

Chapter One

Yes, when I was seventeen, my mother took me to a Greek island, where I held a dying child in my arms.

I was a very normal seventeen-year-old Norwegian girl, which is perhaps why my mother was worried about me. I thought the entire world was inside my Smartphone, which I clung to like an electronic teddy bear. I was as much aware as the other kids of the wars somewhere out there in the world, of the refugees who brought all their problems to our quiet little country, and of this thing called climate change, which our teachers talked about in school, just enough to scare us. So we teenagers turned to the sanctuary of our Smartphones, where with a flick of our fingers we could choose our preferred reality.

My mother, Sofia Alexandra, a nurse who worked with premature infants in the maternity ward at the National Hospital in Oslo—she kept those tiny babies alive in their little incubators—had reached her limit with my blank stare at the little screen on my telephone. She announced in November of 2017 that during the Christmas vacation—from December 20 to January 5—we were going to spend two weeks together on the Greek island of Lesbos, working as volunteers to help the refugees who arrived on the beaches in their little rubber boats.

I stared at her in the kitchen, my phone in my hand. “We’re going to *what?*”

She explained with a calm and determined voice—no longer her exhausted and exasperated voice—that she had signed us up as volunteers with the Norwegian organization, Drop in the Ocean. We would be part of a team of about twenty people, most of them Norwegian but some from other countries, who were trained to meet the boats filled with refugees as they arrived, to administer first aid, and to work in the camps when we were not out on patrol. Drop in the Ocean required that volunteers must be at least twenty-five years old, but since I would be with my mother, a nurse, I had been accepted into the program.

Then my mother stared at me, waiting for my reaction.

The truth was, that I was bored—utterly bored, bored, bored—with high school. Most of what I looked at while surfing on my phone were places I wanted to visit: I wanted to ride a red double-decker bus through London, I wanted to visit a cathedral in Paris where I could look up at the stained-glass windows, and I wanted to ride a

trolley-car up and down the hills of San Francisco. Maybe ride an elephant in . . . some far-off country.

The little town where we lived, half an hour by train south of Oslo, was very nice, very tidy, very quiet, very safe, and so utterly, utterly boring.

And the weather was gray, especially in the winter. Cold and gray.

A beach on a Greek island? At the very least, I could buy a Greek t-shirt, pink, and wear it to school in January.

So I said, "All right. But what can I do with a bunch of refugees?"

She smiled. "You're the night owl. Sometimes we'll be out on patrol at night. The little boats cross the sea at night when the Turkish coast guard can't see them. When the refugees approach a Greek island, they shine the lights of their telephones toward the beaches as a signal." Then she laughed. "You can shine your light back, letting them know that we have spotted them. You can finally put your phone to good use."

Yes, well, I could do that. And a beach on a Greek island at midnight . . . well, that was certainly more intriguing than life in a town that shut down at ten.

I tried to smile, letting her know that I was grateful. "All right. Maybe we should learn some Greek before we go."

"And Arabic, Sweetheart. We're going to need to learn some Arabic."

So on December 19, my mother and I, accompanied by my father and brother, took the airport train north to Gardermoen, where we would board an SAS flight to Athens. I must admit that I was excited. My brother would be hanging out for two weeks in all the usual places, while I was getting a suntan and eating Greek yoghurt and . . . helping the refugees.

I was also very glad, though I didn't say so, that my mother and I were friends again. No more arguing about the telephone; it was in my carry-on, and I left it there. No more arguing about my grades. No more arguing about my refusal to wear a nice, traditional Norwegian ski sweater. (Like all the other kids, I had three favorite colors: gray, dark gray, and black.)

Whatever it was we were doing, my mother and I were together on an adventure. We had a book of Beginner's Greek, and we had a book of Beginner's Arabic. I felt a glow of happiness, the first for a long, long time.

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The people with Drop in the Ocean—the “Drops”, as they called themselves—were wonderful. My mother and I were a little tired by the time we finally arrived at the hotel on the northern coast of Lesbos, but we were welcomed by a jubilant group of people who were making a taco dinner in the restaurant kitchen. They helped us to carry our bags to our room, and explained that if you wanted a really *hot* shower, it was best to try at eight in the morning. Then they led us back to the dining room and into the kitchen, where I was soon working with a woman from Poland, cutting up the most gorgeous red tomatoes I had ever seen in my life.

So much more I could say, but really, we need to get to that beach at night when I—yes, it was me, with my owl’s eyes—spotted a faint speck of light maybe three hundred meters out from shore, surrounded by the darkness of a cold December night out on the Aegean Sea.

My mother was driving the little blue car that she had rented along a bumpy, rutted road that wound along at the top of a cliff overlooking a narrow black beach far below, and overlooking as well the broad black expanse of the sea. We were heading west, so that I, in the passenger seat, could look north out my open window, sweeping my eyes back and forth across the dark sea. In the distance, ten kilometers away, I could see lights scattered along the coast of Turkey. Occasionally I spotted the lights of a ship, or a fishing boat heading out before dawn. The night was cold—we had the car’s heater on full blast—but I had to keep my window open so that I could see—

“Mom, I saw a light!”

“Where, Honey?” She slowed to a halt, then looked out my window.

“Straight out. Maybe three hundred meters. Can you see it? A tiny speck of a light. It’s moving. Yes, I can see that it’s moving.”

I snapped off my seat belt, swung open the door and stepped out carefully—the road was close to the edge of the cliff, with absolutely no guard rails—then I opened the rear door and grabbed a powerful flashlight from the back seat. I heard the squeak of the emergency brake as my mother set it, then she was out of the car and standing beside me as I shone our beacon toward the speck of light which she too could now see.

“Two lights!” I cheered, spotting a second speck. “They see us.”

My mother was on her phone now, calling the Spanish lifeguards who kept their rescue boat in the harbor of the fishing village of Skala Sikamineas, a few kilometers

east of us . . . where the sky showed the first pearly glow of dawn. She told them—in English, the language we all used—where we were along the coastal road, and said that we would head back east about half a kilometer to where the road descended and a lane branched off down to the beach.

The wind atop the cliff was cold. When I had grabbed the flashlight, I had forgotten to put on my gloves. My mother was holding her phone with her bare hand. Neither of us were wearing our wool caps. I could only imagine how cold it must be out there on the open sea.

“All right,” said my mother, handing me her phone. “Hop in and call the other Drops while I get us down to the beach.”

We got back into the car—the engine was still running, the heat was blasting—and I phoned the Drop on night duty at the hotel while my mother released the brake and slowly drove backwards with a sharp turn, so that our headlights shone out over the sea. She blinked the lights several times, letting them know that we saw them, then she drove carefully forward with a sharp turn to the east. We could not drive fast; the road was too rutted, too close to the edge of the cliff, and in the darkness of night, we had to be especially careful. But she drove at a good steady pace, her eyes staring ahead. While I gave the night-duty Drop our location, and told him that we were now heading down to the beach, I marveled at my mother’s courage.

By the time we were rocking from rut to rut down the lane—our headlights shone on the wreckage of previous rubber boats hauled up on shore—we could see the bright lights of those valiant Spaniards as they raced in their small rubber boat toward the cluster of faint specks, now about two hundred meters from shore. The Spaniards would tell the refugees to stay calm—“remain seated, remain seated” in Arabic—and then they would tow the refugee boat toward the spot on the beach where we would be waiting.

Now behind us followed the headlights of somebody’s car coming down the lane; the lights bounced up and down as the car jounced over the ruts.

My mother drove to a broad spot where the lane ended, with the cliff to our left and the slope of the beach to our right, and huge boulders ahead of us. As we got out of the car and were reaching into the back for our hats and gloves and a scarf against the cold wind off the water, the lights of the car behind us shone for a moment on our yellow reflective vests. Then the lights went dark, and we stood on a black beach beside a black sea, beneath a dark sky with a few faint stars. My eyes were watering in the cold wind.

This was our first boat. My mother and I had been on night patrol for five nights, including Christmas Eve, without spotting a boat. Now, sometime during the week between Christmas and New Year's Eve, we had spotted our first boat. I was not excited. I was not afraid. But never, never, never before in my life had I felt so keenly alive.

Then I heard a voice from the car behind us, "Anna Katerina, you and your mother are the first to arrive. Did you spot them?"

"Yes," I called back. It was Nikos, one of the Greek lifeguards, a man whom I had gotten to know during the past few days.

"Good work," he called. "Good work." I could see, just barely in the darkness, that he was taking off his jacket, and shirt, down to his skin, then his trousers, down to his shorts. And now he was putting on his black rubber wetsuit. He and the other Greeks would wade out to meet the refugee boat. They would help the refugees, one by one, to shore, where the rest of us would be waiting to help.

We could hear voices now from the two small rubber boats approaching the beach, the Spanish rescue boat bright orange, the refugee boat black. The dinghies bobbed in the waves that grew steeper near shore. I could distinguish between voices speaking Arabic with instructions to stay calm, and voices shouting, wailing, weeping and praying in Arabic because the terrifying voyage was almost over. Some of the refugees, men, were standing up now in their boat, ready to jump overboard onto the beach.

Nikos was shouting now in Arabic, his voice firm, almost angry. The standing men sat back down. I knew the drill from our instructions at the hotel: first the children would be lifted from the boat. Then the women would be helped from the boat to the beach. And then the men would be helped to shore.

My mother and I walked carefully down the slope of the beach—it was not a sandy beach, but a beach of round stones the size of lemons—until we stood above the wash of the waves. My mother carried her first-aid case. I carried a blanket. We could see now that the refugee boat was not only filled with people—25 or 30 in one small rubber boat—but it was filled with water as well. Waves had clearly washed over the low, rounded sides of the boat. Maybe the refugees had a bucket for bailing, though I did not see one.

Some of the people, either unconscious or dead, were held in the arms of others. I looked at my mother. She said to me quietly, "Be strong, Anna. Be strong."

Now the Spaniards in their trim, well-equipped rubber rescue boat nudged the wallowing refugee boat bow-first toward the beach, so that it would not turn broadside to the waves and capsize. Two Greeks took hold of the sides of the bow and braced it as they let a wave carry the bow onto the beach. Another wave carried the boat a bit further up the beach . . . and then the boat, its bow on land, most of it still in the water, was stable enough that Nikos could reach over the side, pick up a child and wade with him to shore. The little boy, wailing with fright, was able to stand as he stared back toward the boat for his mother or father. My mother set down her first aid case, picked up the wet child and carried him toward our car, where we had dry clothes and blankets stored in the back.

The headlights of three cars came bobbing down the lane. The Drops were arriving. Each car, I knew, was packed with towels, warm clothing and wool blankets. And the metallic blankets that held in body heat. Bottles of water. Chocolate energy bars. Enough to keep these people alive until we got them to the refugee camp near Skala Sikamineas, where fires would be burning in barrels, and hot soup would be served, and warm beds would be ready.

“Anna!” Nikos was calling my name. “Come take this one.”

I set down the blanket and walked in my Norwegian winter boots to where Nikos came wading out of the water with a small, limp body in his arms. “She is alive,” he said to me as he passed a child gently into my arms. “Hold her so that you can brace her head.” I looked down in the first faint glow of dawn at a little girl’s face—she was perhaps four years old—her eyes shut, her mouth open, utterly drenched by the cold sea.

Nikos said quickly, “Her mother is in the boat.” He glanced at the dark figures running across the beach from the cars. “Magnus! I need your strong arms!”

Magnus, one of our Drops—a dairy farmer from the west coast near Stavanger—ran past me in his yellow vest as I carried the limp girl up the beach toward our car.

Another Drop, Anne Kari, was dressing the little boy—his wet clothing lay in a heap on the ground beside him—with a wool, hand-knit Norwegian sweater, red with blue snowflakes. He wore woolen trousers, such as a child might wear when playing on a kindergarten playground in the winter, and heavy woolen socks. My mother was opening a box in the back of the car, from which she took a child’s woolen ski cap.

Bless those women back home, I thought, who knit sweater after sweater and sent them down to Lesbos.

“Mom,” I called, “spread a blanket on the ground. This little girl is unconscious.”

My mother handed Anne Kari the blue knit cap, then she stepped toward me and examined the child in my arms. She felt for a pulse under the jaw, then opened the lids of an eye. She laid her hand over the child's brow. "Hypothermia. She is deeply cold." I saw the concern in my mother's eyes, the same concern with which she must have examined a thousand premature babies . . . a concern which I had never before witnessed.

She took a blanket from the back of the car, then opened it to form a mattress big enough for a child and spread it on the ground. I gently laid the child on the blanket, while my mother supported her head. "Quick, Anna, fetch my first aid case, down on the beach. I need my stethoscope."

As my mother knelt over the child and began to unbutton her wet coat, I glanced at Anne Kari, who was putting the little boy on the passenger seat of the car—in the warmth of the blasting heater—then I ran down the beach and grabbed my mother's first aid case, almost hidden among the refugees now pouring out of their boat. I returned with the case to my mother, who lifted the lid, took out the stethoscope, fitted it to her ears and then leaned over the child while she pressed the silver disk on several spots of wet pale skin over the girl's heart. "You're a fighter, Sweetheart," she said to the unconscious child. "Keep fighting. Keep fighting."

Anne Kari now joined us, holding a blanket to block the wind off the sea as my mother undressed the child. I handed my mother a towel. She dried the child's dark hair, then her face and the front of her body. Rolling her over gently, my mother dried the girl's back, the backs of her legs, her feet.

"She is so cold that her heart, her brain, everything is very delicate now."

Rolling her over again, my mother dressed the girl with layers of woolen clothing that I fetched from the car. A traditional Norwegian sweater, red and white, with brown reindeer running across the chest. A white cap with a tassel. Blue-and-white mittens. Wool socks, and then another pair of wool socks. Still the eyes were closed, the mouth was open, but we could see now that the girl was breathing with more than imperceptible shallow breaths.

Magnus came walking toward us with a woman in his arms, a woman who also wore a Norwegian sweater and a cap and woolen trousers and wool socks, a woman who stared at the little girl on the blanket . . . who was safe and warm. "Lamar," she said, calling, as we guessed, the girl's name. Then she spoke in Arabic as Magnus, kneeling, set her on the ground beside her daughter. Apparently too weak to walk, or even to sit

upright, she lay down beside her daughter, wrapped her arm over her child and snuggled with her, their cheeks touching.

Anne Kari wrapped a blanket over them, tucking it beneath the mother's feet against the wind. My mother rolled up a towel and set it beneath their heads as a pillow.

Then the four of us, my mother and I, Anne Kari and Magnus, stood for a moment in a quiet circle, looking down at two survivors who had managed, somehow, to flee from a war, to reach the coast of Turkey, to cross the sea on a winter's night, and to find safety on a stony beach. Where was the husband, the father? Did these two refugees know that all the borders further north into Europe were closed? Did they know that even further north, all across Europe, holiday shoppers were buying champagne and fireworks in preparation for New Year's Eve?

That was the moment when I felt, for the first time in my life, the grief—the huge, black, overwhelming grief—for people who were strangers, to whom I could not even say “Hello”, who were the victims of war. That was the moment when I understood, for the first time, that the word “humanity” meant “all of us”.

“Magnus,” said my mother, “will you help the mother into the car? The heater is on. We can place her daughter in her lap. Then Anna and I will take them to the camp. They can sit in a chair beside the fire burning in a barrel. The child needs real heat. And hot soup. And a bed.”

Anne Kari spoke with the boy on the passenger seat. He was still shivering but clearly warmer. He kept asking for someone. He had family on the beach and he wanted to find them. Anne Kari held his hand as they walked toward the noisy crowd of refugees and Greeks and Drops; the boy kept calling out someone's name.

Kneeling again, Magnus lifted the mother and set her carefully on the passenger seat. Then he set the daughter on her mother's lap. The mother wrapped her arms around her child and sent up a wailing prayer.

Magnus looked at us briefly. “The bus should be here soon. We'll meet you at the camp.” Then, grabbing armloads of blankets and woolens from the rear of our car, he hurried back down to the beach and disappeared into the crowd.

The Spaniards were pulling away now in their orange rescue boat; they would return to Skala Sikamineas, where they would be on call, ready for the next overloaded rubber boat filled with desperate refugees.

I made room for myself on the back seat. My mother drove the car in tight little turns, forward and back, until she managed to turn around and head up the rutted lane in low gear.

To the southeast, somewhere beyond the brown hills ahead of us, the winter sun was rising above the sea, bringing a new day to the inhabitants of planet Earth.