

Set
Me
Free

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Chapter

One

I still get land sickness. Watching the heavy sea swell till I fear it will spill over, I take deep breaths to combat my nausea. I sympathize with small creatures caught in its great pull. What if they crash on the rocks?

Amid the beach's white, tan, amethyst, and black grains of sand is a sailors' dumping ground. I spy lobster traps, broken ships' masts, and a cracked cutlass that once hoisted anchors. It's like a tackle graveyard. A wheelbarrow is stained from carrying thousands of gutted fish. Small iridescent flies gather on it. Sprouts of bright green grass surround the blanket where I sit.

I picked this unlikely spot, behind Ezra Brewer's house, to write. I'm penning a history of the deaf population on our island, which is uncommonly large. One in four born in Chilmark in the west of Martha's Vineyard, off the coast of Massachusetts. I've come to know every inch of the land I daily explore and record, so anything new is welcome. But lately, my flow of

ideas and words has slowed to a trickle. And because I think in a combination of signs, pictures, and a stream of feeling that resembles music, it takes some time to get it on paper.

I'm fourteen now. One would think that I have more free time, as my schooling finished when I was twelve, but there are more chores to do, more expectations to keep the household as I grow, so I may one day run my own. Is that my sole ambition?

I spot a fishing pole I've never seen. It's stuck in the silt, leaning at an angle. Lightning must have hit it; it's galvanized black. I wish my imagination could frame it as a mystical object—a medieval sword caught in granite waiting to be released by its rightful owner—but my interest dribbles away.

I envy my best friend Nancy's pursuits. She lives near Boston with her uncle, Jeremiah Skiffe, and is learning to be a concert pianist. She is a passionate and dedicated student, but also has many pastimes. She's joined a group called the bluestockings, who advocate for the rights of women. I find the ideas of self-reliance that Nancy has shared intriguing. Why can I no more own property than vote?

A gust of wind tickles my hands and neck. The way the breeze moves about me is almost a sound. I don't need to hear it whistling to know it's passing through.

I miss the adventures Nancy and I used to have together. I've seen her only once since she left the Vineyard. We exchange letters as frequently as we can. If I find a local fisherman leaving for the city, it takes only a week for the post to arrive. Otherwise, lonely months pass without news.

When I think of her uncle, I can't help but feel a sting. He was involved in the accident that killed my brother, George, and fled before the inquest. It was a cowardly maneuver. Still, I am grateful to him for helping Nancy flee her abusive parents. I hope to visit her someday.

But the thought of Boston makes me break out in a chill. I dream of it sometimes, being held captive in a foreign city, never knowing if I'd return home. Sometimes, when I wake, I cannot move my hands and fear I can no longer speak, just as I felt then.

The pen I'm holding drips ink on my skirt. I blot the stain with a piece of rag paper. This is useless! I

promised Papa I'd be back at the farm by midday. I squint toward the sun high in the sky, pack up my writing materials, and walk toward home.

As I come around Ezra Brewer's house, my old friend sits in his favorite wicker chair. His body is lean with muscle, but he's asthmatic and walks with a slight limp. He uses an economy of signs, adapting words to his bent hands.

He must note my concern because he signs, "The ague left me weakened but didn't rob me of my spite, gal."

A shivering fever swept the island last year. Thank the Lord, our family was spared. The Wampanoag people were the hardest hit. People in all four of their communities suffered—Aquinnah, Chappaquiddick, Takemmy, and Nunnepog. There were about four thousand in number at First Contact; today there are not even one thousand.

"From what ship is that broken cutlass?" I ask, hoping for a stirring tale.

"Nay, I can't remember," he says. His fingers shine silver from scraping scales off fish with his trusty knife. There's a bucket at his feet. His one-eyed cat, Smithy, mother to my Yellow Leg, tries to scoop her share of

cod. When he lifts her into his lap, I see her whiskers have grayed to match her master's.

"Just as well. I'm needed at the barn," I tell him.

A mischievous smile spreads across his face. "Can't say I envy you, Mary. But I suppose the time is for the young. Even the Irish."

He refers to our farmhand Eamon's nephews, recently arrived from Ireland.

"I'm tired of your bigoted notions," I sign.

"Me?" He points to himself. "Why should I mind anyone who doesn't harm me?"

He reaches for a pipe in his pocket and a bottle by his chair. Finding neither, he scowls.

"What do I need good health for?" he signs. "Yes, the time is for the young. You'd better get going." Ezra Brewer seems timeless to me, neither young nor old, like the sea. Why is he suddenly contemplating age? I leave him to it and start for home.

I used to make up stories as I walked. Fancies of my imagination. That dried up soon after I was rescued and returned to the island. Now I make lists of chores and check them off in my mind. There's safety in routine.

When I reach the high road, I empty sand from my shoes and tread a familiar path. I stoop to pick up a piece of petrified driftwood. The sides are strangely smooth, and the top is crystallized. It took millions of years to make this. I feel a spark of inspiration, but I doubt I'll get any work done where I'm going.