

PROLOGUE

September 1941

Avila, Ma Vie.

As I write, I'm crossing over to your island from the mainland, near (I believe) Morehead City. It's as if I were being carried via magic carpet home to you, under cover of darkness into your world. Perhaps I've been reading too much Louis MacNeice, but I do feel a poem coming on. "Island Embrace" it wants to be called. Dead giveaway I should think. I'll scratch it out in a bit and enclose with this letter which you will not see just yet.

I've been so anxious, Ma Vie, to get to you. It's taken a week, what with the *official* purpose of the trip being in Washington. I've thought my pulse would explode with the pacing of the journey, all this waiting for the *real* reason I agreed to this strenuous travel for as far as we're concerned.

I'm on the private ferry, accompanied by the wild wet, rain-strong winds and purple fiery sunset from the gods. And at peace. Deep peace. As I remember it, rather mystical this place called Ocracoke. Every bit as much as Lindisfarne—only, as you said when we were there on that Holy Island, not as ancient. Nor holy. There's humid warmth in the wind here tonight, so welcome after last year's seemingly endless autumn-into-winter blitzes which are still happening as we speak; I lean against the ferry's bow railings—the other passengers sit in their cars sleeping or smoking. The sturdy vessel feels empty—but it is actually about half full. I wonder what the dark cloud feeling is on board. The war is supposed to be far away—on foreign soil.

The lighthouse you sketched me is now in view, though, of course, much shadowed by the blackout. Even so, I see its silhouette and its faint whitewash in the moon's silver.

By the time you read this, I will be gone from your home island. To parts unknown. I write you a letter now, to leave with you later, while my mind and all senses are brim full of love, coming to you.

Island Embrace

Only Seagulls usher
Us out to the channel.

We glide into moonless
Dark by faith, believing
Silver Harbor's welcome
Will reveal squat dusky
Lighthouse, unlit, blacked
Out, invisible to enemies
At sea. The dim beacon
Beckons, calling me
Home to you.

Chapter One

September

Present Day

Madeline

It's time, the estranged female voice in the dream had told her. *The time is now.*

Tell him, it urged. *Tell him about your baby, his baby.*

These words blew through her mind, as Madeline pedaled the beach bike faster through the moon-full night, north on Ocracoke's deserted Highway 12. These were the words she'd reported by phone to her friend Trish who was due to arrive any moment on the midnight ferry from Hatteras. As it had been recently, the ferry was running late. So Maddie took her time and relished the cover of windy darkness, breathing the marshy-wetland smells mixed with salty damp. Her long brown hair flew behind her like a bike-flag.

Trish hadn't yet said much about the baby news other than *I'm coming. We'll talk.* This was not because of any rescue-Maddie-mission. The phone call had coincided with Trish's own crisis: the boyfriend (Maddie had never liked him) had started to beat Trish up. So, the arrival of the midnight ferry was really about solidarity. Once again, as they had done ever since their boarding school days, their lives were running parallel, side by side in fortune and misfortune.

Now it appeared there'd be plenty of time to commiserate, time to talk things through and figure stuff out, because Trish was coming to stay indefinitely which, somehow, felt just right. *Thank God,* Maddie thought again as she watched the ferry pull into its slip and bump up against the pilings. The oafish double-decker, loaded with vehicles and campers, looked out of place back-lit by an effervescent full moon in a starless sky. Gears downshifted and the diesel engine growled to a low rumble.

Her heart was hammering by the time she parked and locked her bike at the pedestrian passenger boarding lane to watch the boat unload. She would collect the bike tomorrow.

Grateful for the wakefulness, Maddie knew she'd pay for it feeling nauseated and disembodied in the morning. So be it. Because Madeline Graham had more news than just the baby on the way. She hoped sturdy, lovable, fanciful, rugged BFF Trish could stand it all. She pictured the stash of very old letters she and Will had discovered yesterday. Trish would want to play Nancy Drew with them. Madeline had hardly had time to give them another thought.

The Art and War of Island Secrets/Sheryl Cornett

A wind-chime sound pinged on her tablet-sized cell phone

You have one new email.

Monday, September 1

11:42pm New Email Message from Trish Collier

Hey Maddie—

I know I'll see you just as soon as I get across the Inlet, but want to email you anyway
Can't wait to be together. I'm in line now for the last ferry, which I almost didn't make because I
got pulled by a cop for speeding and that took up precious minutes on the ticking clock.

The midnight crossing, that's what the ferry operators call this ride we're about to take.
This one's complete with moonlight. I can't help but feel I am going home somehow. Isn't that
strange? It's your family, your cottage. I haven't visited in years, but it's the first thing I thought
when the shit hit the fan. *Maddie. Ocracoke. Home.*

I don't give a damn about the speeding; because I've long dreamed of driving south on
Highway 12 under a full moon. Always, I guess, in the back of my mind I was south bound for
your "shack." But I'd hoped it'd be under happier circumstances. This time, the wild stretch of
barrier island road found me traveling solo. The autumnal wind whistle-wailed around me,
slicing into my hair through the Jeep's rolled down windows. Not another car in sight, though I
may have an angry ex on my bumper trailing me back beyond what I can see in the rearview
mirror.

The cop was *hot* and really nice. Only gave me a warning. God a-mighty! Men in
uniform!

Anyway, thank you, thank you Madeline, for asking me to come. I'm hitting *enter* now as
it's time to load the ferry. I want to hear more about that voice speaking to you in your dream

Sent from my iPad

Cars and trucks rolled and clanked off the ferry bed, their pop or country music stations blared a rift into the night quiet, and the sound of collective tires broke the music of waves and wind. Maddie waved to her friend as Trish's red jeep appeared from behind a greyhound bus-sized RV. She saw in the dark distance a small fishing craft whose peace, she imagined, had been disturbed.

Trish pulled the jeep off to the side to let other vehicles pass and so Maddie could get in the passenger side. Instantly, they reached for each other across the stick shift and the bucket seats holding on in a neck hug.

“You! You're here,” Maddie shrieked.

“I know. Woo-hoo! It feels like coming fresh off time travel!” Maddie grinned. “And that means what?”

“Oh, you know. That ferry-boat ride through the velvety moist night air, the soothing wake and wave sounds against the vessel's hull, the salty-water smells . . . “

“Ok,” Maddie said laughing, hugging Trish again. “I get the picture. You writing poetry again?”

“I might be, now that I'm here. Who knows!”

The jeep filled with their good humor, the relief of it. Here they were at last, face to face on Ocracoke, so many months after their last visit in Raleigh. The darker news could wait.

“What happened to you?” They said in unison and laughed again.

“You go first,” Trish said. “I’ll drive us to the shack. See if I remember the way.” The jeep picked up speed and their windblown hair tangled together in the space between the bucket seats—a wispy tapestry woven of brown and red threads

Maddie let out a long breath. “The short version,” she sighed, “is that Will has deployed for Iraq, already. I knew it would be soon. Still, I prayed and prayed the EPT would be negative and there wouldn’t be an issue and now there is and he’s gone.”

After this word-deluge, she paused. Maddie inhaled deeply and wondered if Trish loved the seaweed-y smell as much as she did. The Jeep turned so slowly into Oyster Creek Lane they could hear the crickets sawing song as she continued. “I put off telling him because it’s my worst fear and I hoped it wouldn’t come true.” Her voice shook, breaking up a little. “I didn’t want to believe it.” Maddie looked up through the sunroof into the deep purple-black sky. “I was worried he’d want an abortion or jeopardize his own clear headedness and carry the shock with him to the front and then maybe from Iraq to Syria—“

“So, he doesn’t know?” Trish drove slowly. Tree frogs’ throaty sounds joined the crickets singing through the darkness and open jeep. Tires crunched the oyster shells lining the sand-and-dirt lane.

“Nope.”

“God.”

“Yep.”

“But I understand,” Trish said stopping the jeep outside a short white fence.

Do you?”

“Sure. I mean, what a bomb to drop on guy heading into a freakin’ war. No pun intended.”

“I know.” Maddie said, pointing ahead to a darkened cottage. “By the way, it’s not this one, but the next one down.” The tires spun slightly in the sand, even though they drove slowly enough to hear the owls haunting hoots. “And to be blunt, I’m terrified shitless for myself—as much as for him. Isn’t that selfish?”

“Hmmm. Not necessarily.” Trish inched the car past a few more cottages.

“It’s the one kind of person I promised myself I’d never be—alone and pregnant and doomed to single parenthood like my mother and grandmothers—“

“Now wait a minute, Madeline.” As always when being direct and strong—*bossy* Chad would say—Trish called her Madda-LINE as in the classic children’s book. “Let’s not get carried away with doom and gloom.”

“You’re right, you’re right,” she said pulling her wind-tangled hair back from her face into a clip, smelling salty humidity and sweat on her arms. She silently thanked Trish for not saying *why not an abortion?* It was a long-standing debate between them: the definition of “choice.”

Again, Maddie blurted, “But it *is* hard not to panic, seeing my life disappear right before my very eyes.” She heard the panic in her shrill voice.

Trish jabbed Maddie in the ribs. “Are *you* writing poetry?” They laughed, maybe too eagerly. Maybe too shrilly.

Maddie knew what her friend was up to with the joke about Maddie and poetry, which she declared she could not write. The joke worked. The grief-cloud lightened and suddenly she wanted to tell Trish about Avila's Island Pantry, her one bright piece of news. But it could wait. It would have to wait. Trish's scary escape from Raleigh, and the other dark news pushed everything else aside.

“Now it's your turn, Trish. What the hell happened?”