

The Lobster Woman

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Protagonists

ANN (72) became the first female lobster fisher in town when she got her licence twenty years back. Not long before this she had come to Stone Harbor with Carolyn, her younger partner, to create a new life after an academic career. But their grocery store venture failed and Carolyn suddenly left the confined community and Ann. Ann has found her salvation in a tightly structured daily routine ever since. She's opinionated, sarcastic, hard on herself and everyone else except her blue lobster, Mr Darcy, with whom she holds a one-sided conversation every afternoon in the garden. She avoids the other villagers but has their respect. As the novel unfolds Julie, and later Mina, too, get Ann to open up to some affection and engage with village life.

JULIE (54) is a spirited woman, loud, open and full of humour. She swiftly learned how to assert herself in this male-dominated community of lobster fishers. In her first life she'd wanted to be a pilot but a bad accident shattered that dream. Her training in the fishing community had been tough but she'd found in Stone Harbor a place to call home. She's something of a good fairy in the community, taking care of everyone, baking for the sick, as well as unapologetically pushing her way into Ann's previously solitary life, while herself still dealing with the loneliness created by the long-term psychological impact of her accident. Julie takes on Mina for the boat and teaches her lobster fishing. Julie falls for Nat Cooper, a widower who sees a future with her, but she's afraid of love.

MINA (28), a young woman full of self-doubt, is still only tentatively coming to terms with her past. She doesn't know where she belongs, her family fell apart after her brother's sudden death, their mother withdrew from everything and barely speaks to her even now. But it's in Stone Harbor that Mina first experiences unconditional warmth, a new sense of belonging, as well as the honesty and openness that a fishing community can't function without. And here at last she gets to understand what really happened that fateful summer of 1982 – helped by meeting up with Sam, the island

boy she'd once spent hours roaming the pine woods with and whose family was now even more damaged than hers. The closer they get to past events, the more their growing love threatens to fall apart once more.

Prologue

[...]

Chapter 1

Spring 2000

It was stormy when Mina came into her home during that first spring of the new millennium. Ann would always recall how Mr Darcy's antennae twitched wildly, as they did whenever the wind got up, while he sat near her on the grass, watching her smoke the after-work cigarette. Mr Darcy predicted a fair breeze that would make the harbour waves roar and the silver lobster atop the church tower spin.

It had been love at first sight when Ann had spotted him in one of her lobster-pots two years back. At first she wanted to throw him back in. He was nowhere near even the minimum weight accepted by the fishing authority for a sale. His shell shimmered blue. Ann knew right there that a lobster with such an exotic coloured shell had to be unique among the other two million of the species. She put him in a bucket and placed it in a corner of the cabin. Then later she took him home. She looked in the attic for the aquarium Carolyn had bought two decades ago for the goldfish who had then died suddenly when she'd left Ann. It wasn't that Ann hadn't fed them. It was as if they'd thought life not worth living without Carolyn. And Ann got that. She took a canister down to the harbour and brought back sea water, crossed Main Street and carried the container up the steep steps to her house to fill the aquarium. With great care she lifted the lobster from the bucket and placed him in the tank right next to a solitary fake plant. He lifted his antennae and swivelled them in all directions before moving slowly along the bottom, then stopped and stared at Ann. 'Tomorrow I'll bring you a few pebbles, mussels and sand, and the plant will go, that's a promise,' said Ann. 'And for now you're Mr Darcy. I think you're the type to start with a tough outer shell but when it falls away there's quite something underneath.'

[...]

This life of hers was highly ordered. Every evening she would cut three slices of bread, load them with turkey meat, salad and cheese, place them soft side up in a snap tin, add a couple of carrots and cucumber slices, then put it all in the fridge. She would set up the coffee machine, exactly half a litre of water in the jug and four scoops of ground coffee in the filter. Then bed. She would read three pages of one of the novels on loan from Linda Stratford at the library. She would set the alarm, turn out the light and without further ado sleep until three.

It was still dark when she went to the bathroom. She plunged her face in cold water, ran her fingers back through her short hair, smeared on a bit of sun cream, pulled on her old jeans and brown fleece, crossed the street to the jetty, greeting the fishermen only if she felt like it, untied her little boat and rowed out to her lobster ship, the 'Carolyn'.

When the sun slowly began to emerge above the horizon, she'd already been out at sea a good while, far from the other boats. The world belonged to her and that's how she liked it. She didn't believe in God but if he did exist this would be the moment when she'd admire his sense of beauty. But there was no doubting his ability to dump suffering on people. She emptied her pots, refilled and re-attached the bait bags and lowered them back into the deep. She owned two hundred lobsterpots and took out a hundred with her each time. Her cheeks were flushed and stinging from the easterly, she could taste the salt in the moist air and on her lips, and when she leaned over the side rail to hook in the buoys on her traps she caught a glimpse of the dark green depths beneath her. An intermittent pain shot through her back but she ignored it. At midday she took out a small cool bag from under the steering-wheel, opened her snap tin and bit into the bread. The boat rocked on the waves, the seagulls landed and took off like so many fighter planes.

Carolyn had never gone out with her on the boat. When their shop had gone bust in the early eighties, she'd thought Ann crazy to take up fishing at over fifty. When tourists saw Ann on the street, clad in baggy rubber trousers with bits of bait still stuck to them, an old shirt, a man's,

half hanging out, her hair unkempt, a cigarette in one of her battered hands, they'd turn and take a second look. For them she represented one of those fabulously weathered, authentic fisher folk. Carolyn had first met a very different Ann. Dresses, high-heels, handbags, her thick black hair knotted loosely in the nape of her neck.

But on board ship long hair had got in the way. She'd cut it off and stopped the colour. 'How the hell can you stand stinking of dead fish every evening?' asked Carolyn, ignoring the fact that with her lobsters Ann was earning for the two of them. And earning well. When Carolyn had left, Ann's reaction was that of a general at the passing out parade – expressionless face, straight back – followed by a thorough clean of Carolyn's room. She'd gone out, yelled into the wind but it hadn't helped. After two days her legs had given out, and somehow her heart, too, and she lay motionless on the sofa for a whole day. After that she just carried on. She wasn't the kind of woman to give in. From April to October she took the boat out. Always until 3pm. Every day except Sunday. She didn't seek out a new love. And she no longer wanted to be found.

Ann sat on the grass, looking at the first tulips nodding in the breeze, and drew on her cigarette while Mr Darcy nibbled at her right thumb. Visible in the far distance as a narrow strip on the horizon was Eagle Island, nothing beyond it but open sea. Dark clouds were gathering but she wasn't concerned. No boats were out. When a storm was brewing, people headed back to harbour, moored their boats, turned their backs to the wind and headed home. Not beach weather today, the tourists would say. The locals rarely went to the beach. Tyres crunched on her gravel run-in. She stubbed out her cigarette on the grass, dropped it into an old jam jar and got to her feet. Ellis Jones from Eagle Island was helping a young woman out of the back of his truck. She was soaked through, seaweed hung from her auburn hair and stuck to her arms, her skin glowed deep pink, with a tinge of purple. Ann hurried towards them. 'You're fishing your women out of the sea now, Ellis? Haven't you seen the small ad in 'Fishermen's News'? Women in town want to connect'

Ellis took no notice and nudged the girl towards her. 'You'll have to take her in, Ann. I found her on the beach when I took the dog, no idea how she got there but I can't spare the time. Got to collect my new car from the Billings workshop and then go straight back.'

'So that's why you thought you'd offload her here?'

'Where else?' shot back Ellis. 'Ann Pretchett, you're known for taking in any unusual finds from

the sea. Look at Mr Darcy.'

'At least she doesn't have a fish tail and silver plates on her boobs,' said Ann. 'I assume that's when you'd have taken her home alright.'

Ellis grinned and looked at the young woman. 'All the best,' he said to her. He climbed back onto the truck, turned and gave a brief toot of the horn. Ann studied the new arrival. Her green eyes were bright, her eyebrows flecked with slivers of mussel shell, and there was a graze across the top of her upper lip. 'Okay then,' said Ann, taking her gently by the arm and leading her into the little storm-porch behind her outside door. 'Stay here. I'll fetch you something to dry yourself with.'

Ann went upstairs and brought back a couple of hand towels which she handed to the young woman before going out into the garden and picking up Mr Darcy. She looked straight at him, saying: 'Mr Darcy, there's some kind of mermaid in the storm-porch and she's dripping all over the rug. What d'you think of that?' But Mr Darcy simply twitched his right antenna and stared at her. She put him in the aquarium. The young woman was still standing in the same spot, helpless and shivering. Ann took charge. 'Right, get those things off. All of them. Bathroom time.' In silence the girl did as she was told, took off her trousers and white blouse and dropped them on the rug. Then she followed Ann upstairs to the bathroom with its pale green washbasin, old-fashioned pink tiling and small shower cubicle with a plastic curtain. As Ann turned the cracked porcelain knobs the shower groaned and juddered into action. She tested the water. 'Warm enough,' she said. She left the bathroom and returned with a washed out T-shirt and some lacy silk underwear. 'You can wear these.' Noticing the young woman's surprise, she said, 'I know they don't look like they'd be mine. They're not. Someone left them here.' She jerked the door shut 'Anyway, what's your name?' she shouted through the closed door.

'Mina,' came the quiet reply.

Ann went downstairs to the telephone and dialled up Julie. Hugging the receiver with her lower jaw, she fished a cigarette out of the pack. Today, as an exception, a second one was a must. After the fourth ring, Julie picked up. 'You won't believe this. I've got a mermaid here.'

'Yeah, right. So what've you been smoking?'

'No, listen, I mean it. Ellis scooped her up from the beach and offloaded her here, with me.'

'Congratulations. It's a girl. Name?'

'Mina. And For Your Info: she doesn't cry, the eyes are open and she can even speak a bit. And she smells of seaweed, salt water and old mussels.'

'Freshly hatched, I reckon.'

'Seriously, though, she looks mid-twenties and is upstairs showering right now. I got out a few bits of mine for her to wear.' Ann hesitated. 'And some underwear of Carolyn's that I still had.'

'You kept her underwear?'

'I haven't had them next to me in bed since she left, if that's what you mean.'

'Nothing that's human is weird.'

'Could you come over tomorrow afternoon and talk to her?'

'Doesn't she speak one of your languages then?'

'You should know I don't much like diving into other people's lives. But you'd be okay with it.'

'Why are you here and where d'you want to go – you can ask her that, come on.'

'On top of that I've got to take the boat out early tomorrow and then I really need to get that mole on my arm looked at. It's getting bigger so I think I'll go over to the clinic in Portland tomorrow and have it checked out.'

'And with any luck she'll have gone by the time you get back, leaving nothing more than a slithery trail of seaweed off her fishtail in the hallway, or so you hope. Say nothing, turn away, drive off, and the problem vanishes into thin air. Hardly ever works like that, Ann. But of course, I'll come over tomorrow afternoon.'

Chapter 2

Spring 2000

The rain sounded like lead shot as it beat down on the roof. In the bushes outside her house sat the kind of squirrel Julie loathed, a fat greedy grey one, licking its own coat. It wasn't a boat day, she'd seen that at six the moment she'd looked out of the window. A leaden sky hung heavy over Stone Harbor. She went back to bed but couldn't sleep. Watson was snoring alongside. She'd got him from a rescue a couple of years back. Man's best friend, a dog. But he was old now and barely moved away from her bed. She reached across his body as it rose and fell in time with his breathing, and grabbed the list she'd put together yesterday evening. Dog food. Say sorry to the girl at the Donut Store. Lobster Ball.

Fifteen years ago, when she'd come out of the coma after her accident, life was full of complex rules she'd had to re-learn. She'd been blunt even before the accident. Her mother would reprimand her. 'That's enough, Julie.' Even now she'd sometimes slip into the old tone and mischoice of words, like yesterday when she'd called the Donut Store girl a slow-witted zombie with shit tattoos. But she'd learnt to apologise albeit with a certain lack of humility. She still thought she was right on that one.

She went into the bathroom and tripped on the towels she'd let drop yesterday evening and forgotten about. She was incapable of keeping order. Quite the opposite of Ann. She had a hook or a shelf for everything. As she smoothed in body lotion after her shower, she felt the fleshy contours of her belly and the scar that ran across it. She'd gained weight recently and her ribs were invisible beneath her ever increasing breasts. Whenever she tried to quash the emotions she'd not easily kept a rein on since the accident, she'd reach for sugary stuff. She'd have to lose a bit to get into the dress she'd bought months ago in Bangor and then buried at the back of the cupboard. But today the plan was to ask Malcolm Leary to accompany her to the Lobster Ball. He was one of the two bachelors in the village and not without reason. But you've got to start somewhere when you want to make a change in your life, thought Julie. The Ball was to take place in *Fisherman's Wharf*. There'd be a band. There'd be beer and home-distilled firewater. They'd all get smartened up, that much she knew, they'd dance, sweat, undo a few buttons, roll

up their sleeves and, if she was lucky, one of the wives would give her a nod and beckon her to a table while Malcolm, the alcohol coursing through his veins, would be busy fighting outside along with the others. Always a good excuse for that.

Even after three years in Stone Harbor Ann was still her only woman friend. In the beginning she'd really tried. Front doors were always left open and she'd step inside with a loud 'Hallo' and if nobody replied would sit down at the dining table and start leafing through any magazines lying there, do a crossword puzzle, make herself a tea, put out a second cup and wait. Two women, two tea-cups. Chat about children, bingo, lobster casserole, who's sick, who has died, that's how it was meant to go. But if nobody came she'd go inside the next house where a fisherman's wife might be working with her back turned, beating some cream or standing over the stove, and tap her on the shoulder and laugh if the woman cried out. This went on for a couple of weeks before she gave up. None of the women seemed to appreciate her spontaneous visits. With a tight-lipped smile they'd exchange a few words with her and indicate she'd do better to try a neighbour. But this was Scottish-Norwegian fishing aristocracy. Two centuries on the same clifftops. How could you, Julie Barker, ever have thought we'd all be waiting for someone like you?

[...]

She got in the car and parked right outside the bakery, a grey two-storey in the middle of narrow Main Street. As she and Watson stepped inside Karen's shop, they were hailed by Linda Stratford, the village librarian. Linda had positioned herself by the counter in such a way as to stop her husband seeing her if he drove by just as she was leaning forward to bite into her daily croissant with raspberry jam. Julie's regular spot was in the right-hand corner, just by the window. Karen pushed her a coffee across the counter. 'Rosemary Focaccia?' Julie nodded. She looked out of the window. A tall woman, her white-blond hair swept up, was crossing the street just in front of the bakery. She was wearing cowboy boots and a heavy, glitzy chain. 'Baubles round her neck, baubles on her feet, baubles everywhere,' she heard Linda Stratford mutter behind her. 'It was a whole lot better here before ex-bankers from New York began coming over, thinking they could open up a

hotel in a fishing village and turning men's heads with their high heels.'

'Would this be the envy of the dispossessed, Linda?' asked Julie.

And then she saw him, Nat Cooper, attempting to ram his truck into too small a parking spot. Using his bumper, he nudged forward the New York registered car in front of his, dropped back a little, then gave it another nudge, got out and looked with satisfaction at his own vehicle. He turned toward the bakery and waved. Julie winced slightly. Things were not so easy between them. There'd been a time when she'd gone out with him every day as ship's mate. Working together like this, they'd very much fallen into their own rhythm but then his wife, Ethel, had fallen ill and he no longer came to the harbour. 'Hey, you'll have to find someone else to sail out with,' he'd said to her on the phone as if she'd been a pet to be handed on. That's when she'd decided she would get her own boat and be completely independent of the moods and platitudes of the other fisher folk on whose boats she was now helping out again. That had been eight weeks ago. 'There's Nat over there,' said Karen. 'He doesn't look so good. D'you know how Ethel is?' Julie shook her head.

'She shouldn't take on so much,' said Linda Stratford all of a sudden. 'She's far too old to take in some random girl like this.'

'First off, it was Ellis who found her on the beach. And second, how can anyone be too old to help someone in dire need?' asked Karen.

'I presume you two are talking about Ann,' piped up Julie. Karen nodded. 'Village gossip.' Linda picked up the binoculars that were always at the ready on the window-shelf and focused them on Ann's garden the other side of the street. Maybe she'd get to see the lady of the sea. 'Ann's much too dangerous for such a youngster,' she said.

'What d'you mean by that?' asked Julie.

'You know darn well how she turned up here twenty years ago with the ten years younger live-in girlfriend who suddenly vanished,' Linda retorted. 'The whole village was baffled but Ann never said a word. Only yesterday I asked my husband why he went on bothering to say hello to a woman who's as cold as the sea he fishes every day.'

Julie took the measure of Linda. Hair twisted into a thin plait, brown lace-up shoes, boring beige tights, mouth set in a straight line.

'I was always against women fishing. It's men's work. A boat's no place for a lady. There aren't even any toilets on board,' pronounced Linda.

'So not all women are given to squatting on deck for a pee and then hosing it away. I could teach you, though, Linda,' Julie offered. Karen was trying hard not to laugh. Linda paid up and left the shop with a murmured farewell.

Julie liked Ann's gruff ways. Being polite was alien to her. Honest to the core, is how the fishermen described Ann. She'd ignored Julie at first. All the stuff about women at sea didn't interest her was Ann's brisk response when, after a year of greeting one another daily with a casual wave, Julie had suggested they go for a beer. After that Julie had kept out of her way. But one evening, after she'd rinsed out the empty bait chests and was going to the truck, Ann was suddenly there in front of her. 'You can eat at mine this evening.'

'Would it be okay tomorrow?' asked Julie. Ann just stared at her.

'Then I'd better wash my hands and come now,' said Julie. Ann turned and strode on ahead.

It was at the house that Julie saw Mr Darcy for the first time. He was sitting on the floor of his tank and didn't move. Ann saw her looking. 'That's Mr Darcy,' she said.

'Pets are a real support if you're alone,' said Julie.

Ann gave a shrug. 'Seems to me the point of having a pet is to teach young kids about death.'

'Okay. Talking of death, why have you invited me to dinner? Have you got cancer or something? D'you want me to buy your boat off you 'cos you haven't got long to go?'

'Sorry, back of the queue for that one, I've already promised it to someone else.'

'That clears that up then,' said Julie. And that was it.

They didn't know much about one another but each recognised a survivor when they saw one. From then on they would sometimes go together to the jetty and their boats of a morning. One of them taciturn, brusque, tall, muscular, the other bubbly, cute, agile, forthright with a preference for pink T-shirts with butterfly designs or rhinestone stars on them. Neither had been born here but had instead been washed up here by life, in this village of 476 souls – uninvited guests but staying anyway.

Chapter 3

Spring 2000

The first thing Mina saw when she woke after a restless night in this strange bed and opened the curtains was a weeping man with a cat in his arms. He carefully placed the cat in the back of his truck and drove off. A middle-aged woman in a red anorak with fairies embroidered on the back watched him go, shaking her head in disbelief. It was just before eight.

Power lines cut across the morning sky, a misty blend of grey and red, huge seagulls perching on them as if too heavy to fly. She lay back in the huge bed with its ornate ironwork and flaking paint. The wallpaper facing her gave off a silky gleam. Palm trees, gondoliers, colourful houses, lemons, orange trees. It felt like the room belonged to someone who would sooner have made a home anywhere but a mist-ridden fishing village in Maine. Overnight the noises made by the house had been scary. Beams creaking in the silence, the moan of the wind as it caught the roof. She'd pulled the white sheet over her head and tried to sleep. As each hour passed all she could do was toss and turn before falling into a dream as dawn broke. She woke up exhausted. Ever since that man had dropped her off like a stick of furniture at the home of this severe-looking woman with the deep, gruff voice, she had felt trapped as if in a child's snow globe, the muffled world crowding in on her through the glass.

The wind had got up as she'd climbed into her kayak yesterday. But she paddled ahead regardless, her arms tired and tingling, each breath coming faster. She was trying to pull her camera out from under the towel behind her seat when the kayak rolled over. She kicked herself free but went under. Moments later, or minutes, she couldn't tell, she found herself back on the beach, lying like a crab on its back, helpless. All she'd wanted was to photograph the small group of islands with the fir trees. She remembered them from kayaking during their last summer holiday in Maine. She'd sat behind her father in the kayak, fish jumping beside them. He still sometimes talked about that. But fragmented as if he'd allowed something to slip out from the back of his memory and wanted to push it back inside. Her mother would give him a doubtful look. 'More,' said Mina every time. 'Tell more about it all.'

‘There wasn’t any more,’ came the swift reply each time. As she got older, she stopped asking but she knew there had been more. Lightness and warmth and happiness. Her mother would let out a sigh. ‘The child is always full of questions. I don’t know what’ll become of her.’

And what had become of her? Mina Grey, who’d screwed up her Finals, still living at home because she went from one low-paid job to the next and couldn’t afford her own place. That’s what she had become, she was thinking, one of the quiet ones who go unnoticed, living neither a full life nor half a life and who was too useless even for kayaking. She felt her ribs one by one and gasped in pain. The man who’d found her on the beach had carried her with such care to his truck and gently set her down on the back bench. His Black Labrador had jumped up into the passenger seat and turned to look at her indifference. Inside the truck it smelt of oil and aftershave. The man asked her name. ‘Mina,’ she’d said. He took a long look in the rear view mirror as if searching for something in her face, then turned to rest his hand on the dog. ‘Come along with us. I think it’s best if I take you to Ann.’ Then he fell silent. Here in Maine you didn’t get involved in other people’s stuff. People might be surprised a young woman draped in seaweed was lying on the beach but they wouldn’t ask unnecessary questions.

Mina eased herself out of bed and pulled on the clothes Ann had left for her yesterday. Some trousers and a sweater that reached her knees. It smelt of dust and something fragrant, maybe old perfume. All was quiet. Ann seemed not to be home. She’d shown her the coffee machine the night before. ‘We’ll talk about the rest when I get back from the boat. Two house rules: Mr Darcy stays in the tank and the front door stays unlocked, only tourists lock doors here.’ Mina went to the kitchen, took a glass off the shelf, ran some water and drank as if she’d had nothing for days. On the kitchen table was a coffee cup, bread for toasting, and a pot of strawberry jam. The note left on a gold-rimmed plate read ‘Help yourself’.

Her mother used to spread cream cheese on bread for her every morning. That was back then, when things had still been the same. When Christophe would walk into the kitchen, she’d start to glow. Only when he was there was her world perfect. He could do no wrong. And was the source of Mina’s happiness, too. Slopping into the kitchen after sleeping late, he’d sniff at her

hair, hold his nose and say, 'My little skunk.' She'd hit out and thump him and he'd laugh as he fended her off, lifted her and sat her on his shoulders. But after that last summer on Eagle Island he'd stopped making anyone glow. Occasionally he'd run his hand through her hair and she'd see the old tenderness. But he could no longer meet anyone's gaze and she knew he wasn't really looking at her any more. And now he'd suddenly fall into rages and the more he raged at their parents, the more she tried to be quiet and good.

A few weeks after his death six months earlier, she'd found in his room a photo of him at half the age he'd been on the day of the motorbike accident. Sixteen. She remembered how they'd celebrated his birthday in their garden in Philadelphia just before setting off for Maine. Their mother had been trying to flatten his ever disobedient hair with spittle before the guests arrived. 'Get off me,' he'd hissed in disgust and Judith didn't dare touch him again. That photo showed the version of her and Christophe that she cherished deep inside. They'd been sitting in a boat on the water, she was looking straight at the camera as if trying to share her happiness with the whole world. That day had stuck in her mind like sand sticks to wet skin. She remembered poking out her tongue to capture the taste of salty air. Back then everything they wanted had felt within reach.

She could have stayed in Philadelphia and forgotten all that but thoughts of that day on the sea with her brother wouldn't go away. Something inside her wanted out, out of the stultifying silence of her parents' house. She wanted to feel the world again. So the day before she'd packed a bag and headed north-east. Towards a feeling and a taste perhaps never to be re-discovered.

She made herself a coffee and wandered through the house, mug in hand. Much of the furniture looked as old as the building itself, handed down from one owner to the next. She settled in a shabby rocking chair that had worn ruts in the floorboards. From the draughty sash window she saw a woman opening the door to a single story building. Mina noticed the sign above the door. Community Library. She pushed up the window and in the distance heard the long-toned fog horn.