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opening extract from

Troll Mill

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CHAPTER 1

What Happened on the Shore

The boat danced ungracefully in from the fishing grounds, dipping and rolling over lively waves at the mouth of the fjord. Her crew, a man and a boy, reached steadily forward and back, tugging their two pairs of oars through the choppy water.

The boy, rowing in the bows, looked up over his

companion's bent back. Out west beyond the islands, the wind tore a long yellow rift in the clouds, and the setting sun blinked through in stormy brilliance, splashing the water with fiery oils.

Dazzled, the boy missed his next stroke, slicing the oars through air instead of water. Braced to pull, he flew backwards off his seat into a tangle of nets and creels and a slither of fat, bright fish. He lay breathless as the boat heaved under his spine, hurling him skywards, then sinking away underneath as though falling through space.

"Resting?" teased his friend Bjørn. "Had enough rowing for one day?"

Peer laughed back from the bottom of the boat, long arms and legs sprawling. "Yes, I'm tired. I think I'll just stay here. Ouch!" Salt water slapped his face as the prow cut through a wave, and he scrambled up hastily with dripping hair, snatching at the loose oars.

"Ship them," said Bjørn over his shoulder. "I'll take us in." He leaned unhurriedly on his own pair of oars, and Peer knelt, clutching the slender bows, looking forwards at the land. The water under the boat lit up a cloudy green; over on the shore the pebbles glittered, and the sea-grass on the dunes glowed gold. The late sunlight turned the slanting pastures above the village to slopes of

emerald. High above all, the rugged peak of Troll Fell shone as if gilded against a sky dark as a bruise.

"Bad weather coming," said Bjørn, squinting at the sunset. The breeze stiffened, carrying cold points of rain. "But we'll get home before it catches us."

"Maybe you will," Peer said. "I'll get soaked on my way up the hill."

"Stay with us," offered Bjørn. "Kersten would love to see you. You can earn your supper by admiring the baby." He glanced round, smiling at Peer's sudden silence. "Come on. Surely you've got used to babies with little Eirik to practise on up at the farm? How old is he now?"

Peer calculated. "He was born last seedtime, just after Grandfather Eirik died, so... about a year. He certainly keeps Gudrun and Hilde busy. He's into everything."

"He's a fine little fellow, isn't he? It's sad his grandpa never saw him."

"Yes... although actually," said Peer, "I think he might have lost patience with the noise. Dear old Eirik, he was always grumbling, 'A poet needs peace and quiet!' Little Eirik screams such a lot. Babies! I never knew they were so much trouble."

"Ours is a good little soul," Bjørn said proudly. "Never cries."

"And how is Kersten?" Peer asked, his eye on the shore as they ran in past lines of black rocks. He crouched, tensing. Bjørn pulled a couple of hard strokes on one oar to straighten up.

"She's fine, thanks," he grunted, twisting round as the boat shot in on the back of a breaking wave. The keel knocked on the shingle and Peer sprang out into a welter of froth and seaweed. Bjørn followed and together they ran the boat higher up the stony beach.

"That was a good day's work!" said Bjørn. "Glad Ralf could spare you."

"I've been helping him plough," Peer explained, "but we've got the seed in now and lambing's nearly over. So he said I deserved a holiday."

"It's been nice to have company." Reaching into the boat, Bjørn hooked his fingers into the gills of a heavy, shining cod and hefted it. "There's plenty of eating on that one. Take it back with you." He handed it over. "Or will you stay?"

Cradling the fish awkwardly, Peer glanced around. The brief sunset flare was over. The rising wind whipped strands of sea-stiffened fair hair across his face. Loose swirls of cloud were descending over Troll Fell. The fjord disappeared under a grey sea fret, and restless waves slapped jerkily against the rocks.

"I'll stay," he decided. "Ralf and Gudrun won't be worried, they know I'm with you." Absurdly, he hugged the fish, smiling. Three years ago he'd been a friendless orphan, and he could still hardly believe that he had a family now, who cared about him.

"Good choice!" said Bjørn cheerfully. "We'll ask Kersten to fry that fish for us, then, and we'll have it with lots of warm bread and hot sizzling butter. Are you hungry?"

"Starving." Peer licked his lips.

Bjørn laughed. "Then hurry! Go on ahead while I finish up here. Off with you! Here comes the wet."

Cold, stinging rain swept across the beach as he spoke, darkening the stones. It drove into Peer's face as he dashed across the clattering shingle, dodging boulders and jumping over inlets where the tide swirled and sloshed. It was fun, pitting himself against the weather. Soon he came to the channel where the stream ran down to the sea. Beside it, the path to the village wound up through the sand dunes.

Rain scythed through the long wiry grass, switching his skin and soaking through his clothes in cold patches. Tiring, he slowed to a plod, looking forward to sitting snugly by the fire and chatting to Kersten while she cooked. The fish was a nuisance to carry though, slippery

and unwieldy. He nearly dropped it and stopped to hoist it up. It slithered through his arms. He tried shoving it inside his jerkin, but the head and tail stuck out. Wet and shivering, he began to laugh.

This is silly, he thought, *I'm nearly juggling. What I need is a piece of string, or maybe a stick to skewer it on. I... what's that?*

Footsteps thudded and splashed on the path above him. In a flurry of flying hair and swirling cloak, a woman ran headlong out of the mist and slammed into him. Peer dropped the fish and grabbed at the woman, staggering. His fingers sank deep into her arms as they struggled for balance. She was gasping, her heart banging madly against him, her breath hot in his face. He tried to push her off and found his hands tangled in her wet hair. Her hood fell back.

"*Kersten!*" Cold fright shook Peer's voice. "What's wrong?"

She clutched him fiercely. "Is Gudrun still giving suck?"

Peer gaped. "What?"

She shook his arm angrily. "Is Gudrun still suckling?" She threw back a fold of her huge cloak. It flapped heavily in the wind, slapping his legs like wet hide. In the crook of her arm, wrapped in a lambskin—

The baby? Peer blinked in horror. But she was thrusting it at him; he had to take it: little light arms and

legs waved in the rain. He looked desperately to cover its head and she pushed a blanket into his arms. She was speaking: words he didn't understand.

"Take her – to Gudrun – Gudrun can feed her—"

"Kersten," Peer croaked. "What's happened? Where are you going?"

She looked at him with eyes like dark holes. "Home."

Then she was past him, the cloak dragging after her. He snatched for it. Sleek wet fur tugged through his fingers. "Kersten! Stop!"

She ran on down the path, and he began to run too, but the baby jolting in his arms slowed him to long desperate strides.

"Kersten!" Rain slashed into his eyes. His feet skated on wet grass, sank into pockets of soft sand. She was on the beach now, running straight down the shingle to the water. Peer skidded to a crazy halt. He couldn't catch her. He saw Bjørn, still bending over the boat doing something with the nets. Peer filled his lungs and bellowed, "*Bjørn!*" at the top of his voice. He pointed.

Bjørn's head came up. He turned, staring. Then he flung himself forwards, pounding across the beach to intercept Kersten. And Kersten stopped. She threw herself flat and the wet sealskin cloak billowed over her, hiding her from head to foot. Underneath it, she

continued to move in heavy lolloping jumps. She must be crawling on hands and knees, drawing the skin cloak closely around her. She rolled. Waves rushed up and sucked her into the water. Trapped in those encumbering folds, she would drown.

"Kersten!" Peer screamed. The body in the water twisted, lithe and muscular, and plunged forward into the next grey wave.

Bjørn was racing back to his boat. He hurled himself on it, straining to drive it down the shingle into the water, wrenching the bows round to point into the waves.

"Bjørn!" Peer cried into the wind. Spray filled his mouth with salt. He stammered and spat. "Your baby... your baby!"

Bjørn jumped into the boat. The oars rattled out and he dug them into the water with savage strokes, twisting his body to scan the sea. Peer heard him shout, his voice cracking, "Kersten! Kersten, come back..." The boat reared over lines of white breakers and was swallowed by rain and darkness.

Peer stared. Like a speck in his eye, a sleek head bobbed in the water. He ran wildly forward. It was gone. Then he saw another – and another, rising and falling with the swell. Swift dark bodies swept easily between wave and wave.

"Seals!" he whispered.

In his arm the baby stirred, arching its back and thrusting thin fists into the rain. Peer clutched it in dismay. Clumsily he tried to arrange its wrappings with his free hand, dragging the blanket up over its arms. It seemed tiny, much younger than little Eirik up at the farm. He was terrified of dropping it.

Kersten was gone, lost in the vast sea. Why? Bjørn had gone, searching after her over the wild waters. Where? Even the seals had gone now, he saw, leaving the empty waves toppling in one after another to burst on the shore in meaningless foam.

The baby's eyes were tightly shut, but a frown fluttered across its small face. The mouth pursed and it moved its head as if seeking something to suck. Soon it would be hungry. Soon it would cry.

Peer's teeth chattered. He shuddered all over from cold and shock. He fumbled jerkily inside the blanket for one of the baby's small fists. It felt like ice, and he poked it gently. Tiny reddened fingers clenched and twitched. Was it a boy or a girl? He couldn't remember. Didn't babies die if they got too cold?

Gudrun, he thought. *I've got to get it to Gudrun. Kersten said.*

Holding the baby stiffly across his chest, he plodded up the shingle, turning his back on the shore and the

relentless turmoil of exploding breakers. He trudged up the path through the dunes. The sound of the sea was muffled and he left the spray behind, but the keen rain followed, soaking into his shoulders and arms, trickling down his back. The first house in the village was Bjørn's. The door stood wide open, and rain was driving in. Peer hesitated, and then stepped quickly inside. He pushed the door shut, shivering.

The fire was out. The dark house smelled of cold, bitter ashes. Angry tears pricked Peer's eyelids. He remembered Kersten's warmth and gaiety and good cooking. Whatever had gone wrong?

Still holding the baby, he blundered across the room and cracked his shins on something wooden that moved. It swung back and hit him again, and he put a hand out to still it. A cradle.

Thankfully, Peer lowered the baby into the cradle and stood for a moment, trying to make his brain work. What now? Did anyone else in the village have a young baby? No. Gudrun was the only person who could feed it. *But what will Bjørn think if he comes home, and the baby's gone? Should I wait for him? But he might not be back for ages. He might capsize, he might never come home at all...*

Peer crushed down rising panic. *When he does come, he'll be cold,* he told himself sternly. *He'll need to get warm.*

At least I can light the fire.

It was the obvious, the sensible thing to do, and he groped his way to the ledge where Bjørn kept his strike-a-light, and a box of dry wood shavings. Clumsy in the dark, he knocked the box to the floor and had to feel about for the knob of flint and the crescent-shaped steel striker. He scooped a handful of shavings into the hearth and struck flint and steel together repeatedly, showering sparks. The wood shavings caught. Wriggling red-hot worms appeared in the darkness, and Peer blew, coaxing them into clear flames. The room glimmered into view. With a sigh of relief he grabbed a handful of kindling, and carefully fed the blaze with twigs and branches. The fire nibbled them from his fingers like a live, bright animal. When at last it was burning steadily and giving out heat, he got stiffly to his feet.

The house had only one room and little furniture. The firelight picked out a few details and crowded the rest with shadows. It gleamed here on a polished wooden bowl, there on a thin-bladed sickle hanging on the wall. Peer wandered about. In a corner stood Bjørn and Kersten's bed, the rough blankets neatly folded. He felt like an intruder. And there was nothing to show why Kersten had suddenly rushed out of the house, carrying her baby.

His foot came down on something hard. It clinked. He picked it up, his fingers exploring the unusual shape before he held it into the light. A small iron key on a ring.

A key? His eyes flew to the darkest corner of the room where a big wooden chest stood, a chest for valuables, with a curved lid that Bjørn always kept padlocked shut.

It was open now, dragged out crookedly from the wall, the padlock unhooked and the lid hurled back. Peer threw himself on his knees and plunged his arms into the solid black shadow that was the interior, feeling about into every corner. But whatever Bjørn normally kept there was gone. The chest was empty.

Bjørn's been robbed. Peer got to his feet, his head spinning. *Is that why Kersten was so upset? But no; it doesn't make sense. She'd tell Bjørn, not run into the sea. She'd have told me! And who could have done it?* He tried to imagine robbers arriving, forcing Kersten to find the key, open the chest...

It still didn't make sense. Trollsvik was such a small place, the neighbours so close. Kersten need only scream to raise the entire village. And he couldn't imagine what Bjørn might own that anyone would want to steal. He sat down on a bench, his head aching, longing for Bjørn to come.

At last he gave up. He banked the fire up with logs and peat, and bent to scoop the baby out of the cradle. It was awake, and hungry. It had crammed its tiny fingers into its mouth and was munching them busily. Peer's heart sank.

"I haven't got anything for you!" he told it, as if speaking to his dog, Loki. "Come on – let's get you wrapped up." He grabbed an old cloak from a peg behind the door, and as he bundled it around them both, the baby looked straight into his eyes.

It didn't smile – Peer didn't know if it was even old enough to smile. It gazed into his face with the most serious and penetrating of stares, as if his soul were a well and it was looking right down to the very bottom. Peer looked back. The baby didn't know about robbers, or the wild night outside, or its missing parents. It didn't know that it might die, or grow up an orphan. It didn't even know it needed help. It knew only what was right here and now: the hunger in its belly and Peer's arms holding it, firmly wrapped and warm, and his face looking down at it. For this baby, Peer was the only person in the world. He drew a shaky breath.

"They left you," he said through gritted teeth. "But *I* won't. You come with me!" Pressing the baby to his shoulder, he elbowed the door open and strode furiously out into the pitch-black night.