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Opening Extract from...

MANHATTAN BEACH

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———— PART ONE ————

The Shore

CHAPTER ONE

They'd driven all the way to Mr. Styles's house before Anna realized that her father was nervous. First the ride had distracted her, sailing along Ocean Parkway as if they were headed for Coney Island, although it was four days past Christmas and impossibly cold for the beach. Then the house itself: a palace of golden brick three stories high, windows all the way around, a rowdy flapping of green-and-yellow-striped awnings. It was the last house on the street, which dead-ended at the sea.

Her father eased the Model J against the curb and turned off the motor. "Toots," he said. "Don't squint at Mr. Styles's house."

"Of course I won't squint at his house."

"You're doing it now."

"No," she said. "I'm making my eyes narrow."

"That's squinting," he said. "You've just defined it."

"Not for me."

He turned to her sharply. "Don't squint."

That was when she knew. She heard him swallow dryly and felt a chirp of worry in her stomach. She was not used to seeing her father nervous. Distracted, yes. Preoccupied, certainly.

"Why doesn't Mr. Styles like squinting?" she asked.

"No one does."

"You never told me that before."

"Would you like to go home?"

"No, thank you."

"I can take you home."

"If I squint?"

"If you give me the headache I'm starting to get."

"If you take me home," Anna said, "you'll be awfully late."

She thought he might slap her. He'd done it once, after she'd let fly a string of curses she'd heard on the docks, his hand finding her cheek invisibly as a whip. The specter of that slap still haunted Anna, with the odd effect of heightening her boldness, in defiance of it.

Her father rubbed the middle of his forehead, then looked back at her. His nerves were gone; she had cured them.

"Anna," he said. "You know what I need you to do."

"Of course."

"Be your charming self with Mr. Styles's children while I speak with Mr. Styles."

"I knew that, Papa."

"Of course you did."

She left the Model J with eyes wide and watering in the sun. It had been their own automobile until after the stock market crash. Now it belonged to the union, which lent it back for her father to do union business. Anna liked to go with him when she wasn't in school—to racetracks, Communion breakfasts and church events, office buildings where elevators lofted them to high floors, occasionally even a restaurant. But never before to a private home like this.

The door-pull was answered by Mrs. Styles, who had a movie star's sculpted eyebrows and a long mouth painted glossy red. Accustomed to judging her own mother prettier than every woman she encountered, Anna was disarmed by the evident glamour of Mrs. Styles.

"I was hoping to meet Mrs. Kerrigan," Mrs. Styles said in a husky voice, holding Anna's father's hand in both of hers. To which he replied that his younger daughter had taken sick that morning, and his wife had stayed at home to nurse her.

There was no sign of Mr. Styles.

Politely but (she hoped) without visible awe, Anna accepted a glass of lemonade from a silver tray carried by a Negro maid in a pale blue uniform. In the high polish of the entrance hall's wood floor, she caught the reflection of her own red dress, sewn by her mother. Beyond the windows of an adjacent front room, the sea tingled under a thin winter sun.

Mr. Styles's daughter, Tabatha, was only eight—three years younger than Anna. Still, Anna allowed the littler girl to tow her by the hand to a downstairs “nursery,” a room dedicated purely to playing, filled with a shocking array of toys. A quick survey discovered a Flossie Flirt doll, several large teddy bears, and a rocking horse. There was a “Nurse” in the nursery, a freckled, raspy-voiced woman whose woolen dress strained like an overstuffed bookshelf to repress her massive bust. Anna guessed from the broad lay of her face and the merry switch of her eyes that Nurse was Irish, and felt a danger of being seen through. She resolved to keep her distance.

Two small boys—twins, or at least interchangeable—were struggling to attach electric train tracks. Partly to avoid Nurse, who rebuffed the boys' pleas for help, Anna crouched beside the disjointed tracks and proffered her services. She could feel the logic of mechanical parts in her fingertips; this came so naturally that she could only think that other people didn't really try. They always *looked*, which was as useless when assembling things as studying a picture by touching it. Anna fastened the piece that was vexing the boys and took several more from the freshly opened box. It was a Lionel train, the quality of the tracks palpable in the resolve with which they interlocked. As she worked, Anna glanced occasionally at the Flossie Flirt doll wedged at the end of a shelf. She had wanted one so violently two years ago that some of her desperation seemed to have broken off and stayed inside her. It was strange and painful to discover that old longing now, in this place.

Tabatha cradled her new Christmas doll, a Shirley Temple in a fox-fur coat. She watched, entranced, as Anna built her brothers' train tracks. “Where do you live?” she asked.

"Not far."

"By the beach?"

"Near it."

"May I come to your house?"

"Of course," Anna said, fastening tracks as fast as the boys handed them to her. A figure eight was nearly complete.

"Have you any brothers?" Tabatha asked.

"A sister," Anna said. "She's eight, like you, but she's mean. Because of being so pretty."

Tabatha looked alarmed. "How pretty?"

"Extremely pretty," Anna said gravely, then added, "She looks like our mother, who danced with the Follies." The error of this boast accosted her a moment later. *Never part with a fact unless you've no choice.* Her father's voice in her ears.

Lunch was served by the same Negro maid at a table in the playroom. They sat like adults on their small chairs, cloth napkins in their laps. Anna glanced several times at the Flossie Flirt, searching for some pretext to hold the doll without admitting she was interested. If she could just feel it in her arms, she would be satisfied.

After lunch, as a reward for their fine behavior, Nurse allowed them to bundle into coats and hats and bolt from a back door along a path that ran behind Mr. Styles's house to a private beach. A long arc of snow-dusted sand tilted down to the sea. Anna had been to the docks in winter, many times, but never to a beach. Miniature waves shrugged up under skins of ice that crackled when she stomped them. Seagulls screamed and dove in the riotous wind, their bellies stark white. The twins had brought along Buck Rogers ray guns, but the wind turned their shots and death throes into pantomime.

Anna watched the sea. There was a feeling she had, standing at its edge: an electric mix of attraction and dread. What would be exposed if all that water should suddenly vanish? A landscape of lost objects: sunken ships, hidden treasure, gold and gems and the charm bracelet that had fallen from her wrist into a storm drain. *Dead*

bodies, her father always added, with a laugh. To him, the ocean was a wasteland.

Anna looked at Tabby (as she was nicknamed), shivering beside her, and wanted to say what she felt. Strangers were often easier to say things to. Instead, she repeated what her father always said, confronted by a bare horizon: "Not a ship in sight."

The little boys dragged their ray guns over the sand toward the breaking waves, Nurse panting after them. "You'll go nowhere near that water, Phillip, John-Martin," she wheezed at a startling volume. "Is that perfectly clear?" She cast a hard look at Anna, who had led them there, and herded the twins toward the house.

"Your shoes are getting wet," Tabby said through chattering teeth.

"Should we take them off?" Anna asked. "To feel the cold?"

"I don't want to feel it!"

"I do."

Tabby watched Anna unbuckle the straps of the black patent-leather shoes she shared with Zara Klein, downstairs. She unrolled her wool stockings and placed her white, bony, long-for-her-age feet in the icy water. Each foot delivered an agony of sensation to her heart, one part of which was a flame of ache that felt unexpectedly pleasant.

"What's it like?" Tabby shrieked.

"Cold," Anna said. "Awful, awful cold." It took all of her strength to keep from recoiling, and her resistance added to the odd excitement. Glancing toward the house, she saw two men in dark overcoats following the paved path set back from the sand. Holding their hats in the wind, they looked like actors in a silent picture. "Are those our papas?"

"Daddy likes to have business talks outdoors," Tabby said. *Away from prying ears.*"

Anna felt benevolent compassion toward young Tabatha, excluded from her father's business affairs when Anna was allowed to listen in whenever she pleased. She heard little of interest. Her father's job

was to pass greetings, or good wishes, between union men and other men who were their friends. These salutations included an envelope, sometimes a package, that he would deliver or receive casually—you wouldn't notice unless you were paying attention. Over the years, he'd talked to Anna a great deal without knowing he was talking, and she had listened without knowing what she heard.

She was surprised by the familiar, animated way her father was speaking to Mr. Styles. Apparently they were friends. After all that.

The men changed course and began crossing the sand toward Anna and Tabby. Anna stepped hurriedly out of the water, but she'd left her shoes too far away to put them back on in time. Mr. Styles was a broad, imposing man with brilliantined black hair showing under his hat brim. "Say, is this your daughter?" he asked. "Withstanding arctic temperatures without so much as a pair of stockings?"

Anna sensed her father's displeasure. "So it is," he said. "Anna, say good day to Mr. Styles."

"Very pleased to meet you," she said, shaking his hand firmly, as her father had taught her, and taking care not to squint as she peered up at him. Mr. Styles looked younger than her father, without shadows or creases in his face. She sensed an alertness about him, a humming tension perceptible even through his billowing overcoat. He seemed to await something to react to, or be amused by. Right now that something was Anna.

Mr. Styles crouched beside her on the sand and looked directly into her face. "Why the bare feet?" he asked. "Don't you feel the cold, or are you showing off?"

Anna had no ready answer. It was neither of those; more an instinct to keep Tabby awed and guessing. But even that she couldn't articulate. "Why would I show off?" she said. "I'm nearly twelve."

"Well, what's it feel like?"

She smelled mint and liquor on his breath even in the wind. It struck her that her father couldn't hear their conversation.

"It only hurts at first," she said. "After a while you can't feel anything."

Mr. Styles grinned as if her reply were a ball he'd taken physical pleasure in catching. "Words to live by," he said, then rose again to his immense height. "She's strong," he remarked to Anna's father.

"So she is." Her father avoided her eyes.

Mr. Styles brushed sand from his trousers and turned to go. He'd exhausted that moment and was looking for the next. "They're stronger than we are," Anna heard him say to her father. "Lucky for us, they don't know it." She thought he might turn and look back at her, but he must have forgotten.

Dexter Styles felt sand working its way inside his oxfords as he slogged back to the path. Sure enough, the toughness he'd sensed coiled in Ed Kerrigan had flowered into magnificence in the dark-eyed daughter. Proof of what he'd always believed: men's children gave them away. It was why Dexter rarely did business with any man before meeting his family. He wished his Tabby had gone barefoot, too.

Kerrigan drove a '28 Duesenberg Model J, Niagara blue, evidence both of fine taste and of bright prospects before the crash. He had an excellent tailor. Yet there was something obscure about the man, something that worked against the clothing and automobile and even his blunt, deft conversation. A shadow, a sorrow. Then again, who hadn't one? Or several?

By the time they reached the path, Dexter found himself decided upon hiring Kerrigan, assuming that suitable terms could be established.

"Say, have you time for a drive to meet an old friend of mine?" he asked.

"Certainly," Kerrigan said.

"Your wife isn't expecting you?"

"Not before supper."

"Your daughter? Will she worry?"

Kerrigan laughed. "Anna? It's her job to worry me."

* * *

Anna had expected any moment to be called off the beach by her father, but it was Nurse who eventually came, huffing indignantly, and ordered them out of the cold. The light had changed, and the playroom felt heavy and dark. It was warmed by its own woodstove. They ate walnut cookies and watched the electric train race around the figure eight Anna had built, real steam straggling from its miniature smokestack. She had never seen such a toy, could not imagine how much it might cost. She was sick of this adventure. It had lasted far longer than their sociable visits usually did, and playing a part for the other children had exhausted Anna. It felt like hours since she'd seen her father. Eventually, the boys left the train running and went to look at picture books. Nurse had nodded off in a rocking chair. Tabby lay on a braided rug, pointing her new kaleidoscope at the lamp.

Casually, Anna asked, "May I hold your Flossie Flirt?"

Tabby assented vaguely, and Anna carefully lifted the doll from the shelf. Flossie Flirts came in four sizes, and this was the second smallest—not the newborn baby but a somewhat larger baby with startled blue eyes. Anna turned the doll on her side. Sure enough, just as the newspaper ads had promised, the blue irises slid into the corners of the eyes as if keeping Anna in sight. She felt a burst of pure joy that nearly made her laugh. The doll's lips were drawn into a perfect "O." Below her top lip were two painted white teeth.

As if catching the scent of Anna's delight, Tabby jumped to her feet. "You can have her," she cried. "I never play with her anymore."

Anna absorbed the impact of this offer. Two Christmases ago, when she'd wanted the Flossie Flirt so acutely, she hadn't dared ask—ships had stopped coming in, and they hadn't any money. The extreme physical longing she'd felt for the doll scissored through her now, upsetting her deep knowledge that of course she must refuse.

"No, thank you," she said at last. "I've a bigger one at home. I just wanted to see what the small one was like." With wrenching effort,

she forced herself to replace the Flossie Flirt on the shelf, keeping a hand on one rubbery leg until she felt Nurse's eyes upon her. Feigning indifference, she turned away.

Too late. Nurse had seen, and knew. When Tabby left the room to answer a call from her mother, Nurse seized the Flossie Flirt and half flung it at Anna. "Take it, dear," she whispered fiercely. "She doesn't care—she's more toys than she can ever play with. They all have."

Anna wavered, half believing there might be a way to take the doll without having anyone know. But the mere thought of her father's reaction hardened her reply. "No, thank you," she said coldly. "I'm too old for dolls, anyway." Without a backward glance, she left the playroom. But Nurse's sympathy had weakened her, and her knees shook as she climbed the stairs.

At the sight of her father in the front hall, Anna barely withstood an urge to run to him and hug his legs as she used to do. He had his coat on. Mrs. Styles was saying goodbye. "Next time you must bring your sister," she told Anna, kissing her cheek with a brush of musky perfume. Anna promised that she would. Outside, the Model J gleamed dully in the late-afternoon sun. It had been shinier when it was their car; the union boys polished it less.

As they drove away from Mr. Styles's house, Anna searched for the right clever remark to disarm her father—the kind she'd made thoughtlessly when she was smaller, his startled laughter her first indication she'd been funny. Lately, she often found herself trying to recapture an earlier state, as if some freshness or innocence had passed from her.

"I suppose Mr. Styles wasn't in stocks," she said finally.

He chuckled and pulled her to him. "Mr. Styles doesn't need stocks. He owns nightclubs. And other things."

"Is he with the union?"

"Oh no. He's nothing to do with the union."

This was a surprise. Generally speaking, union men wore hats, and longshoremen wore caps. Some, like her father, might wear either,

depending on the day. Anna couldn't imagine her father with a long-shoreman's hook when he was dressed well, as now. Her mother saved exotic feathers from her piecework and used them to trim his hats. She retailed his suits to match the styles and flatter his ropy frame—he'd lost weight since the ships had stopped coming and he took less exercise.

Her father drove one-handed, a cigarette cocked between two fingers at the wheel, the other arm around Anna. She leaned against him. In the end it was always the two of them in motion, Anna drifting on a tide of sleepy satisfaction. She smelled something new in the car amid her father's cigarette smoke, a loamy, familiar odor she couldn't quite place.

"Why the bare feet, toots?" he asked, as she'd known he would.

"To feel the water."

"That's something little girls do."

"Tabatha is eight, and she didn't."

"She'd better sense."

"Mr. Styles liked that I did."

"You've no idea what Mr. Styles thought."

"I have. He talked to me when you couldn't hear."

"I noticed that," he said, glancing at her. "What did he say?"

Her mind reached back to the sand, the cold, the ache in her feet, and the man beside her, curious—all of it fused now with her longing for that Flossie Flirt. "He said I was strong," she said, a lump tightening her voice. Her eyes blurred.

"And so you are, toots," he said, kissing the top of her head. "Anyone can see that."

At a traffic light, he knocked another cigarette from his Raleigh packet. Anna checked inside, but she'd already taken the coupon. She wished her father would smoke more; she'd collected seventy-eight coupons, but the catalog items weren't even tempting until a hundred and twenty-five. For eight hundred you could get a six-serving plate-silver set in a customized chest, and there was an automatic toaster for

seven hundred. But these numbers seemed unattainable. The B&W Premiums catalog was short on toys: just a Frank Buck panda bear or a Betsy Wetsy doll with a complete layette for two hundred fifty, but those items seemed beneath her. She was drawn to the dartboard, “for older children and adults,” but couldn’t imagine flinging sharp darts across their small apartment. Suppose one hit Lydia?

Smoke rose from the encampments inside Prospect Park. They were nearly home. “I almost forgot,” her father said. “Look what I’ve here.” He took a paper sack from inside his overcoat and gave it to Anna. It was filled with bright red tomatoes, their taut, earthen smell the very one she’d noticed.

“How,” she marveled, “in winter?”

“Mr. Styles has a friend who grows them in a little house made of glass. He showed it to me. We’ll surprise Mama, shall we?”

“You went away? While I was at Mr. Styles’s house?” She felt a wounded astonishment. In all the years Anna had accompanied him on his errands, he had never left her anywhere. He had always been in sight.

“Just for a very short time, toots. You didn’t even miss me.”

“How far away?”

“Not far.”

“I did miss you.” It seemed to her now that she had known he was gone, had felt the void of his absence.

“Baloney,” he said, kissing her again. “You were having the time of your life.”