

CHAPTER ONE

Water coming out of the stern? I sprinted down the dock toward my sailboat. Why was the bilge pump on? Scrambling below deck to the living quarters, I waded through the flood, heaved aside a cushion and stuck my finger into a lift hole in the bench seat, revealing the engine. Water spurting from a disconnected hose. I grabbed what was closest—since the boat was also my home, it was a fistful of underwear—and crammed it in to staunch the flow. The metal clamp holding the hose in place had broken. I hustled to my parts drawer, grabbed a spare. After positioning the new clamp, I yanked out the underwear, muscled the hose into place, and tightened the clamp. Whew. And yuck. I was covered in grime and soaking wet.

And now I was late, too. After quickly changing, I hurried above deck. Pulling my hair into a ponytail as I went, I hopped onto the dock. The name on the hull had originally been DREAM BOAT. Only the faint outline of the “R” and “E” remained. It read D AM BOAT now.

Platters clattered to our dining room table and silence descended as the family dug into Thanksgiving dinner. When the phone in the kitchen rang, Uncle Ned waved to my mother he’d get it. A moment later, he returned and sat down, a conspiratorial smile on his face. “Guess who’s coming for Thanksgiving?”

“Give us a hint,” I said.

He made an upward swooping motion with a massive drumstick. “Able to leap tall locomotives at a single bound.”

I said, “Isn’t it tall buildings—”

“Faster than a peeing bird.” Aunt Deirdre made a sideways swooping motion.

“Faster than a speeding bullet, Aunt Deirdre, not a—”

“Look,” Uncle Ned said, jumping to a stand, pointing

toward the ceiling with the drumstick. Everyone looked. “Up in the air,” he shouted. “It’s a bird! It’s a plane! It’s—”

“It’s Giselle.” But I said it like it was the coming of the plague. I stared at the gargantuan turkey carcass. “This is Thanksgiving. Isn’t it rude to come at the last minute?”

“She probably just stopped a bunch of people trafficking in nuclear warheads or something and got freed up,” Uncle Ned said. He shrugged. “She’s a spy. It happens.”

“We’re just happy our little star is coming,” Aunt Deirdre said, clapping her hands.

“She called from her car. She’s bringing a friend. They’ll be here any minute.”

My mother turned to me, lips pursed. “Nora, dear, you don’t mind moving, do you?”

“What? Not the—” My mother nodded. It was too late to put the leaf in the table. Stomping to the closet, I pulled out the junior-sized card table Giselle and I used when we were kids. I moved my dishes and crammed my rear into a tiny chair as mom and Aunt Deirdre scrambled to set two more places at the big table. “Hey! It’s not like she’s royalty.”

The front door opened. A hush descended as Giselle swept into the room, arms open wide to her audience. She posed briefly, the better for us to gaze upon her chin-length, Marilyn-blonde, perfection of a coiffure and to note her diamond earrings with matching necklace.

With her was a tall man with green eyes and curly hair she introduced as Jesse. Sitting like an oversized five-year-old at my table-for-one, I craned my neck for a better view.

“That must be her boyfriend,” Aunt Deirdre whispered down to me.

Giselle’s life was perfect in every way. Why wouldn’t she have the perfect boyfriend? I felt a flash of guilt as I thought of Kenny. Hey, I was just looking. I was too far away to touch.

Jesse sat beside her, and everyone passed them platters of food. Giselle pushed away her wine glass, emptied a large tumbler of water back into the pitcher, and refilled it with Pinot Noir.

A short time later, Giselle started down the hall to the bathroom. Before each doorway, she stopped, looked in the room, and darted past. On her way back, she made a sudden turn into the dining room and scanned the perimeter. She sat down and resumed eating.

In her absence, Uncle Ned had stepped into the kitchen. Giselle didn't notice him come back. Passing behind her, he put his hands affectionately on her shoulders. Giselle twisted around suddenly, grabbed him, and was just about to pin him to the turkey carcass. Everyone froze. I could see the flash of realization hit her eyes; she grinned and did a quick playful one-two double jab boxing move. "Just kidding with you, Uncle Ned."

"Ha! You got me good!" he yelled in delight, giving her a good-natured one-two back.

Everyone laughed. But Giselle's rapid-fire breaths didn't seem to match her smile. Had she been kidding? Why had my sister picked now to drop by so unexpectedly? And why the hell was Giselle so jumpy?

The entourage formerly known as the family followed Giselle to the living room. I stayed behind, stacked dishes, and headed to the kitchen. From the other room I heard a group, "Ooooh," Giselle's voice and laughter. I moved quietly. I didn't want to have to go in there.

Jesse came in. "Can you tell me where the wine is, Nora? Giselle wants another glass."

"Sure." As I got out a bottle and the corkscrew, he noticed an oversized bulletin board on the kitchen wall. Postcards with

exotic postmarks had been attached to every available inch surrounding a central portrait. A row of three small, lit candles sat below.

“Giselle?” he asked, pointing to the picture. I nodded. He walked over, took it in for a moment. “This almost looks like a... like a...”

“Shrine?” I said for him.

“Kinda.”

“Uh huh.” I handed him the bottle. As he disappeared, I glanced again at the picture of Giselle. She was the oldest. She’d always been the favorite. But it still hurt.

I tiptoed upstairs to my old room. I’d been out of the house for years, but my mother hadn’t changed a thing. Museum of Nora.

I heard stomping on the stairs, and Giselle blasted in. Her cell phone rang. When she saw the number, she stiffened. “My boss. Can you give me a minute?”

In the hall, something made me stop, my eye to the crack between the door and the jamb. Her hands shook so badly, Giselle put the phone on speaker and set it down. I strained to hear.

“You can have all the time off you want,” the boss said, “if you can find someone to do the job for you. Far as I know, everyone’s pretty busy.”

A voice on the phone interrupted. “International terrorist for you on line one, boss.”

“What? Don’t they know it’s Thanksgiving? All right, hold on.” Then he was back to Giselle. “I gotta go, Giselle, unless you being a little overworked is more important.”

Giselle squeezed her eyes shut and bit her lip, close to losing her fight with tears. Was this connected to how jumpy she was? Her voice thick and weary, she said, “Okay.”

“Remember,” he said, “it’s your assignment unless you find

somebody else to take it on.”

As I walked in, Giselle picked up a small wooden boat on my desk and blew dust off it. The boat held tiny figures I’d glued in it, including myself at the wheel. “Nora, remember that school-on-a-schooner thing you used to talk about? Taking kids to exotic places for adventure learning? All that wind-in-your-hair, learning-by-doing crap?” Giselle bounced the boat along as if it was bounding on waves, pulled her hair back as if it was blowing in the wind, did a little hula dance.

“So?”

“You’re still at Bob’s Bikes and Boats. You’ll be a hundred before you have money for a schooner. Besides, you would’ve done it by now if you were going to. It’s been nine years.”

“It has not.” But I did the math. She was right. How could so many years slip by?

One of the tiny figures fell to the floor. I picked up the bed with one hand and retrieved it.

Giselle tried to lift the bed. She couldn’t budge it. “You’re strong. You go to a club?”

“Working on my boat’s all the workout I need.”

She assessed me like a piece of possible produce. “Hey, let’s do something tomorrow.”

“I have to work a half day.” And why the sudden interest in hanging out with me?

“After work. I’ll meet you there.” Not waiting for an answer, she ran back downstairs.

I put the tiny figure back in the boat. “School on a schooner.” A wave of sadness rocked me. Back in high school, I already loved sailing. I’d planned to have a seagoing school for girls. My eyes filled with lost-hopes tears as the dream emerged full force—a sixty-foot schooner, all shiny wood and gleaming decks, dancing across the water with sparkling white sails, filled with girls excited to be traveling to the Caribbean,

New Zealand, Thailand.

I had a boat, sure. But it was a thirty-footer with a beat-up body, patched sails, engine trouble, and leaks so bad I was afraid to take it out of sight of Portsmouth Harbor.

I looked at the little figures on the boat. The one next to me, I'd labeled "Dreamboat!!" I remembered back to the man I'd dreamed of since I was a teenager. He was tall, sandy-haired, a look of intelligence, kindness and humor in his eyes. Gentle but strong. He loved the outdoors and the sea and sailing. In short, he was wonderfully perfect. My tears rained on the little boat.

Footsteps on the stairs again. Swiping tears away, I rushed to the door, the boat behind my back, and smacked right into Jesse. He saw my tear-smearred face. "Hey, are you all right?"

I backed to the bed and sat, fighting tears. But I hadn't expected the look of caring in his eyes. Taking the boat from behind my back, I handed it to him. "A dream I used to have. A school on a schooner."

"Cool." He sat beside me, taking in the tiny figures and all the other details. Turning toward me, he put his hand on my shoulder. "Dreams die, Nora. But only if you let them."

A voice intruded from downstairs. "Nora!" My mother.

"Oh, that's what I came up to tell you," Jesse said. "Your mom's looking for you."

I went out to the top of the stairs. Below, my mother held up two bags of trash. "I'll take those, Ma," I said, hurrying down the stairs. Jesse followed. He grabbed one of the bags and we walked out the front door toward the street. A car stopped and the window slid down.

"Isn't it nice your sister the spy made it home for the holiday, Nora?" the woman said.

"Yeah. Just great." The car drove off. "Friend of my

mother's from bingo," I said.

He stopped. "You know that's supposed to be a secret, right?"

"Of course it's a secret. A secret only the family knows."

"But that lady knew."

"Okay, the family and selected trusted friends the family decides to tell."

A kid from next door wandered into the yard, autograph book and pen in hand. "Hey, Nora," Larry said, "can I see your sister the spy?" I waved him in the direction of the house.

Jesse looked at me. "Okay," I said, "the family and selected trusted friends and neighbors the family decides to tell."

Two little old ladies walked by. "The neighborhood spy lives there," one of them stage-whispered to the other.

"Tell me something I don't already know," the other said.

Jesse looked at me again. "Okay," I said, "the family and selected trusted friends and neighbors the family decides to tell, and—"

"And everyone else," Jesse said.

I shrugged. "We're Irish. We're not that good at keeping secrets."

We plopped the bags at the curb and turned back toward the house. Giselle appeared at the front door and trotted out. Jesse continued toward the house while I waited for Giselle.

"Gotta get something in my car." She walked into the street, toward the driver's door. Her phone rang. As she grabbed it from her pocket, a noise from up the street made me spin.

A shiny black sedan. But instead of slowing, it sped up. Giselle had turned away from the noise, the phone to one ear, her finger in the other. The driver was veering *towards* her. Adrenaline electrifying me before conscious thought had a chance, I grabbed for Giselle...