgen, you are the image of your," she pauses, "great grandmother. Daddo will have to show you her photo in his studio." Mammo slurs her words as if she is talking in her sleep. Mom's jaw tightens. "And Quinn." Mammo puts her hands on my brother's shoulders. He stiffens. "You have your mother's hair." She brushes at a reddish-gold curl and he turns his head away. Mammo's hand hovers in empty air for a moment that feels laden with loss before she drops it back to her side. "Hannah, dear. Are you cold? Would you like a towel?" She gives Mom a quizzical look. I notice she's much more circumspect with Mom. Not a hug or kiss. Not even a real greeting.

Mom wraps her arms tighter around herself. "Please, no bother, Myrna. I have to get back to Portland tonight and with the weather," she gestures outside, "I should head right back."

"I thought you weren't leaving until tomorrow," I say. "What about dinner?" I smell something rich and fishy and realize it's been a long time since that sandwich somewhere in New Hampshire.

"Yeah." Quinn takes up the wail. "It's not fair."

Mom hugs us to her and whispers into our hair, so that Mammo can't hear, "I can't stay here. It's too much for me right now. I thought I could come here and not be overwhelmed. And I need to go, like we talked about. Please understand. And always remember that I love you both so much." She seals this statement with a kiss to the top of each of our heads. "Once I finish my work this summer, we can be together forever and not worry." I nod against her embrace, wanting a world without worry, one that includes Mom, and she squeezes tighter, whispering,

"Daddo needs you and your brother. He's lost too without, you know. And you'll be safe here."

In her hug, I conjure up my father and I feel my mother's loneliness as palpable as my own. And a void where Dad should be that seems to extend beyond us into this whole house. I want to stay in her hug forever, but the older me understands. She needs to leave and we need to stay. Not just for each other, but for Dad. Mom releases us and takes a step back.

"Aine!" A bass voice rumbles from the next room and I am jolted by the familiar sound, thinking Dad has come back to life. "Come and let my tired eyes get a look at you girl." Daddo comes toward us.

"Aine," Mammo puts a stress on Mom's Irish name that jars me – it seems to signal some sort of displeasure, "says she has to get going." She gestures toward the window. "The weather."

"Not before she gives her old father-in-law a kiss," he says.

Daddo is well over six feet tall and broad, with a thick beard that had once been dark but now is shot through with silver. He wears a red and black plaid flannel shirt that hangs over his generous belly, and brown work pants splattered with paint. For the briefest second, I think he is Dad – bigger and older, his peaked eyebrows thicker and flecked gray. I see Dad in Mammo, too, in the curve of her chin and in her full, arched upper lip. Curves and arches that carve an ache into me. I can only imagine how Mammo must feel when she looks at us and sees variations on the theme of her lost child.

Daddo takes Mom by the shoulders. Like Dad, he's only a few inches taller than she is. An odd look flicks through her eyes before she disappears in his embrace. "Ah, darling, it's so good to see you," he says. "What's this about heading out into that good night?" He releases her and looks at Quinn. "And who's this little leprechaun?" He tosses Quinn in the air as if he is still a toddler. "Quinn my boy, the man of the family." He places Quinn back on the floor. Quinn

wobbles as he lands, his cheeks flushed red. “My little salmon, Muirgen. We have quite the plans for this summer.” He brushes my cheek. “You know how to swim?” I nod. “Good girl. Aine, any objections if I teach this one how to dive for scallops?” A small smile spreads across Mom’s face. She is blushing, as if Daddo has brought Dad back for her, too.

“She’ll work for her supper, right, Muirgy?” Mom pulls me to her in one of those best friend hugs. A reddish-gold curl, worked loose from her pony tail and damp from the rain, flicks water on my cheek. “Quinn is quite the little fish too. They’ve had their swim classes at the Y and learned a bit about boats last summer when we stayed at a friend’s camp in South Hero while Fi --,” She bites off the name. “Now you’ll learn about the ocean.” She conveys her message to us in her polite chatter. “It’s not like Lake Champlain. It doesn’t stay put. Watch the tides. And the seals.”

“Seals? They’re no bother,” says Daddo. “They stay away from humans, most of the time. Though be careful because one might be a selkie and recognize you my girl.” He winks at me. “But your mother is right – don’t try to pet them no matter how adorable they look. They can be nasty bastards and we don’t want them finding a seal skin for you!” Daddo points at me in a playful gesture and nods toward the window. “They sun themselves on the rocks at low tide. “You’ll be able to see them tomorrow morning, assuming they don’t all blow out to sea in this fairy whirlwind.”

A heavy gust of wind moans as it tears through the eaves. A fairy whirlwind. According to one of Dad’s stories, that’s how the souls of the dead make their way home. I shiver.

“I’d better get on the road,” says Mom. “You two have your cell phones, right?” I reach into my backpack and bring up a thin white phone. Quinn draws his black one from a pocket. “I programmed in my number and all the numbers where I’ll be this summer so you can leave me

messages. I won't be able to take your calls while I'm in the lab or collecting data. Wait." She takes my phone. "Shit. Oh, sorry." Mammo frowns at Mom's language. "Only one bar. I was afraid of that. Do you get reception anywhere in the house?"

"Upstairs is best, in the room where Muirgen will sleep," says Mammo. "And outside at the end of the property."

"So call, or text, every day. Texts work really well. They go through even when the reception isn't great. Plus, I can read them on the fly." Mom gives us each our own hug and kisses the top of our heads once more. "Thank you for going this," she looks at Daddo. "They'll be far happier with you than being hauled around the country. I really appreciate it."

Mammo pulls me away. "Our pleasure. It will be a treat to finally be grandparents."

Mom's forehead wrinkles and I wince at the deflected pain I read there from Mammo's implied criticism. "Muirgen can help in the gallery, too. She's good with numbers." Mom says, raising an eyebrow at me. I nod. I seemed to be doing a lot of nodding. "And Quinn is quite the little artist."

"Perfect! A gallery slave and a bit of competition," says Daddo. "We'll take good care of them. You've got all their bags out of the car?" He looks at our duffels dumped by the door.

"I'll get them!" Quinn dashes toward the door and I run after him.

"Back in the house, you'll get your –" Mom bites off her sentence. She almost broke Rule Number Five. Death, and Dad's name, are never spoken.

Mom hurries out and reappears a moment later with our suitcases. She rises on tiptoe and kisses Daddo on the cheek. "Thanks again, Da," she says and turns to Mammo. "And Myrna, I expect to be back for the Fourth of July break."

With that, Mom disappears into the not so gentle night and Mammo closes the door.

Chapter 2

All night, wind howled and waves crashed against the rocks, filling my dreams with seals and sea. But this morning, the world is washed clean and bright, the air crisp as fall, not at all like June. My bedroom is set beneath the eaves at the back of my grandparents' house. The ceiling slopes in except for a window recess. I ease forward so I won't bump my head on the ceiling and pull open lacy curtains. Lawn stretches down to the sea, the waves that had broken my sleep, and a small island beyond. I do a quick scan of my room. The walls are covered with a random pattern of flowers and the windowsill and table are crowded with photos. One picture is of my parents in Ireland on a barren swath of rock. We have the same picture at home.

Mom didn't notice when I took the photo albums to my bedroom so I could brush my fingers against that picture of them in Ireland and remember how Dad would tell me stories as he leafed through the pictures. My parents spent their honeymoon on Great Blasket Island, a windswept pile of moss-covered rocks and heather that's dotted with the ruins of white-washed beehive-shaped cottages straight out of a fairy tale. Dad like to say that was where I "got my start," his veiled attempt at discussing my conception. But I could count. I was born less than six months later, putting Mom's academic career on hold.

Shortly after I was born, Mom's parents moved from Washington DC to Tucson. Her father had taken early retirement from some vague government job. They were always off on one trip or another and the only travelling we did was from one college or another for Dad's medical education, so we never saw them. Mom put grad school on hiatus again when Quinn came along two years later.

Mom's parents have only met Quinn through photos, and they couldn't even come to Dad's funeral because Mom's mother had fallen while hiking and unable to walk. At least, that's

the story Mom told. I don't think they liked Dad, but, like everything else, no one in our family will talk about it. So that set of grandparents consists of birthday cards stuffed with ten dollar bills. That's what feels odd about this summer. Mom is involved in a project that she says will lead to her final degree and a job; somehow her father is part of it. As if Dad's death is bringing about some sort of reconciliation for Mom with both her parents and with Mammo and Daddo.

I slip into my jeans and t-shirt from the night before and rummage in my duffel for the University of Vermont sweatshirt Dad bought me for Christmas. It was one of the few things they found unscathed in the accident, the shiny wrapping paper barely touched. I draw the heavy green shirt over my head, close my eyes, and imagine what it should have been like Christmas morning, Dad urging me to open the box. The sweatshirt is big enough that it might have fit him and falls almost to my knees. But he couldn't have known I would need one that would fit me for the rest of my life.

Close to the window is a large, framed maritime map that I missed in my first scan of the room. I can tell it's for guiding boats through the shoals. Not only are the water levels marked, so are the rocks that lurk unseen at high tide. The map shows shreds of land dangling out into the ocean – the same islands and peninsulas I remember from the road map – making it look as if a large creature has mauled the shoreline. Coming closer, I trace the thin line of the road we drove, which winds down the length of the longest peninsula. It's a curious old map, with dots for houses and buildings and, at the end, on a tiny spot of land off a place called Lands End, there's a symbol for a light house. I wonder how far it is to Lands End and if I can ride there on a bike and if there's one in the large red barn at the back of the house that I can use.

I grab my backpack and slip downstairs. Even though I've never been here before, the house feels reassuring, full of life, even though no one else is up yet. I don't feel the absence of

Dad the way I do at home because, I suppose, I never knew him here.

Through the large glass door that separates the old house and the new studio space, a large pillar of black stone looms. I open the studio door to get a better look at the photographs of seals and posters of what look like mermaids tacked to the walls. Next to the door that leads to the gallery is a framed black and white photograph of a seated woman in a long white dress, a veil flowing from her hair. A grim man in a black suit stands behind her, slightly off center, a hat held against his waist so that his elbow cocks to the side. He has a look in his eyes like a victorious hunter with his trophy. The woman leans forward, her hands resting on the carved arms of the chair as if she is about to bolt. This must be the great-grandmother Mammo mentioned, the one Daddo claims was a selkie. Trapped by the man in black, I suppose. I snap a quick photo of the portrait with my phone and text it to Mom.

The sun porch that opens off the kitchen looks older than the gallery and studio part of the house. The windows snuggle into the sills and the glass in some of the panes looks wavy. A storm door, which curiously is not locked, leads to a small deck with steps to the lawn and a seaweed-strewn line of rocks beyond. The water has retreated to the channel – low tide – leaving trails of sand, weeds, and rocks in its wake. A large gray and black rocky mass pokes out of the water in mid-channel. As I gaze at the rocks, one moves. The small island is covered with overlapping seals, vying for room in the sun. Farther out in the channel two trees rise from a larger island, and beyond that, another, even bigger island shimmers at the mouth of the inlet.

The grass twinkles with the remnants of rain and my sandals are soaked before I reach the water. How close can I get, I wonder, before the seals slip back into the sea. Below the lawn, beach grass and seaweed entwine with old bottles, lengths of rope washed of whatever color they once held, and what looks like the head of a baby doll. I jump from the lawn to the damp sand,

and hear the splash of a seal leaving the island. Jammed into a space beneath where the waves had battered the shore is an old wooden box filled with seaweed. I tug at it, but it is too heavy. I push aside the seaweed and see a smooth flared edge of bone. Dad had taught me all about bones as he studied anatomy and orthopedics and this one reminds me of the hip bone he showed me as we studied each set of bones in his medical school skeleton. That skeleton was almost a member of the family. He'd bring it down from the attic for holidays. Last Halloween, Dad dressed it in his clothes and stood it on the porch, rigging it with wire so he could move an arm to scare trick or treaters. During Thanksgiving dinner, it sported a paper pilgrim's hat. After the accident, the skeleton was simply gone, like Dad. I flick away a piece of seaweed and place the bone at my feet. I notice other bits of bone scattered in the sand and pick up a long, finger-like knuckle. There are too many bones for my backpack so I clear the remaining seaweed from the box, put the bones inside and tuck it up above the high tide line.

"Hey Mud Head, whatcha doing?" Quinn calls from the deck. I shield my eyes from the morning sun and motion him down. Quinn runs across the grass. His nose is plastered with a thick white coating of zinc oxide. Mom had given us both regular sunscreen and the stronger thick paste. I was surprised he'd put it on himself. Guess he heard the message about being careful. You see, Quinn is much fairer than I am. Like Mom, his skin is almost translucent while I tan easily, like Dad. He's also a tall, rather gangly ten-year-old, with a mop of unruly red-gold curls that resist taming.

"Check this out." I pick up the saucer-sized flanged bone. "What'ya think? Pretty cool, huh?"

Quinn slides down the bank and squats next to the box. He pulls out a stubby piece of bone. "What's it from? Some kind of fish?" He turns the bone over and holds it up to the light.

"Look how it's kind of twisted."

"Did you see this?" I hand him the long finger-like bone.

Quinn stabs at the air with the bone. "I'll get you my little pretties," he screeches.

"Cut it out." I snatch the bone back from him. "Let's see if we find other bones. I'm pretty sure they're seal bones. Daddo will know. We can keep them in this box. Maybe we'll get enough to make a …" One glance at my brother tells me are both thinking about Dad's skeleton, with its rakish grin and beckoning hand. "We'll find the rest of the bones and put the seal back together," I say. "Until then, we'll keep them here, in our bone box."

We pick our way over seaweed-covered rocks, wet sand and muddy patches. Above the low tide mark we find several more finger-like bones, another flanged piece and others of various shapes. Each one goes into the box.

"This is so cool," says Quinn. "Do you think we'll really get enough for a whole something? Maybe it's not a seal but a sea monster!"

"You wish. No, they're probably just seal bones. I'll check with Daddo's books after breakfast. Careful with that one." I take a small, delicate bone from him and tuck it into a corner of the box.

"Meeergun, Quinn." Mammo's voice rings out from the deck.

I wince at the harsh pronunciation. Maybe I should just have her call me Megan. But Muirgen, with its soft slurring Irish lisp, is the name Dad chose. I push the box back into the bank, wedging it between two boulders and out of the direct sun, but not before snapping another photo to send to Mom.

* * * * * *

"You won't believe what we found." Quinn dances on the deck with excitement. Daddo folds his arms, a bemused look on his face. I'm happy that Quinn is not in the dumps this morning. But I worry what Daddo's reaction to his energy will be. We hardly know these people.

"You're such a drama queen." I roll my eyes at Quinn, my effort at toning down his energy a notch. "We found a bunch of bones that washed up on the beach in the storm," I say to Daddo. "I'm guessing they're seal bones. Do you have any books where we could look them up?" I look around for shelves stuffed with textbooks like we have at home.

"Why don't we bring them into the studio and lay them out. I have a marine anatomy book that I'm using for my sculpture. Wouldn't it be grand if we could build a whole seal skeleton? It could be a great help." His gaze wanders off somewhere none of us can even imagine. To his sculpture? To the memory of his son?

Daddo's idea for a seal skeleton lights a spark in me and I feel something I haven't felt since the accident. Excitement. A sense of purpose, of moving forward. It makes me wonder what Dad would have done when he was my age. And it strikes me. I can use this summer to find my Dad in this house, learn about him when he was my age. Maybe I'll find a clue to what happened Christmas Eve. And I remember Mom's words. Daddo needs us. He's grieving too. By building him a seal skeleton, maybe I can help bring Dad back for him.

I follow Daddo through the screen door and smell bacon and eggs and fresh biscuits. As I settle my backpack on the floor beside my chair, I'm still engrossed in the possibilities of the skeleton. But wonder how it will help him. "Daddo," I say, "I really like the idea of building the skeleton, but what will it do? How will it help?"

"My latest commission." Daddo gestures toward the towering block of dark stone in his studio. "Some judge who owns a big summer house around the bend wants me to carve him a selkie." He pulls in his chair. "That's what I'm doing with that big chunk of rock."

"A selkie is a seal that turns into a man, right?" I say.

"Or woman. He wants a statue of a woman coming out of her seal skin, at that vulnerable point where she turns human and gives up her seal abilities. Good to see you know some of the stories, must have been … ," he snaps off the sentence as Mammo places a plate of eggs in front of him, and puts her hand on his arm. He folds back a plaid cloth napkin on a basket full of biscuits, takes one and offers me the basket. I plop a biscuit on my bread plate and reach for the jam dish that glows red with raspberries. Biscuits. Like the ones Dad would ask for on special mornings. We were supposed to have them for breakfast Christmas Day.

"Your grandfather has received a commission from a very important person, one who knows a lot of very wealthy people in Boston, Providence, even New York City. He wants Daddo to make a marvelous sculpture out of that rock, as you called it Meergy, and then they will all come to our little studio, right Ronan?" She puts the last plate in front of me and sits down with half a grapefruit.

"Damn straight. He even gave me half the commission up front, so I could get the stone and so we'd have a little something to tide us over now that Mammo here is retiring." He hugs Mammo so that her grapefruit tilts as her spoon digs into the fruit. She frowns and pulls away from him. It's curious, how she seems in pain at his touch. And in her glimmer of pain, I see a flash of Dad I hadn't noticed before, in her eyes. Daddo is big like Dad was, but Mammo has Dad's … I guess you'd call it softness. Or sensitivity maybe. It makes my throat catch so I busy myself with my breakfast.

"I would have had the time to spend with you two this summer anyway, but now I don't have to worry about reorganizing my classroom for the fall," she says, wiping away all traces of the frown.

"What do you teach?" Quinn asks.

"High school biology. That's how I met your grandfather." She turns toward Daddo with a shy smile that makes her look almost like a girl. I can see the lines of her beauty beneath the roughness of age. Daddo sits up straight in his chair, squaring his shoulders.

"In biology class?" asks Quinn.

"No, silly," says Mammo and for the first time I feel warmth from her. "I was in college and working in the library on one of my anatomy labs, when this handsome young art student came in looking for books on the very anatomy I was studying. I believe that was the fox, right Ronan?"

He grins. "I caught my own fox that day." They exchange one of those adult looks like my parents used to do and I feel a tug at my heart.

"Did you go to the same college?" I ask between bites, looking for some clue to these grandparents I am only beginning to know. I arrange pieces of poached egg on my biscuit so that each bite has the same amount of egg, butter and bread. On the other half of the biscuit I slather a thick layer of butter and jam. I bite the egg half and the richness of the yolk and butter and bit of salt fill my mouth. I close my eyes, then bite the half with jam, the sweetness mingling with the savory. The explosion of tastes reminds me of Dad, doing much the same thing on those rare mornings when we had fresh biscuits and homemade jam for breakfast. His eyes would close just like mine, and a smile spread across his face as he chewed.

Daddo coughs into his napkin. "Well, not exactly."

"Your grandfather didn't believe that anyone could teach him anything about art that he couldn't learn by doing. He popped in and out of the college library and sat in on courses here and there for pointers, but he never formally enrolled. So yes he went to college, but not for a degree." Mammo's jaw tightens like Mom's does when she's annoyed with us.

I try to unravel the tangle of contradictions in what she says, and compare it with Daddo's history. Mom and Dad were always on us, even in kindergarten, about getting good grades so we could go to the best college, like they both had. "But you are an artist, so you were right?" I ask.

"Some say. I still have a lot of …," he looks at Mammo, "local work to do on my reputation, but yes, I've had considerable success and acclaim for my work, in spite of some critics." Mammo frowns. He scoops the last bit of his egg up with a biscuit, stuffs it in his mouth and examines me as he chews. "Have you ever modelled? For an artist, not that fashion crap." His gaze is appraising and more than a bit unsettling. I pause as a prickling warning feeling courses through me, and look down before answering.

"I'm only twelve." I look up and meet his gaze, trying to gauge who this man is who is my grandfather. "Who wants a scrawny kid for a model?

"I want to get a sense of your face, especially those eyes. It's better than using a photograph." He's staring at me, head tilted, as if I'm not real. Or at least not live but more like a plate of fruit or other still life. This calms me a bit, and I think he's looking not so much at me, or my body, but at his ideas in his head.

"What he means dear, is that you have your great-grandmother's eyes. Her photo is in the studio," says Mammo.

"You mean great-grandmum Hughes? Is she the bride in that photo? I peeked in earlier." I remember the story Dad had told about his grandmother, and the powers people claimed she had. "Was she really magic?"

"All beautiful women are magic," says Daddo. "But she was more magical than most. Some say she was a selkie trapped on land by a very bad man who hid her skin. She had a lovely baby girl and ran away with the baby, my grandmother, to American when she was not yet twenty."

"Can boys be selkies?" Quinn interrupts.

Mammo smiles at Quinn. "Of course they can, right Ronan?" She leans into her story. "Otherwise, how would there be baby selkies? Correct my details if I'm wrong, Ronan, but your great-grandmother came to American with thousands of other Irish during the potato famine. Most of her family had died of hunger. There was a story about a love affair with the son of the English lord of the manor who owned their farm. If there was any bad man involved, it would have been the lord."

"What's a famine?" asks Quinn.

"That's when everybody is really, really hungry and no one has anything to eat," I say. "Remember what," I rephrase to avoid any reference to Dad (Rule Number Five, we never say his name and we never mention death), "all those stories? People ate lots of potatoes in Ireland, something happened, they all rotted so no one had anything to eat." I wave my fork, hoping to dispel a lengthy discussion of the hundreds of years of English oppression in Ireland that Dad always added, a sore subject also, I can only guess, for Daddo.

"But why didn't someone help, like UNICEF or something?" Quinn asks.

Quinn can be amazing sometimes. Annoying, yes, but what little brother isn't? Sometimes he seems like Yoda in Star Wars.

"People were not always so kind to others," says Daddo. "Especially if you were poor in Ireland and didn't own your own land. In those days you had no one to take care of you if your crops went bad. In fact, most farmers' crops were exported to feed the British and their colonies, leaving nothing behind but a few potatoes and those were struck with blight. We Americans hadn't invented foreign aid yet. That would be a few more years, after we wreaked havoc in a war or two. Basically, people died because of greed. An old story that keeps repeating itself. Take Biafra …"

"Enough with the politics," says Mammo. "It's a beautiful day and no reason to sit inside trying to figure out hundreds of years of history. Why don't you two go out and see what you can find on the beach? All sorts of marvelous things appear after a storm out there."

"We already did!" Quinn bounced in his seat. "Did you hear about the bones Mammo? Tell her Muirgy, about the seal we're building. We're building a seal skeleton, right?" Quinn is almost bouncing in his seat.

"That's right! These two fine young archeologists are collecting seal bones in a box on the beach," says Daddo. "Come on, you two, show me what you've got and we'll set you up in the studio. Muirgen, we'll get you fixed up with a table and a chart from one of my books, so you can get to work on that seal skeleton. And Quinn, we'll get you your own easel." At the mention of the bones, Mammo gets a faraway look on her face, like Daddo had earlier and I remember. Dad, the Bone Man. Maybe the skeleton, and bones, will help Mammo, too.

In the excitement of setting up my own little lab, my miniature version of what both my Mom and Dad worked in, I forget to ask about bicycles and my plans to explore the peninsula. I

also forget to ask about keys. I've never lived somewhere that the doors are always open. They must lock them sometimes and I'd hate to get shut out. "Mammo," I start. She looks up, expectant. "Do you have sets of keys for Quinn and I to carry? In case we're outside and you're not home or something. Mom always had us wear ours on ribbons around our necks." I pull out the remnants of the Burlington ribbon, with only my front door key left dangling.

Mammo and Daddo look at each other and starting laughing. "Keys? No one locks anything around here. What would they steal? Half a ton of granite?" While laughter is usually infectious, I don't understand. Locks are important.

"What about your paintings? The gallery?" I gesture to the front of the house. Daddo makes a dismissive gesture.

"Don't worry about keys, dear," says Mammo. "If we really need to lock the studio, which we rarely do, you can always get in the back door to the kitchen." She gestures to the storm door. "It doesn't even have a lock." I exchange glances with Quinn, who just shrugs.

I find this more than a little unsettling. Anyone can walk right in, during the day or worse, the middle of the night. But it's clear that my obsession with security must come from my Mom, not my Dad. I'm about to ask about bikes but decide to skip it for now. There's plenty of time, I think, and tuck the thought away for later. I push back from the table with a nod to Mammo as thanks for breakfast, grab my backpack where it rests against my chair, and head to the beach with Daddo. Quinn runs ahead of us. The sun is higher now and the air, while still crisp, has an edge of warmth. The water sparkles and light dances across the ripples of waves as the tide surges in, already halfway up the rocks.

"Down here, Daddo." I slip on the wet grass at the edge of the beach and pin-wheel my hands in the air to catch my balance. Daddo steadies me. Quinn is already down by the box,

crouching with knees bent up like a frog's legs. He pokes a driftwood stick at the seaweed over the bones. "Hey, careful," I say.

Part of a picture of three oranges still clings to the end of the wooden box, with only a scrap of writing left, "om Brand," and groves stretching toward mountains in the background.

"Nice orange crate, says Daddo. "It's an old one." He brushes away seaweed and holds up a gnarled bone. "Beautiful. Do you know what it is?"

"A seal bone?"

"The equivalent of your femur." He taps his thigh. "Except yours is long and straight because you walk upright. This is dense and curled, designed to support a lot of muscle. It's the bone that attaches to the hind flipper that propels the seal through the water." He pulls another bone out and points it at Quinn. "Like this one?"

"It's creepy, like a witch's finger," Quinn says.

"Nothing quite so evil. You know the fins on a seal? Well, inside each fin is a hand like yours. This is one of the seal's finger bones. It helps the seal pull out of the water, kind of like you might pull yourself out of a swimming pool." He nods toward the rocks that rise out of the channel. "Look, out there."

The seals are crowded together to soak up the last few minutes of sunshine before high tide. A wave splashes on a rock face and three seals slip into the water, barely disturbing the surface.

"Where do they go?" I ask.

"Off to hunt for food. Most likely they'll head out there." He motions to the farther island at the mouth of the channel. Waves crash on its far shore toward open ocean. "Speaking of fish,

there are great ones to be had as the tide changes. Want to go out and see what we can find for supper?"

"Can I use a fishing rod?" Quinn is on the task in a flash. "Are we going out in a boat?"

"Whoa, down boy. Yes, you can hold a rod. A fat sea bass would make a fine supper. We'll leave the bones for now and set you two up later. It's too nice a morning to stay indoors. The boat is down over there." He gestures to a dock barely visible through the trees. "I hope. I tied her down pretty good yesterday. Come on. The buckets and lines are all in that shed." He points to a small wooden building.

The dock, on hinges so it can rise and fall with the tide, extends out from the shed. A wooden row boat, its paint mostly faded blue but with hand-painted patterns like waves worked along the gunnels, is pulled high on the shore and lashed to a tree. Stenciled on the back of the rowboat is the name "Selkie." Which I think is an odd name for a boat but then again, I'm quickly finding that Daddo can be single-minded about things, especially his favorite stories.

One of the pines that crowds the back of the shed didn't make it through last night's storm and dents the roof with its weight. "I'll have to call someone about that," says Daddo. "Careful." He guides us around the shed away from the tree. "Down trees are dangerous. Never know what they'll do."

I squint at the tree. I'm no expert, but don't think that tree is going anywhere without a chainsaw and some ropes. Nevertheless, I steer clear. Daddo waits until we're away from the shed, then creaks the door open, watching the tree. The tree doesn't budge and he ducks inside, retrieves a bucket and fishing lines and two orange bulky things with buckles. He backs away from the shed and out of danger.

We climb onto the thick wooden slats of the dock. A short ladder on one side descends into the water and the dock's thick pillars disappear into the depths, crusted with dark, lumpy shapes.

"What're those?" I ask.

"Barnacles. What we really want are some of these." He nods toward a clump of smooth dark shells clutching to the rocks at the shore just above the water level. "Fresh mussels. Steam these babies up with a little wine and garlic and you'll be in heaven. Here." He gives me a bucket. "See if you can pry some off. We'll need about," he looks us up and down. "5,000 to feed you two."

"Five – "I start to protest and see his grin. "Make that twenty thousand, because you'll eat more than Paul Bunyan," I say.

"Make that Brian Boru and you're on," he says as I take the bucket. Daddo is just like Dad in his fanatical love of Irish folktales. Brian Boru was another of those over-sized characters, an Irish Paul Bunyan, but more powerful. Dad had said Brian Boru didn't just chop down trees. He freed a country.

Quinn and I climb over the rocks and pluck at the mussels but they won't let go. "Daddo, how do I do this? They're stuck hard."

"Small detail. I forgot to give you my knife." He produces a folded pen knife from his pocket and tosses it to Quinn, who catches it in midair. I wince, not sure if I am mad or scared. Mad that Daddo didn't throw the knife to me, or scared that the knife might pop open and cut Quinn, an irrational thought because Quinn struggles to get it open.

Quinn pries a mussel off with the knife and holds it up. Then he works his way across the rock and I catch each mussel he pries off in the bucket, add bits and pieces of seaweed, and the

bucket is soon full. While we work, Daddo flips the row boat over, drags it to the water, and fits the oars in the locks. “Hop in,” he says. “Fill that bucket with water so they don’t die.” He tosses each of us one of the orange vests and pulls a larger version on himself, leaving the buckles loose. “House rules. Plus, we don’t need trouble from the Coast Guard. I never want to see or hear about you two venturing out in any boat without your PFD.” He must have seen my quizzical look because he adds, “Personal Flotation Device, also known as your trusty life vest.”

I sit in the front of the boat, my backpack at my feet, and watch Daddo as he rows. Quinn trails his hand in the water, bent low over the surface. I remember my phone and send Mom a text with the pictures I’ve taken so far, including one of Quinn and the mussels, then tilt my face up and close my eyes. The boat rocks gently, the sun warms my cheeks, and the oars rise and fall with a regular creak and splash. I close my eyes. My dreaminess is shattered by the clatter of oars.

“This looks as good a spot as any.” Daddo hefts a small silver anchor overboard. “This will keep us from drifting too far on the tide. It’s about …” he peers down the anchor rope, now pulled taut, “twenty feet deep if I remember my chart right. Bit too deep for diving for scallops.” He looks at me. “And you’re not dressed for that anyway. Another day. Besides, I want you to practice holding your breath underwater first.”

“Where do you go for scallops?” I ask.

He points to the island at the mouth of the channel. “In that little cove, the one with the sandy beach. It’s also a great place for a picnic. We’ll head out there some afternoon. Not today. I have to work. We’ll only stay out until we catch our dinner.”

He hands a fishing pole to Quinn and a line with a hook to me. “Drop that down and wait. If you feel a tug, let me know. Here, tie it to the oarlock so it doesn’t get away from you.”

It doesn't take long. Within 15 minutes, Quinn has landed one of the largest fish I've ever seen, which puts a huge grin on his face – and on Daddo's. I look between them, wondering if Dad had gone fishing like this when he was Quinn's age.

Quinn presents the large sea bass that he caught to Mammo and I lug in the bucket of mussels, seawater sloshing on the kitchen floor.

"Excellent!" Mammo says. "This will make a lovely supper." She beams at Quinn, who ducks his head. "But first, you need a little lunch. Go on. Wash up." She shoos us toward the bathroom. I linger at the door. "You too," she says to Daddo, "but not until you gut this thing." She slaps the sea bass down on the counter, dumps the mussels into one side of the deep double sink and turns the tap so water gushes onto them.

Daddo mumbles.

"You've already squandered most of the morning, so might as well get the dirty work of gutting over. You'll have plenty of time for your own work this afternoon," says Mammo.

Daddo rummages in a drawer and brings out a long, thin knife with a blade that tapers almost to a point. He tests it with his index finger.

"Ronan, you'll cut yourself." Mammo takes the knife from him. "I just got all the knives sharpened. Use the old knife to get those scales off first."

He draws out a battered black handled knife. The blade has a nick in it about half way down from the point. He holds it up and smiles at me. "Never use a good knife for chopping wood." Mammo rolls her eyes.

His deft strokes scatter fish scales in the sink like iridescent confetti. I pick one up. "It's like a fingernail," I say.

"But flexible. Did you see how I scraped from the tail toward the head?"

I nod.

"The scales overlap to form a smooth surface so the fish can slice through the water." He makes a wiggly zoom with his hand. "And they're small so the fish can bend at any point." He places the fish on a large cutting board and pulls out the long, sharp knife. With one deft slash, the fish flops into two halves. He throws the inside yucky stuff in the bucket we'd used for the mussels. Mammo left it on the floor by his feet, I suppose for just this purpose. The two of them move in patterns that seem long memorized, barely needing to talk to each other. Would my parents have moved like this if they had spent twenty more years together? A few more quick slashes and he holds up an almost intact fish skeleton. He jiggles it so that the lacy outline of the fish sways in the sunlight before tossing it in the bucket. He draws the knife in a few more quick strokes between the skin, sliding through as easily as the fish once slid through water. The reddish flesh separates into two thick fillets, leaving behind a cartoon outline of the fish in the skin flayed on the cutting board. "Dinner." He hefts a fillet. "Must be over a pound a piece. Good catch, Quinn," he yells over his shoulder.

Quinn has wandered into the yard. His interest in the fish waned as soon as Daddo helped him pull it in. Quinn looks up as he hears his name then returns to his examination of something in the lawn. While we'd been out in the boat, I had felt an odd tension between Daddo and Quinn, as if Quinn was pulling away from Daddo as hard as the fish had pulled on the line before Daddo won. Daddo becomes the center of everything, and brings everyone with him. Would it have been the same, I wonder, with my Dad? Did he pull away, only to be drawn back to the man as if he were a huge magnet?

Mammo follows Quinn's meanderings from the window. "That boy needs a father," she says. "Ronan, you'll have to bring him around."

Her remark sparks like a lit match. "Myrna, how the hell do you expect me to work magic in one morning?" He slams down the fillet knife. "Come on," he says to me, "I'll show you what we do with fish detritus." The screen door snaps shut behind him with an angry slap.

Mammo frowns. That's all the signal I need. In less than one day I feel like I can read the weather of Mammo's moods and don't want to be in the middle of a storm. I make my own flap snap of the screen door and catch up with Daddo by a mesh enclosure near the water's edge. He pulls aside a cover made from an old wooden screen and tilts the bucket so that the contents topple out. Flies buzz and a sea gull snap at the cover. He waves them away and refastens the mesh. The taut lines in his neck relax and he stretches his head to each side like an athlete. "Why do you let it all rot like this?" I ask.

"Compost," he says. "Stinks like hell for a few weeks. Throw in enough grass clipping, dead leaves, and we have some mighty fine fertilizer. See those tomatoes?" He gestures to a terraced garden that follows the slope down to the water. "They'll be ripe in a week or two. First in the neighborhood, and biggest." He fills the bucket with sea water and flings it in a circular motion over the pile. "We'll put in the shells, too, but have to whack them into bits first. Adds calcium." He smiles at me. "Enough with the garden chemistry. Let's get washed up before lunch or we'll reek worse than this pile."