

Excerpt from *North of Boston* by Elisabeth Elo (Viking, 2014)

From Chapter One

At Taffy's, a restaurant on the corner, Noah squares off in front of a hamburger and fries. He gets his fingers around the bun, lifts it to his mouth, and takes an enormous bite. He chews like a lion, gulps it down. He admitted he was hungry when I asked. It's possible he's actually starving.

It's been three days since his father drowned. I have no idea how much he knows about the accident. The story was on the news in a slightly-more-than-sound-bite form. A picture of Ned's regular-guy mug hovered in a small box next to the news announcer's perfect cover-girl face, then expanded to fill the entire screen. When his face was in the box, he looked like a nice guy you knew in high school who forgot to comb his hair. When it bloomed to fill the screen, you could see the brown discolorations on the side of his face from years of being outside. His tea-green eyes looked bloodshot, wary, possibly dishonest. Or maybe he only looked that way because, on the news, everyone tends to look like a criminal. In any case, it would have felt drastically wrong to Noah to see his deceased father on a television screen.

"You want to know how it happened, Noah?"

"OK." He's learned to be accommodating.

"It was a crash, like the kind on highways, only this one was on the ocean."

"I *know* that already." He dips a French fry in a little paper bucket of ketchup to show how uninteresting this is.

Of course. He knows everything about crashes; he's seen a million on TV. Sparks fly, buildings dissolve, cars burst into flame. *Ho-hum.*

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I take the paper place mat from under the plate my BLT is on and turn it over. With a pen borrowed from the waitress, I sketch the coastline from Cape Cod to Maine. I put in the islands in Boston Harbor and roughly shade in Georges Bank. “Your dad and I were here,” I say, pointing to a spot that correlates to about twenty-five miles northeast of Boston. “The fog came in thick. Your dad was in the wheelhouse. I was in the stern baiting lobster traps. It was really quiet. I couldn’t even see the bow. The next thing I knew, something huge crashed into us. Huge, Noah. A freighter. It hit starboard, broadside. That means right in the middle of the boat. I bailed, and when I broke the surface and looked back, your dad’s boat was in splinters and the freighter was passing by.”

“My dad swam away, like you did.”

“The Coast Guard looked for him for about five hours that day, until the sun went down, and then from daybreak to sunset the next day. They had two patrol boats, two helicopters, and a C-130 search plane. Almost twenty hours of searching, Noah. Some fishermen were out there, too—your dad’s friends. A lot of people were involved. They searched an eight-mile radius from where I was found.”

“Cool,” he says. His eyes are vacant, as if he doesn’t know what I’m saying is real.

“They didn’t find him, Noah.”

“He got away like you did. He swam underwater.”

“He’d have to come up for air sometime.”

“Not if he went to Atlantis.”

“Atlantis is a made-up place.”

“No, it isn’t.” He looks at me reproachfully.

I’ve babysat him since he was an infant. I’m his good fairy godmother, the one who plays games and willingly accompanies him on flights of fancy, who doesn’t ever tell him to be sensible or brush his teeth. This is a new me he is seeing.

I wait.

Noah dips another fry in the ketchup. He draws it several times across the thin paper at the bottom of his hamburger basket, leaving reddish streaks. Maybe he's writing a hieroglyph, trying to communicate. If he is, I'm probably the only person left in the world who would try to decipher it.

"A monster killed my dad," he says, attempting.

"He drowned, Noah," I say gently. "He's gone."

Fury knits his brows together, makes his tiny nostrils flare. "Why did that boat crash into him? Why didn't they look where they were going?" He's been told that a hundred times. *Be careful. Don't run. Watch what you're doing.* But he's already figured out that adults don't play by those rules.

"It was an accident, Noah. Collisions at sea happen more often than you'd think." I could kick myself for making it sound mundane.

"Why didn't the people stop to look for him?"

"Good question," I say, buying time.

I feel helpless to the point of despair. I don't want Noah to see my rage. If the captain had stopped the freighter immediately, as soon as he realized what had happened, he could have saved us both easily. But he didn't. He just kept going. He probably wanted to spare himself an official inquiry and whatever damage his reputation would suffer.

I can't say that to Noah. So I give the typical response. "The Coast Guard is looking into it. They're going to find the people on the boat and ask them that."

He looks at me with the weary, perplexed eyes of a disappointed man. He knows I'm holding back.

"It's possible that the people on the ship didn't even know they hit us," I say. "That freighter could have been five hundred feet, and I don't even know how many hundreds of tons. Double steel hull. Bridge about three stories up. And in fog like that, what's the point of looking out anyway? They rely on radar in that weather. But the ocean is big

and they're not expecting anything, so if they see something small like your dad's lobster boat, they might think it's just sea clutter, like floating oil drums or garbage."

Noah's lip is trembling. He's trying not to cry. His tears are so rare that the prospect of just one falling makes my whole body hurt.

But he gets himself together, gazes out the window. Across the street there's a lamp store, a Walgreens, and an Indian grocery. Down the street there's a park with a playground where he often went with his dad and where I've taken him, too. As a small child, he liked the swings but not the slide. On the swings he could keep an eye peeled for unusual occurrences; the slide was too disorienting.

I wonder what he's thinking. Maybe that the world is deeply unfair and dangerous, only he wouldn't have the words for that. Maybe he isn't thinking at all, just soaking it up. Cars, boats, fog. Drunken mothers, distant fathers. Crash. I wish now I hadn't said his dad's boat could have been mistaken for garbage.

I draw a vessel that looks like the *Molly Jones*. "There's something important I want you to know. Your dad probably could have jumped overboard and swum away, like I did. But if he'd done that, we both would have died because nobody would have known we were out there. So your dad stayed in the wheelhouse and called the Coast Guard."

Noah is staring at me, and I'm having a hard time looking back. "Your dad saved my life."

Noah frowns. He picks up his hamburger slowly. "Did he want to marry you?"

"No. We were just friends."

"Why?"

"Why were we friends?"

"Why didn't he want to marry you?"

"He just didn't. Marriage is a special thing. We were happy being friends."

“How come my mom and dad didn’t get married? Were they just friends?”

This one’s tricky. I tell him they used to be more than friends, and then they became friends.

He puts what’s left of his hamburger down, takes the bun off, peels a pickle out of its mustard-ketchup goo, and places it carefully on the wrapper. Without looking at me, he says, “If you and my dad got married, you’d be my stepmom.”

That’s how I know how bad he’s hurting; he’s never said anything like this to me before. I take my time before I answer. “I’m not cut out for parenthood, Noah. But if I had to be someone’s stepmom, I’d want to be yours.”

He looks into my eyes with as much trust as he can give to anyone, and I think three words I haven’t used since my mother died. *I love you*. I would say them to him, but I’m afraid I haven’t got what it takes to make good on the promise they imply.

Noah takes something out of the pocket of his jacket. It’s a yellowish-white disk riddled with tiny veins and holes. Two inches in diameter, an inch thick, the edges smooth as glass.

“That’s nice,” I say. “Where’d you get it?”

“My dad. He gave me other stuff, too.”

“Where’d he get it?”

“Off a whale.”

“Is that what he told you?” It looks vaguely like it could have come from an animal, but I’ve never seen a bone like that. My guess is it’s some kind of rock. It’s obviously been cut and appears to have been polished.

Noah leans forward and whispers, “My dad fought a whale once. He got in a little boat and followed it and killed it with a harpoon. The whale didn’t die right away. It pulled my dad all over the world, but he hung on with all his might. The whale was bleeding the whole time and finally it bled to death, and my dad pulled it back to the ship. He

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stayed up all night cutting it into pieces, and he took some of its bones.

See?” He waves the ivory disk. “A whalebone.” He gives it to me.

When Noah was a baby, he had enormous dark blue eyes. His lips would pucker in tiny exhaled kisses, as though he couldn’t help sending the love that filled him into the world. We used to play a game together: We would sit face to face, he in a high chair, me in a kitchen chair. We would pass something—a rubber duck or ninja figure or some other little toy—back and forth for a long time while we smiled into each other’s eyes. This reminds me of those times. Only when I try to return the disk, he pushes it right back to me.

Maybe the kind of hero I described—the kind who radios for help—isn’t good enough. He needs one who wielded harpoons.

I turn the treasure slowly in my hand, inspecting it, respecting it. “Nice, Noah. Really nice.”

He grabs it and stuffs it in his jacket pocket, closes and buttons the flap, and looks around the restaurant at the people eating. Suddenly he’s a restless kid again, perked up by a hamburger, secure in his right to believe stories that comfort him and to ignore facts he can’t understand. There’s still some time until he has to do homework, and he says, “Hey, Pirio, after this can we go to your apartment and play dominoes?”