



Chapter One

THE MOONLIT MAP

Minnow lay just beneath the surface, still as driftwood, counting the seconds as she held her breath. Her heart thudded in her ears, fierce as thunder, and she balled her fists to stop herself moving. The still waters of Brighton marina weren't ideal for hiding in, but at least the dark would help her keep out of sight. Minnow loved the silver-dark of a starry sea, where she could dive through the waves unhindered. Or the night horizon beyond the twinkly pier, where the indigo tides felt like freedom. Even the evening marina was cool and familiar to her. But the far down, deep, dark made Minnow fearful. That place in seemingly bottomless oceans where the light is lost and the water swirls like inky gloom. It was that thick, breathless dark Minnow dreaded: the dark where the beast lived. The beast was a silent watery creature that swam through Minnow's dreams. Many

times Minnow woke gasping for air. Then Mercy, her mother, would pull Minnow into her arms and sing a sea lullaby to soothe her.

With the slightest flick of her ankle she curved down around the draft of the boat that was her home: *The Seafarer*. Minnow had taught herself to slow-drift in a circular motion, barely sinking or rising, so she could move underwater almost unnoticed. All around her the underside of other boats hung in stillness, but *The Seafarer* cast a deeper presence, as if it was cut from the very bones of the sea. It wasn't *The Seafarer's* size that set it apart, but its aura: a work of sea-bound fiction imagined with wood. A beautiful mermaid figurehead carved from black timber peered out from its prow, her braided hair sculpted to look as though it was flying out behind her.

Minnow flattened herself against the side of her boat and gazed up, hoping that anyone who caught sight of her would put it down to a trick of the moon. Suddenly there was a splash, as something wolf-shaped dived from *The Seafarer's* black deck, and Minnow smiled. A wet nose dipped down and two sapphire-blue eyes sought out her own. Minnow reached up and hugged Miyuki her beloved husky, lightly tapping the dog's nose to signal silence. Then, using Miyuki's silvery body to shield her, Minnow slowly stood. Her toes recoiled as she slid her red Salt-water sandals into the oozing silt at

the bottom of the marina and peeked her head above the waterline, her eyes darting anxiously to *The Seafarer's* deck.

There was her mama, Mercy; hair the colour of blood. She was wearing jeans, cowboy boots, and a flowing silken shirt. *Fighting clothes*, thought Minnow darkly. But instead of unleashing the wrath of a thousand furies upon the three strangers—men who had just stepped onto her boat—Mercy instead struck a match on the heel of her boot and lit a cigarette. Minnow in all her twelve years had never seen her mama smoke, and as she watched her now Minnow had the shivering feeling that she was staring at a stranger.

The three men watched in tense silence, as Mercy sprang onto the neighbouring boat *The Water Lily*, and with the edge of her hook cut a sprig of fresh mint from the deckside herb garden. She stamped her cigarette out on *The Water Lily's* deck, shoved the mint into her mouth, swung her legs easily onto the promenade, and sauntered away. Minnow felt a scream begin to rise up in her throat. What was her mama doing? Abandoning *The Seafarer*, disrespecting their neighbour's boat, and acting as if Minnow and Miyuki didn't exist. Minnow stood to her full height, head and shoulders out of the water now, spinning in the silt to go after her mum. But one of the men suddenly moved across *The Seafarer's* deck, shining a torch into the water, and Minnow

instinctively shot back below, pulling Miyuki with her, thankful that the rich golden-brown colour of her skin made it easier to blend into the night water.

The Seafarer swayed and moaned as the men's heavy footsteps moved up and down, echoing out through its draft, as if the boat had a heartbeat. Minnow edged closer and tried to catch a sense of the conversation up on deck. One voice was low and rough, and another sounded loud and boastful. The third—the man who, moments before, had tried to warn Mercy—was whistling a tune.

Minnow scrunched her eyes shut and tried to follow the sound. Something about the whistled tune felt comforting. And then she almost opened her mouth to gasp—it was her lullaby! The song which could carry her straight back to childhood. To the safe embrace of her mama's arms, the diamond-sharp edge of Mercy's hook glinting in the starlight. Red hair streaming in the wind as she sang. It was the song to hush nightmares, banish the beast and the dark ocean. How did this whistling stranger know her song?

Moving away from the boat Minnow sank down, clutching *The Seafarer's* rusted anchor, and settled cross-legged amongst the reeds and silt. In the watery dark she ran over everything that had happened in the last five minutes and tried to make sense of the unfolding strangeness.



It had been a perfectly lovely Brighton evening. Starlings cut across the sunset, newly awakened stars twinkled on the water, and a wild wind danced with the rigging. Minnow had slipped into a deep sleep in the green, silken hammock, her legs gently twitching, unable to keep still. Miyuki sat proudly beside her as usual, quietly keeping watch while Mercy was out, teaching her evening yoga class.

Minnow had been dreaming of the deep ocean when her mama suddenly swam into her dream. *Amelie*, she called in a voice of ice and salt water. It was only ever her mum who called her by her true name, and only when something was *seriously* wrong.

Minnow's eyes fluttered open. Her head was still foggy from the medicine her mum gave her sometimes to help her sleep, but she'd pushed through the tiredness and made herself sit up. A streak of scarlet caught Minnow's eye across the harbour.

Mercy was running towards her with the urgency of a breaking storm. Minnow sat up straighter, her heart quickening. Something was wrong. Could her mum have woken her with a thought? It wasn't entirely impossible. Mercy had found Minnow in dreams before, but this felt different. As Minnow watched, her mum shimmied up the mast of an empty boat and then with a motion that was part falling, part flying, she dived from sail to sail, landing on *The Seafarer* as though from the sky.

Even from a distance Mercy looked unmistakably like a pirate. It was the gleeful gleam of her ruby hair, a red that rivalled sunsets. And her eyes, such a pale shade of blue they made people think of the Arctic. And her teeth, of course. A mouth that glistened with silver. And her laugh. Minnow had witnessed the power of her mama's laugh many times. A laugh that made married women want to abandon their husbands and run away to sea. And caused grown men to forget their own names. And inspired children to live a life of adventures. But really it was her hook that clinched it.

Anyone could have a heart-stealing laugh and six silver teeth. But on the end of Mercy's right arm was a curl of fairy-tale silver, slim like the sliver of a new moon, its point encrusted with diamonds. It wasn't particularly frightening, but it was—as Minnow knew—deadly sharp. The hook was real, but a costume too. A clever way to make holidaymakers believe that *The Seafarer* was a real pirate ship, so they would pay a small donation to look around this floating museum of marvels. And Mercy and Minnow could afford to live.

Using the hook's half-moon curve, Mercy slid down the rigging, seized her daughter's hand and Miyuki's collar, and yanked them both behind a huge black sail.

'I need you to hide,' Mercy hissed. Minnow blinked in confusion. Was this some bizarre game? It certainly didn't feel like one; it felt like the air was being squeezed

out of her lungs and the world was sliding away from her.

'Hide?' Minnow mumbled.

Mercy nodded, her blue eyes worryingly bright. 'Go below. Wait till I'm off the boat, and then watch for the pier lights to go out. Soon as it's dark sail to Grandma's.'

'Sail to Reykjavik—?' Minnow started, but Mercy clapped a hand over her daughter's mouth and stared at her with a look that could knock eagles from the sky. Minnow was deeply unnerved, her feet aching to run.

And that was when she had first seen the lone figure heading towards their ship.

He was tall, almost willowy, and even though he was hurrying there was a calmness to him. As he stepped into the moonlight Minnow saw that he had beautiful black skin, and a veil of long, neat dreadlocks hanging over his face, masking his features. He climbed onto the boat with the gentle ease of someone who knew *The Seafarer*, though Minnow couldn't remember ever seeing him before.

'Mercy!' His voice was low and pleading.

'Wait here,' hissed Mercy in Minnow's ear. She nodded and held her breath as Mercy slipped out from behind the sail and swept across the deck. Minnow felt the night crackle with electricity, like the moment before a firework is lit. Would there be a terrible row, a dreadful fight? Would her mama brandish her hook? Minnow clenched her fists, her heart roaring. But

none of those things happened. Instead Mercy and the stranger stopped inches away from each other, his head slightly bowed, her face tilted towards the stars so they must have been staring into each other's eyes.

'I found you in time,' said the tall stranger, a smile finding its way into his voice. 'You've got to go. Jah Jah's not far behind me—'

Mercy tossed her flame-coloured hair. 'Let him come.'

Delicately, the stranger took hold of Mercy's face in his hands. 'It's serious this time. Jah Jah's got a new business partner, Louis, who's got a fibreglass cage and a harpoon . . . The man can dive as deep as Jah Jah and he wants to catch a mermaid for his daughter.'

Mercy laughed, but the sound sent a chill creeping through Minnow's soul. 'I can't run Ely, if Jah Jah finds me again . . . it's too dangerous.'

The man slowly folded his arms and gave a slow, sad nod. 'Is she here?'

Mercy shook her head. 'She's with her grandma for the summer.' And Minnow suddenly realized they were talking about her. *Why?* she thought crossly. What did this Ely know about her?

He drew a long breath. 'You know I can't stop Jah Jah, Mercy, you know I've tried. If you want to save the ship you must move away from here and hide the map.'

Mercy nodded then she rose onto her toes and very lightly kissed him. The wind held its breath. Minnow

was speechless! Her mum normally fought with men, hurled them overboard or beat them at cards, not kissed them . . . Mercy hurried into the galley, then reappeared holding something that faintly glimmered. Ely stared at her a long moment, then turned reluctantly away and moved back onto the promenade, hiding himself in the shadows.

Mercy ducked behind the sail and pushed a rolled-up piece of parchment into Minnow's hand. It was smooth, and cool to the touch, and seemed very faintly to sparkle. There was a flash of diamonds and a cutting of metal as Mercy removed the silver locket that hung round her neck and pushed it into her daughter's hands. A whirl of anxiety danced through Minnow's bones. This was her mum's beloved locket that she wore at her throat every day. Why was she giving it to her?

A thousand questions burned on Minnow's lips, but there was no time to ask, for into the lamplight stepped the other two men—Jah Jah and Louis. The first was also tall but fast-moving with purpose. His black skin glistened as if he'd come from the sea and his hair was a mass of thick, twining dreadlocks, which reminded Minnow of the roots of a great tree. Though he was dressed in the casual clothes of a surfer, a clump of golden rings glittered on his fingers, and his watch, Minnow knew, was one of the best you could buy to go diving with.

The second man had white skin that was deeply tanned and weathered from years of being outside. His blond hair was scrunched back in a rough ponytail and he moved with the easy confidence of someone who had grown up on boats. Trailing behind them both, drifting with the sadness of a ghost, came Ely.

As the men stepped onto *The Seafarer*, Mercy raised Minnow's chin with the point of her hook. 'I love you my darling,' she whispered, her voice brittle as salt crystals.

Then Minnow had felt herself being tipped overboard, lifted by the soles of her feet, the way they had rehearsed out deep when they were diving. 'You never know when we might have to abandon ship,' Mercy used to say when Minnow was a child. But Mercy was a sailor of extraordinary skill. She could stare into the heart of any hurricane and defy it with a riotously mocking smile. Throughout a childhood of high waves and sea storms Minnow never had 'abandoned ship'. At least not until this moment. A moment later Miyuki had followed her into the water, then Mercy had strolled away into the moonlight leaving the boat in the hands of the three shadowy men.



Above her, torchlight slanted through the water and Minnow risked moving to the surface to take a breath. An echo of conversation floated down. 'It's not here;



she's taken it with her.'

'Are you sure, mate? There are about a thousand maps on this boat.'

'Not like this. It's like it's made from moonlight.'

Minnow remembered the strange parchment her mum had given her. In a clean, agile glide she moved to the other side of the marina where a wall separated the boats from the sea. In the shadow of the wall Minnow raised her lips to the surface, like a whale taking air. Then she settled back on the marina's muddy bed and pulled the parchment from her back pocket, blinking with delight as it unfurled in her hands, showing itself indeed to be a map. A map the colour of moon dust, or silverbirch bark, waterproof under the sea. *This must be the map they are looking for.*

Tucking it back into her pocket, Minnow rose to the surface. *The Seafarer* rocked almost violently as the three men climbed onto the walkway, and started heading towards town. She couldn't let them get away. She had to know what was going on. But the harbour was full of tourists and she knew she mustn't be spotted emerging from the water, late at night. She cast about and noticed a flock of starlings settled in sleep on the sails of a small boat called the *Louisa-Mae*. Darting over to it, Minnow gave the little white hull a push and smiled as the tiny birds burst into a whirlwind of wings. As a light cheer went up from the crowd, Minnow shot out of the water



in a single ceaseless motion, her sandals hardly brushing the wooden planks of the boardwalk, as she dashed into the bushes unseen.

In the water Minnow was graceful but on land it was a different matter. With a wild stumble she lost her footing and fell, grazing both her knees and kicking up salt dust. Sea lavender prickled her skin and she squeezed water from her braided hair, counting a full minute, allowing her heart rate to pick back up and her lungs to adjust to breathing freely again. Slowly she stood up, a trickle of blood running down her leg and disappearing into the flowerbed. Great—another scar. Minnow was covered in them. Most were temporary, fading away like the moon at dawn, but others stayed, marking her brown skin with trails of silver. None were quite as vivid as the two symmetrical scars that glimmered on either side of her neck. They were blossom-pale and completely identical, and though Mercy had told Minnow they were birthmarks, Minnow had never seen another birthmark quite like them.

Minnow took a deep breath, turned away from her home and walked in her dripping wet shorts and t-shirt up onto the main walkway, whistling for Miyuki as she went. With a bound of salt water her dog was at her side and moving in time with her past the overcrowded restaurants.

Tourists gave them bemused looks, but Minnow

pretended not to see them. What did they know about living by the sea?

‘I think someone’s fallen in,’ said a jolly dad with sunburnt cheeks. Minnow looked him straight in the eye the way she had often seen her mother do.

‘Nope,’ she said with a grin. ‘Just been feeding the walrus.’ And with no further explanation she began to run. Not fast at first, just a jog to get away from the flocking crowds, and then she was flying down the concrete steps, racing after the three strange men. What had Mercy said? *Wait till the lights on the pier go out, then sail to Grandma’s*. Well Minnow wasn’t waiting for any such thing.

Running on land did not come naturally to Minnow. In fact, up until Minnow was five, no one had known if she would walk at all: it was as though she could not bear her feet to touch the ground—her legs seemed unable to hold her. She had tried with crutches, but that only lasted six days before one was lost over the side of the pier. Then Mercy had bought a bright red wagon—a Radio Flyer—which a young Miyuki eagerly pulled. It was one of the reasons Mercy had chosen a sled dog, easily capable of towing a child. Then Minnow startled everyone by clambering out of the Radio Flyer one day and grabbing the dog by the ears. At first, she was dragged, then she started skidding, and then soon she was galloping. Minnow literally ran before she could

crawl. Her consultant, Doctor Stephen, was particularly astonished, being sure that Minnow's skeleton didn't have the right density to support her weight. Mercy had rolled her eyes and touched his hand in a way that made him blush. She refused any more X-rays of Minnow and instead presented Doctor Stephen with a bottle of vintage port. The two had remained friends ever since, and any further medical advice was given over dinners on *The Seafarer*. Minnow was still clumsy on land, but her lungs were strong from free diving and her stamina was unending.

Ahead of her, Minnow spotted the three men closing in on Mercy. Shock rattled through her and Minnow's body was caught off balance, so she was forced to launch herself over the side of the seafront and onto the stony beach. She knelt up, blinking in surprise as she saw her mum do the unthinkable: board a coastal bus to town. Mercy didn't own a car—she would sooner surf on the rooftop of a train than ride in one, and she certainly never bothered with the bus. If Minnow and Mercy left the city they did so by boat. Mercy was only content by the sea, its unpredictable nature matching her own and answering her wildness. But now here she was on the bus the same as everyone else. Minnow watched with a chilling curiosity as the three shadows slunk onto the same bus before it closed its doors and moved away.

Miyuki pushed her wet nose into Minnow's shoulder

and she clambered unsteadily off the beach, following the bus route as it wove along the coast. Mercy gave no sign of noticing her pursuers as the bus stopped and she sauntered off, heading through Kemptown towards the Gala Bingo hall with the relaxed ease of a local, the men following in her wake.

Minnow's head was humming with confusion. This had to be the strangest behaviour she'd ever witnessed from her mum and that was saying something. Then it hit her like the crack of a thunderbolt. Mercy was heading towards a long-deserted train tunnel. 'Oh no,' breathed Minnow desperately. Her mum was leading the men to their death. That's what would happen; Mercy would kill them in the dark, dank tunnel. 'Oh Mama,' Minnow gasped, suddenly feeling an overwhelming sadness for the unsuspecting intruders. For a moment she considered sprinting to the police station; it was near enough, but what would she say? 'My mum is about to murder three strangers in a tunnel!' They would think her crazy.

With shaking hands she pulled a bandana from her pocket, threaded it through Miyuki's collar and tied her loosely to the lamp post. 'Stay,' Minnow murmured, kissing her dog's snowy forehead. On trembling legs she crossed the road, dropped to her hands and knees and followed the men inside the tunnel.