



## Chapter 1

### Eronsay

Parvaneh grasped the door handle, then paused to grip her hand and stop it trembling.

If only Father was here, she thought, if only... but he was gone now.

Father's face.... She swore, the day they got separated near the border, that she would remember it, every inch, every pore, but already it was fading, the small details slipping away. All she had left of him were memories. She didn't even have a photo – they'd arrived here with nothing.

“Come on, Nasim.” She grasped her little brother’s hand and led him outside. As she turned to shut the door of Alice Bain’s cottage her eyes caught the sign, rather crookedly, attached to it:

‘The Haven’.

But was it?

“Oh, wait...” said Nasim, kneeling down to tie his shoelaces.

The harbourside was quiet as Parvaneh gazed around at the place they now called home: the sheen of newly fallen rain glistening on the cobbles; the fishing cottages clustered around a tiny harbour; the cold grey waters of the sound, crested with white-caps; the towering lighthouse. Then she gazed up at the misty moors, the brooding, cloud-draped mountains, the rugged sea-cliffs that surrounded the village.

She caught a reflection of herself in the glass of the red phone box across the street, her face

pale and frightened, hiding under her headscarf.

Taking a deep breath, she straightened up. “Come on. We’ll be late.” She tugged Nasim along with her, marching past untidy heaps of lobster pots, mussel shells cracking under their feet. Of all the places they could have ended up, she thought, the Isle of Eronsay was probably the strangest, the most alien.

A postman wobbled by on his bike, his bag slung over his shoulder. An old man, he had fierce eyes and a stern moustache. Parvaneh tried to smile, but he only glared back. A lace curtain twitched at one of the windows, and a wizened woman’s face peered out at them, her stare suspicious... hostile even.

An image flashed into Parvaneh’s mind – one of chaos, confusion, carnage – the day they dropped the barrel bomb. She felt her eyes welling up.

Nasim tugged on her hand. “What is wrong, Parvie?” His face was creased – a child so young should not have worry lines like those. She gave his hand a reassuring squeeze.

“Nothing.” She tried to blink away the unhappy thoughts, but they were lodged in there like shards of glass that could appear again at any time, slicing into her memory. There was no telling when or why, and each one was more real and vivid than the last. More vivid even than Mother and Father’s faces. Why was that, she wondered?

Her reverie was broken by a cry from her little brother. “Parvie, look at me!”

He had leapt up onto the harbour wall and was balancing there, over a sheer drop into the water.

“Nasim! Come down!” she yelled in her own language. This startled a woman nearby, wearing a tweed overcoat and a deerstalker hat. The woman

turned and stared long and hard at her, stared, it seemed, with accusing eyes.

“Sorry,” said Parvaneh, before hauling her brother off the wall. “Don’t you know how deep that water is?”

All along the street and up the hill she felt the lady’s eyes watching her, boring into her back. Why did everyone keep staring at her like that?

\* \* \*

Eronsay’s school was perhaps the tiniest Parvaneh had ever seen, built out of Victorian granite. But it was at least a school. It had computers, books and teachers. A school was a sanctuary, wasn’t that what father always said?

“I am excited,” said Nasim, and so was she. Until, that is, they stepped inside and caught the fearful looks on the faces of the other pupils, who were sitting cross-legged on the floor of the hall.

Parvaneh froze. “I... we,” she spluttered. Why did everyone seem scared of them?

The staff were no different. They all glared at her, their eyes wide, hostile, until a young teacher with golden hair got to her feet. She was smiling at them encouragingly.

This woman gazed round at the other teachers, as if surprised by their reaction, before stretching out her hand. “Parvaneh, right? We’ve been expecting you. I’m Mrs Struan – I’m new here myself.”

Parvaneh nodded, her mouth suddenly dry. Back home, before the war, they called her a chatterbox, but lately she could barely speak.

“And you’d be Nasim,” said the woman, kneeling down to her brother. Nasim clutched Parvaneh’s hand and hid behind her skirt, which was not like Nasim. Or at least, not the way he used to be. He’d changed too.

“Come and meet the other pupils,” said Mrs Struan, leading them forward.

\* \* \*

That was how it went on all day. Apart from Mrs Struan, the other staff and pupils seemed at best cold, at worst hostile. At break time, Nasim tried to make friends with two local boys his own age, Conor and Danny, but they shunned him. This isn’t fair, thought Parvaneh, watching him from the other side of the playground. He does not deserve this. Not Nasim. Not after what he has been through.

Seeing this, Parvaneh kept her distance from the other children. She had one of her mother’s books with her, so she sat on a bench on her own and read.

\* \* \*

Parvaneh and Nasim shared a room at Alice's house. They had no complaints about the place. The beds were comfortable, the window looked out onto the harbour, which meant they could watch the boats coming and going. Back home, they were so far from the sea that they only got to see it on holidays.

Nasim fiddled with an old toy that had belonged to one of Alice's grandsons, and sighed. "Why did they send us to this place?"

"Give it a chance. You'll soon see," she replied, sounding a lot more positive than she felt.

The sea had calmed, the breeze had dropped and the late afternoon sunlight felt warm when Parvaneh escaped the house. She trudged across the street to a bench at the harbourside. There, breathing in the fresh salty air, she flipped open her book and began to read.

A few minutes later, she heard the click-click-

clicking of a bicycle wheel rolling past. Then it stopped, just behind her shoulder.

"Hello," came a woman's voice, kind, inquisitive and friendly.

Parvaneh turned to look to see a lady she guessed was probably in her mid-fifties. Her face was lined with years of laughter and rich experience. And her eyes, somehow they were old and yet young at the same time. She wore her long straggly hair pulled back in a ponytail.

"You're new here, aren't you?" said the woman. Her accent told Parvaneh she wasn't from round here either.

The woman propped her bike on the railings, its red ribbons fluttering on the handlebars. She plonked herself down on the bench beside Parvaneh, drawing up her rucksack to sit between them. She stretched out her hand. "Doctor Phillips."

Parvaneh introduced herself, after which her companion smiled. “Your English is very good.”

“My parents, they taught me.”

The woman nodded at the book in Parvaneh’s lap. “What are you reading?”

“Poems. My mother was a poet. She wrote it.” Parvaneh had read the book every day for the last six months. She wasn’t sure why. Much of it was beyond her – long words and deep meanings. Perhaps she hoped, in some way, to connect with her mother’s thoughts.

The lady nodded, impressed. “You must let me borrow it some time.”

Both of them gazed out to sea for a moment. A seagull circled the water, searching for something, before flitting away on a whim. It was a moment before Doctor Phillips spoke again. “A strange sort of place this, isn’t it?”

“It’s... it’s a long way from home,” said

Parvaneh.

“For me too,” the woman replied. “So we’re both strangers here, don’t you see?”

Doctor Phillips’ eyes kept moving towards two tall, blond men standing at the other side of the harbour beside a black van. They looked like tourists, dressed in bright waterproof jackets, although they were quite serious and sombre for tourists. They were taking everything in, scanning the surroundings, watching the faces of the people around them.

Suddenly one of them caught the doctor’s eye, and both men’s gazes locked on her. It was strange, almost as if the two men were connected, as if they were one.

Doctor Phillips nodded in the direction of the lighthouse. “See that? That’s where I live.”

“You live in the lighthouse?” It seemed like an odd place to live in.

“Have you ever heard of the mad professor?” she replied, her eyes sparkling. “Well, that’s me. I invent things. I build things. I’m building something right now. Up there, in the lighthouse, I am away from everyone and I like that. Besides, there’s something beautiful about lighthouses, don’t you see? Shining a light out into the darkness – a warning to ships, steer clear of the rocks. But also a beacon of hope, a light in the void, safety in the storm, a welcome, an invitation.”

A slow-moving lorry drove in front of the two men and stopped, blotting them from view. Doctor Phillips flipped open her rucksack.

“I write books too, you know. Look...” She pulled out a book, a heavy hardback, which Parvaneh grasped in her hands: *A History of the Eronsay Lighthouse*. “It’s a fascinating story. Seven men died building it. People went bankrupt,

lost everything, even went mad. And yet it had to be finished... I like that.”

A book, as her father always told her, is a precious thing. “Thank you,” said Parvaneh.

“Perhaps you might tell me what you think of it once you’ve finished.” Doctor Phillips stood up, eyeing the two men who had now come out from behind the lorry and were still staring in their direction. She gazed up at the sky, as if seeking something, then back at Parvaneh, and smiled. “I will see you again.”

With that, she hopped onto her bike and cycled back the way she came. Parvaneh left her seat and returned to Alice’s house.

\* \* \*

Alice had told them that dinner would be at five o’clock. “No sooner, no later.” She was a kind, middle-aged lady who darted about the kitchen as

if she were performing a slick dance routine that she had been practising for years.

“Come on in, sit down,” she said in a sing-song island accent that Parvaneh found very comforting. The table was set, so she and her brother took their places, and Alice laid some plates in front of them. “There you go, fish and chips – the island’s best!”

Nasim stared down at it, bewildered, and Parvaneh couldn’t help but snigger. The people here seemed obsessed with serving fried potato chips with everything, and Nasim couldn’t understand it.

“Don’t they eat anything else?” he said in his own tongue. Nevertheless, the food was good, and when they were finished Alice gave them ice cream.

Afterwards, their host stuffed a five pound note and two coins into Parvaneh’s hand. “Now,

Parvaneh, I’d like you to run an errand for me. The papers need to be paid up. Will you take that money to Mr Cochrane at the village shop?”

The village shop was mid-way along the harbourside and, judging by the massive selection of goods outside, it sold just about anything you could want. Parvaneh walked in, the bell dingling above her head. A man was standing behind the counter. A sad-looking man, he had a thatch of greying hair and thick glasses.

“Mr Cochrane?” she said, offering the money. He didn’t say anything, didn’t even lift his hand to take the money, he just stared. And there was fear in his eyes, terrible fear. “Alice sent me,” she said, after a moment, “to pay the papers.”

Finally he opened his mouth. “Can I help you, lassie?” But he was still staring. Only then did Parvaneh realise that his look, the one of fear and distrust, was not directed at her. He was looking at



something else, something behind her.

Parvaneh whisked round to see a woman standing in the doorway, the woman with the deerstalker hat, the same woman she'd startled earlier that day. The way she was standing was quite strange, her arms stretched out by her side. She was looking around the place, almost as if it was the first time she'd ever been inside a shop.

There was something very odd about that woman, Parvaneh thought. In fact there was something very odd about this whole place. She slapped the money on the counter and tried to move past the lady. "Excuse me." The lady made no effort to get out of the way, but fortunately there was a gap. She glanced up at the woman as she squeezed through, only to see her stare back at her, just stare. Staring as if the whole world was new and different and shocking.

Outside, Parvaneh breathed a sigh, but she

almost thought about going back. What if there was something wrong with the lady? Perhaps she should ask her if she was alright. But then, as she looked back, she saw the woman had left the shop and was scuttling purposefully down the street in the opposite direction.

\* \* \*

As she settled down in bed that night, the strange lady in the deerstalker kept coming back into Parvaneh's thoughts. And those two odd men on the harbour, whose gaze seemed to lock in unison. This whole place, this weird harbourside village, and its cold, distrustful locals. And something else, something that nagged her more than anything: the look Mr Cochrane gave.

It was not for her.

She flipped open Doctor Phillips' book and began to read. At first, she didn't think she'd be

interested, that she'd perhaps get through a few pages before getting bored. But it was quite the opposite. Who knew a story about the construction of a lighthouse could be so interesting? Before she knew it, the clock struck eleven and she'd been reading for hours.

\* \* \*

The following day, she caught sight of Doctor Phillips cycling by the window on the way back to her lighthouse. Parvaneh wanted to thank her for the book. As she flung open the door, a black van hurtled past. She heard a clatter and a muffled scream. The black van screeched to a halt about fifty metres down the street.

There sounded a thud of a door slamming shut, then the van skidded its wheels and sped away.

The bike, Doctor Phillips' bike, with its red

ribbons fluttering on the handlebars, was lying on its side, one wheel still spinning.

Doctor Phillips – something had happened – she'd been taken. Parvaneh wondered what to do. The road the van had turned up, it curved back behind Alice's house. There was a set of steps leading up to it. If she ran, she might catch them. The police station, with its lantern hanging outside, was at the opposite end of the harbour. Or maybe Alice would know what to do....

**And now you decide...**

What should Parvaneh  
do?

**A)** Chase the van

**B)** Tell the police

**C)** Ask Alice

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