



# Chapter

## One

I like to walk early in the morning, before I begin my chores, even in this crisp November weather. I use my birch stick to poke at curious things on the ground, like the tunnels made by moles. They go so deep, they churn up the sand below the soil.

When I leave home early enough, I can see bright flashes from the Gay Head Light in the distance. But today the sun is up.

I run my stick across the top of the mossy stone wall that frames the high road and watch the sea glitter behind gabled houses with sloping yards. Sea grass borders the sand, blowing lightly in the cool breeze. Blue crabs burrow into the mud near the shore, where they'll lay dormant for the winter.

On the beach, there's little left of the humpback whale that washed upon our shores four days ago, delivered by the Almighty.

My closest friend, Nancy Skiffe, and I discovered the whale while playing. It was already dead when we

found it, but its smell was not yet putrid. Small seabirds pecked at its carcass. Its sea-worn, mottled black skin was covered in humps and bumps. We were awestruck by its massive bulk.

Nancy and I walked a large circle around it. I collected scallop shells, moon shells, and quahog shells and put them next to the whale, as a final offering from a human friend. Nancy took a recorder out of her cloak and played a song to guide the beast to its end.

When Nancy and I ran to get her father, my papa, and the other men, they came with spades, knives, rope, and wheelbarrows.

As they made plans to dispose of the whale, Papa, sensing my sadness, signed to me assuredly, “Not one piece shall go unused. Meat for the whole town, oil for our lamps, and baleen in the beast’s mouth for brushes.”

I couldn’t watch as our treasure was flensed, cut, and taken away, piece by piece.

I stop and write *whale* in the sand with my stick. I love words, but they confound me too. The way my mind thinks is not just in signs or English words and sentences, but in images and a flow of feeling that I imagine resembles the music I’ve never heard.

I watch the tide leaping in and out.

I pass a stretch of high road that I have come to avoid. I circle around it as if it is hallowed ground and head back home. Leaves jump and twirl ahead of me; the wind beckons me toward a small graveyard. I choose to ignore its silent whispers.