

Pirates, Prowlers, and Cherry Pie

by

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Chapter 1

Exiled

Fiona Smith folded her arms over her chest and scowled at the surrounding cars. As the ferry maneuvered up to the Mukilteo dock, sea gulls and crows wheeled and squawked above the crammed parking lot. In less than ten minutes, her dad would drive their car onto the ferry and it would be too late to turn around.

“Worst summer plans, ever,” Fiona muttered.

“Not what any of us wanted,” her dad agreed.

Frowning, Fiona twisted her fiery red hair into a tight ponytail. If she wasn’t able to change her dad’s mind about this looming exile, the windy gusts on the ferry would snarl her corkscrew curls into a massive knot.

“Dad, we need to go back home and think this through,” Fiona urged desperately. “Explore all our options...”

Her voice faltered at her dad’s look. “I don’t think we’ve ignored any options,” he said. “You

may not like it much, but this plan will ensure your mom gets well.”

“But without her job, we’re going to be seriously broke,” Fiona protested.

Her dad’s hands tightened on the steering wheel. “We’ll worry about money later, kiddo. Right now, we worry about your mom getting the medical treatment and rest she needs.”

Fiona drummed her fingers on the door handle. Desperation made her mind click along even faster. There had to be another way – one that didn’t send her into exile at her horrible Aunt Irene’s house.

“I know,” she said brightly. “Suppose I get a job picking blueberries? They hire twelve-year-olds. I’d be busy all day so Mom could rest up, plus there’d be all the yummy fresh fruit we can eat. It’s a win-win! Can’t we just go home?” She looked hopefully at her father.

Even as he smiled, Robert Smith’s eyes looked exhausted. “Is this plan twenty-three or twenty-four? I’ve lost count.”

“I just want to help,” Fiona pleaded.

“I know.” Her dad gave her a quick hug. “The offer’s appreciated, Funny-face, but going to your aunt’s for a few weeks is really the best way to help.”

Fiona’s shoulders sagged. “Right.”

The ferry's ramp clanged down and disgorged a stream of cars and people. Most of them would drive to Seattle, thirty miles south of Mukilteo. If she'd been old enough to drive, Fiona thought, she could have stayed home and driven her mom to the weeks of appointments that lay ahead of her.

"Are you sure you have everything you need?" Her dad put the car in gear.

Fiona nodded. "Yup. I'll be fine."

"That's my girl."

As they drove onto the ferry, Fiona stared out the window, trying to mentally send her mom a picture of the white gulls soaring against the blue sky. The hospital walls might be in the way, but Fiona was determined to keep trying. Mom needed good thoughts while being treated for the cancer.

"Dad, maybe I could..."

"No, Fiona."

Her dad parked the car and together they went up the metal stairway to the open deck on the passenger level.

Clean, salty air whooshed past, whipping Fiona's hair loose from the scrunchie. She pulled curly strands from her mouth and wrinkled her nose. Her thirteen-year-old cousin, Lisa, never had messy hair...or messy anything. After a few tugs, Fiona gave up. So what if she arrived at

her aunt's looking like a tornado had spit her out? Who cared if perfectly perfect Lisa rolled her eyes and made snarky comments?

"I'm going up front," Fiona said. Her father nodded.

The engine growled softly as the boat slid from its mooring. Cormorants ruffled their black feathers and watched curiously from huge wooden pylons. The shoreline shrank away. Fiona leaned on the ferry railing, loving the bite of wind on her face, remembering how this terrible trip had started.

First, there had been the scary family conference three weeks ago when her parents had explained that Mom was really sick. Mom said that she'd have to spend most of the summer either in the hospital or resting up from the treatments she was going to have.

"I'll help," Fiona said immediately. "I'll do the housework."

"I'll cook," her ten-year-old brother, Jimmy, offered. "I make awesome scrambled eggs."

Dad drummed his knuckles on the edge of the table and Mom looked like she wanted to cry. Then they dropped the rest of the bad news. They'd already talked to Mom's sisters, Rachel and Irene. As soon as school was out, Jimmy was invited to Aunt Rachel's and Fiona would go to Aunt Irene.

“All right!” Jimmy yelled.

Fiona looked from her mom to her dad. “Aunt Irene?” Her voice sounded kind of strangled.

Dad’s eyes warned her. “It would be a big help to your mom,” he said, “knowing that all she has to concentrate on is getting better.”

“Right.” Fiona shot a look at her mom. Even though she was smiling, her mother’s face looked like a rubber mask – the kind with grey bags under the eyes and splotchy cheeks.

Fiona took a deep breath. “It’ll be great. I’ll swim every day in Aunt Irene’s new pool...and, um, probably hang out with all Lisa’s friends.”

“Thanks, sweetie.” Mom reached across the table and squeezed her daughter’s hand. Fiona smiled and squeezed back.

But afterwards, Jimmy and Fiona had their own family conference in Fiona’s chaotic bedroom.

“What a bummer,” Jimmy said, but then he grinned. “Remember three years ago when we painted graffiti all over Lisa’s bathroom with Scott’s toothpaste?”

Fiona giggled. “Served her right. She gave Scott my *Beach Babe* doll to play headhunter with. The little jerk stuck its head on a stick where the tide comes in.”

“It was a really stupid doll.”

“True, but that’s not the point.”

Jimmy shrugged. “What’re you going to do?”

Fiona sighed and threw herself dramatically backwards onto the bed. “Survive.”

“Pay them back double for every rotten trick,” Jimmy advised. “Maybe that way they’ll leave you alone.”

“Yeah, right.” Even to Jimmy, she wouldn’t admit the sick feeling in her stomach. Every time she had spent even an afternoon at her aunt’s, either her cousins had bullied her or she’d accidentally ended up in six kinds of trouble. She just didn’t get her cousins or her aunt. At their house, Fiona broke rules she hadn’t even known existed.

If her mom hadn’t been so sick, Fiona would’ve yelled, begged and stormed rather than go to Aunt Irene’s. What was she going to do there anyway? Lisa was too cool to want her around and Scott was such a pain. Fiona didn’t want to be anywhere near either of her cousins.

“Make a plan,” she’d told herself firmly. “You can make this work, Fiona Smith.”

Determined, she went online to find out what fun things there were to do on the island. Boutiques and beaches. She didn’t have any money and Aunt Irene would never let her

go off to the beach by herself. There were a couple of good pizza places – definitely a plus. But even if she had the money, she couldn't spend half the summer eating pizza.

As she clicked through an events page, Fiona ended up on the local news site.

Break-ins plague Whidbey island!

“Fantastic,” Fiona muttered and with a small surge of hope, hurried downstairs to tell her dad.

“The robberies are right around where Aunt Irene lives,” she pointed out. “I hope Mom won't worry about me being safe there.”

“Nobody's going to rob their house. They have an alarm system.” Tiredly, Dad put his book aside. “And your mom can't get better if she's worrying about you being home by yourself.”

“I'm twelve, not a baby.”

“That's why I know I can count on you to cooperate.” He rubbed his hand over his face.

With real heroism, Fiona kept her mouth shut.

A few nights later, after reading by flashlight for way too many hours, Fiona had sneaked downstairs for a snack. When she saw the lights were still on in the kitchen, she

hesitated – her parents should’ve been asleep by now. Fiona chewed a corkscrew of hair, then crept closer.

Her mom sounded near tears. “But Bob, what about all these bills? What are we going to do?”

“I’ll put in for some overtime,” Dad said. “I promise I’ll work everything out. I don’t want you to worry.”

The tone of his voice said he didn’t know how he’d work it out. Fiona sagged against the wall. It made her burn that there was no way for her to help her family – except to leave.

The kitchen chairs scraped. Fiona retreated back upstairs.

“I could’ve gotten a job,” she muttered as she got into bed. “Twelve...nearly thirteen... isn’t too young to get a job.”

Too hungry to sleep, she stared at the dark ceiling, planning how she could make a lot of money. When she finally drifted off, her dreams tumbled over robbers carting away pieces of her house while she stood frozen, unable even to scream.

And despite all her ideas, she hadn’t been able to make a single plan that would work.

This morning, the first day of summer vacation, they’d dropped Jimmy at Aunt Rachel’s cramped apartment. Fiona had helped

tote her brother's duffel and sports equipment into Ryan's room. Their eleven-year-old cousin had already cleared off the top bunk and made arrangements for Jimmy to go on a bike trek with his friends.

As Fiona and her dad got back into the car, Aunt Rachel had hugged her niece. "I wish there was room for you, honey. I'd have liked having a girl around for the summer."

Fiona wished they'd had room too. Aunt Rachel liked to have fun.

Not like Aunt Irene. She and Uncle Harold, nine-year-old Scott the brat, and thirteen-year-old Lisa the snob, lived in a huge, gorgeous house on Whidbey Island. Fiona would have rather slept on the sofa at Aunt Rachel's.

As Fiona gloomily thought about the miserable summer ahead of her, a sea gull swooped by the ferry deck, squawking for handouts. Fiona jumped and then laughed at herself. The shore was a lot closer now, looking so much like a postcard picture, Fiona couldn't imagine how a robber could fit in. Actually, she couldn't imagine how she was going to fit in either.

As the ferry nosed into the Clinton dock, Fiona and her Dad went back to the car.

"How far is it now?" Fiona asked as they drove onto the island.

“About ten minutes or so to Langley. The house is just outside town, overlooking the water.”

For the next few minutes the car headed up the road to the houses on the ocean bluff, then slowed for the turn into a long driveway edged by two fieldstone pillars. A carved wooden sign, *Vickers Villa*, hung from a post.

While her Dad lifted her bags from the trunk, Fiona took a look around. At one side of the wide lawn, a man with dirty blonde hair was pulling weeds from the carefully planted flowerbeds. He stopped working for a moment to stare at Fiona. She waved. He turned his back as if he hadn't seen her.

With a shrug, Fiona looked up at the house – it was the same as she remembered from the day of the toothpaste war. Big and showy. Over to her right, Fiona spotted dapples of sunlight reflected through a row of windows.

“That must be where the new pool is,” she told her dad.

He shut the trunk of the car. “Harold’s done pretty well for himself. I wouldn’t mind a house like this.”

“Take your pick!” Fiona pointed at the long row of grand new homes crowding the bluff. “No wonder they’re having so many robberies around here. Everybody’s rich!”

Her dad smiled. "Will you like being one of the upper class, Funny-face?"

"I guess I'll find out."

He rang the bell and a moment later the door opened. Aunt Irene, plump and fashionably dressed, blinked her eyes nervously and smiled at them.

"Come in...come in," Aunt Irene greeted them. Fiona inhaled a cloud of expensive perfume.

"How's Nancy?" Aunt Irene asked.

Fiona's dad smiled. "She's doing okay, and she said to thank you again for helping us out with Fiona."

"We're just glad we could do something." Aunt Irene turned to her niece. "It will be lovely to have you here. And Lisa's thrilled, too...Lisa!" she called.

"I'm on the phone!" Lisa's voice echoed from another room.

"Fiona's here!"

There was no answer.

"Oh, dear...well, everything's ready for you..." She glanced anxiously at her niece. "I'm afraid Scott is spending the afternoon at a friend's, but I insisted Lisa stay home and wait until you arrived, Fiona. And I've told her that she's to take you along with her everywhere...."

Fiona felt her face heat up. Guaranteed now that Lisa would make the summer horrible.

“Let’s have a cool drink on the patio. I’ll get Marcus to carry your bags upstairs.”

“I can do it,” Fiona said. “Who’s Marcus?”

“Our housekeeper’s son. He’s a nice boy.” She spotted her daughter walking slowly toward them, her phone still in hand, her eyes firmly on the screen. “Oh, good. Lisa, can you show Fiona where to take her things? Robert, we’ll get that cool drink. Harold is around here somewhere...”

Still talking, Aunt Irene led Fiona’s dad toward the back of the house.

The girls stared awkwardly at each other for a moment, and then Lisa shoved her phone in her pocket and picked up one of Fiona’s bags. “You’re sleeping upstairs with me.” She started toward the curving oak stairway, and then turned around. “I’m really sorry about your mom.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“But don’t think I’m going to spend my summer baby-sitting you.”

“I’m twelve,” Fiona snapped. “I don’t need baby-sitting.”

“Good.” For the first time her cousin smiled. “This way.” She led Fiona upstairs and into the first door at the top.

The bedroom was huge, with blue carpet and white and blue wallpaper. The twin beds had carved oak headboards and frilly white bedspreads. Fiona dropped her bags, made a bee-line to the dormer window between the beds, and kneeled on the window seat. "This is incredible."

The Cascade Mountains rose mistily blue in the distance. The green lawn ended in a bluff that dropped down to a wide beach where the ocean lapped and surged over the golden sand.

Lisa leaned on the windowsill beside Fiona. "That's the Saratoga Passage. Pirates used to sail around here and hide in the San Juan Islands."

"Real pirates?" Fiona wasn't sure whether her cousin was setting her up.

"Yes. Sometimes people even find gold coins washed up on the beaches."

"Like from buried treasure?" Fiona tried to keep her voice neutral. Buried treasure would be amazing.

Lisa nodded. "In fact, about ten years ago a couple of university researchers used the library's old maps to track down a pirate base. They told Dad they found a broken up pirate chest."

"That is so cool." Fiona rested her chin in her hands and gazed out the window. "I can

just see it – ghost ships sailing under the moon. Year after year...searching for their lost treasure....”

“Get a grip,” Lisa retorted. “And don’t forget this room is mine. Keep your things on your side and we’ll get along.”

She turned on her heel and left.

“I can’t wait.” Fiona looked back out over the water and tried to send a mind picture of the mountains and blue waves to her mother.

Somehow, she didn’t think she got through.