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SIREN

SUICIDES

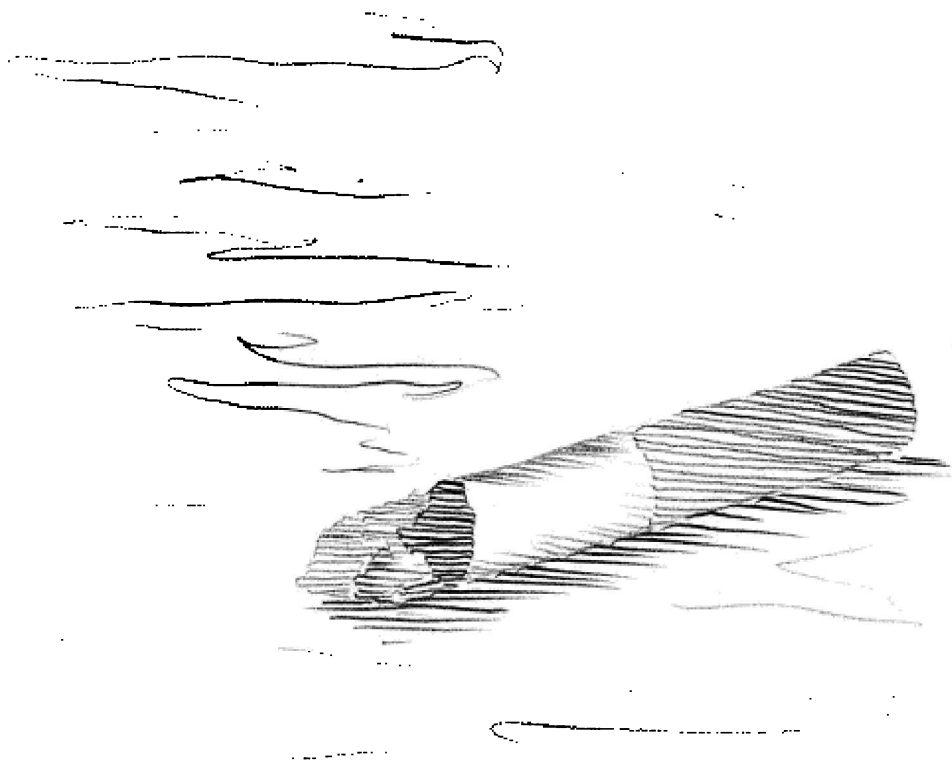
I CHOSE TO DIE

BOOK 1 OF THE SIREN SUICIDES TRILOGY

KSENIA ANSKE

SIREN SUICIDES

I CHOSE TO DIE



**BY
KSENIA ANSKE**

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my daughter, Anna Milioutina, who gave me a new purpose in life when I became a mother at eighteen. At sixteen, I escaped the violence of my home life by running away. I was a suicidal teenager, the result of an abusive father. Then, at seventeen, I got pregnant. Giving birth to a baby girl drove the suicidal thoughts out of my mind and filled me with new life. My daughter illustrated every chapter and created the cover art for *Siren Suicides*, and I am forever grateful for her.

This book is also dedicated to my boyfriend, Royce Daniel, who believed in me as a writer and helped me finish this book by painstakingly reading and commenting on my writing every single day. At thirty-three, I was suicidal again, from revisiting my adolescence and discovering that my father sexually abused me. Becoming a writer and writing out my pain in *Siren Suicides* gave me the will to live once more.

Above all, this book is dedicated to every single human being who has ever wanted to take his or her life and leave this world. If you are thinking about killing yourself, please, don't. Life is beautiful, and it's even more beautiful with you in it. It might seem like there is no other way out at times, but, trust me, it will pass. Hang on, hang on to me, hang on to this book. It gets better. There is love everywhere, if only you're willing to stretch out your hand and ask for help. I know how hard it is; I know that it's nearly impossible. I know how painful it seems to continue living in your body, continuing an existence that you hate. Please, I beg you, ask for help. I know you don't want to, I know you don't believe anyone cares. I do. E-mail me at kseniaanske@gmail.com, tweet to me at [@kseniaanske](https://twitter.com/kseniaanske), friend me on Facebook as [Ksenia Anske](https://www.facebook.com/Ksenia-Anske), and I will respond back.

If you'd rather talk with someone anonymously, you can also call the US Suicide Prevention line at 1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433) or visit <http://www.suicide.org/>.

I will offer this book for free, forever, as a download from my website, <http://www.kseniaanske.com/>. Why? Because I have a secret wish. I wish that my novel will help save a life, or two, or more.

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“The Sirenes (Sirens), daughters of the River Achelous and the Muse Melpomene, wandering away after the rape of Proserpina [Persephone], came to the land of Apollo, and there were made flying creatures by the will of Ceres [Demeter] because they had not brought help to her daughter. It was predicted that they would live only until someone who heard their singing would pass by. Ulysses [Odysseus] proved fatal to them, for when by his cleverness he passed by the rocks where they dwelt, they threw themselves into the sea. This place is called Sirenides from them, and is between Sicily and Italy.”

— Pseudo-Hyginus, *Fabulae* 141 (trans. Grant)
(Roman mythographer C2nd A.D.)

Chapter 1



Brights' Bathroom

I chose to die in the bathroom because it's the only room in the house I can lock. Besides, water calms me, and I have to be calm to pull the plug on my life. Nothing would irritate my father more than finding the fully clothed corpse of his sixteen-year-old daughter on the morning of her birthday, floating in his beloved antique, carved-marble tub—a ridiculous Bright family relic. Each of its corners is held up by one of four sirens, their mouths open in lethal song, their hands turned up in worship to the Siren of Canosa, a bronze faucet figurine. How fitting. Ailen Bright, the deceased, guided into the afterlife by a tap. *Do you hear me, Papa? This is my morbid joke.*

Six years ago today, on a rainy September morning, my mother jumped off the Aurora Bridge. Something terrible must have happened, because she was afraid of heights. I'd heard Papa scream at her, heard her run out of their bedroom and slam the front door. I hadn't seen much of my mom during my childhood, but after that day, I'd lost her forever. For this, and for all of the pain he's caused me, I want to hurt my father the only way I can—by sending him a message as twisted as his soul. By ending my life in the very place he delivered me, on a rainy September morning in 1993.

In some perverted sense, as far back as I can remember, the four marble sirens and the bronze one gave me more comfort than my parents. They were the five sisters I never had. While normal girls spent their free time playing outside, I was locked in our bathroom for punishment, talking to inanimate creatures for hours. Having memorized entire passages from Homer's *The Odyssey*, I was able to call each siren by her proper name. Homer would turn in his grave if he'd heard me. His story mentions only three sirens. I didn't like their names, so I gave them names I liked from other books.

Pisinoe, the one with the persuasive mind, is the youngest of the five. We both want a pet, so I like her best for that. Teles is the perfect one; her cute, yet slightly chubby, face makes me like mine so much better, thank you. Raidne symbolizes improvement. With hair that's long and curly, it's the envy of my life; my hair resembles a spaghetti factory explosion on best days, and on worst, it's dubbed "chicken-feathers" by the kids at school. Ligeia is the shrill one, perhaps due to her voice. Her perfect breasts were the source of my secret admiration until the day I understood that being called flat-chested was my fate. Yeah.

These are my four marble sisters. All of them, except for Canosa, stand about two feet tall. Their bare bodies protrude from four corners of the tub, their knees on the floor, their arms spread wide as if they're the wings of birds getting ready to fly.

The tub is a central feature in our large bathroom; its plumbing was hidden beneath the floor, and its lack of a shower curtain adds to its authenticity. At the head of the tub, with long hair covering her body and legs dangling from the rim, sits the Siren of Canosa, or Canosa for short. My big bronze sister. Although she stands only one foot tall, she's the boss. Her left hand holds the faucet, and her right arm is raised over her head in a gesture of mourning. She's the main funerary siren whose job as a mythological creature is to lead the souls of the dead into afterlife, heaven, or hell. Three very nice destinations. Pick your favorite while you hold her hand. Right. But I'm forgetting to count.

Eight. Nine. Ten.

Ten seconds since I took the plunge, stepping into the bathtub full of water, wearing faded jeans and my favorite blue hoodie. Big white letters spell *Siren Suicides* across the front; they're my favorite band, because their music kicks ass.

Blue is my favorite color. Three is my favorite number. It takes three minutes for an average person to drown. Only two minutes and fifty seconds left. I hold my breath.

My clothes balloon in a funny way before getting soaked completely, feeling oddly warm and clingy. I close my eyes because the chlorine in the water burns them. Now my nose starts burning too, water making its way up my nostrils as if wanting to drive a nail through my

head. I press my hands into the sides of the tub to keep myself from floating up. *I can't do this, I can't. I'm scared.* I sit up and gasp, grabbing my head with both hands to prevent it from spinning. No, to prevent the bathroom around me from spinning. Water rushes down my face. Wet cotton sticks to my skin in thick, soggy layers. *Smoking a joint wasn't enough. Did I absolutely have to drop a tab of acid on top of it? Stupid coward.*

I hear the doorknob as it turns once to the right. Then, after a puzzled pause, it turns to the right several more times.

Click-click-click.

"Ailen, is that you in there?" Papa's voice reaches me as if from some future that I didn't think would ever happen. Distorted and unreal, it strikes my ears like a knife that has a tricky way of cutting deep into my heart, down my abdomen, and then all the way to my toes. My muscles constrict as if freeze-dried. My heart attempts to beat through layers of ribs, jumping on an elevator of fear and exploding in my head with a pounding migraine.

Who else would it be? I want to answer. Another thought pushes it aside. *Shit, he shouldn't be up so early. Damn it.* And another thought. *I should've jumped off the bridge like mom. Why the fuck am I so afraid of heights? Is it genetic? What do I do now? The whole bathroom stinks like weed.*

He knocks on the door. I hold onto my knees, watching the early morning light stream through the window, listening to his footsteps. He's probably checking my room to make sure it's not some thief who decided to take a bath after getting tired of robbing our house during the night.

A few minutes and he'll be back.

All at once, the impossibility of facing my father—and the impossibility of ever getting out of this bathroom in one piece—floods me with renewed force. A thousand needles of terror prick my skin, driving their sharp points deeper, pinning my guts until they reach a pool of doom deep within my soul. The bathroom stops spinning. Reaching a place of calm, a moment of soundless emptiness, I decide to try once more. I don't feel sorry for myself. I've thought of everything there is to think about while smoking away the night. There is no other way out for me except to die.

I hear Papa open the door to my room and shout my name. I ignore him. I can do this. I'll have to think of something to distract myself. Everywhere I look, my mother's face floats up, hanging in the air like an ephemeral vision—the distant memory of her smile, her long brown hair

and blue eyes, and a thousand freckles on the bridge of her nose. Like mine. I blink and focus on the towels. There she is again. I look at the sink. Same. I squint my eyes and shake my head hard. That does it.

A memory of Hunter splits the vision of my mother in two. His ever-crooked grin fills the dark space under my eyelids, brightens it with two rows of shiny white teeth, though he claims he's never been to the dentist. There, that's better. Hunter saved the day, as always. He's my best friend, my only friend. Oblivious to everyone shunning me at school, whenever he sees me, he always yells, "Hey, turkey!" or "What's up, brat?" or "Care to wave hello to monkey boy?" and makes obnoxious gorilla noises. It always makes me snort into my fist.

Since hanging out at his house is out of the question because of his mom's illness, whenever Papa leaves on a boat trip, we get stoned in my bathroom. Did I mention it's the only room in the house that can be locked? It also has a fan and a window. I don't know what my father would do if he found out that I smoke weed. Last night, it came close; way too close. We were blowing smoke rings when Hunter pointed at one of the marble sirens, tracing her open mouth with his finger over and over again. By then, we'd shared a couple of joints.

"Have you ever met a real siren?" he asked, his head cocked to the side, his long skinny legs spread out wide on the tile floor, ending in two poorly laced sneakers.

"You call *this* real?" Too lazy to stand up, I set my joint on a squished soda can and scooted on my butt across the bathroom floor until I came face to face with the stone creature. Ligeia, the shrill one, the one with perfect breasts. The fact that Hunter pointed at her specifically, and not at another siren, made me hate her that much more. He didn't know I talked to them for hours, my imagined sisters. I never told him, out of fear of sounding infantile or outright nuts. When I raised my finger to touch Ligeia's mouth, she winked her marble eye at me. I jerked my finger away, thinking she might bite. I must have been really stoned by then. Hunter didn't notice a thing, puffing perfect smoke circles and watching them dissolve under the ornamental bathroom ceiling.

"You know what I mean. Not the mythical kind. No. I'm talking about a real siren. The girl next door. The killer kind. The one whose gaze never sits still. The way she walks, the way she talks. Every man wants a piece of her. Every man wants to hear her velvety song, the song to die for. Have you ever met one like that?"

"You're stoned," I said.

"No, no, listen." He sucked in on his joint, his slender fingers dancing across it. "Real sirens are among us. They're the girls who come out at night, in the fog, to sing about their pain. Their voice makes

you do things. They command you to come close to them, and then they sing your soul out.”

“And then what?” I shuffled across the floor back to the wall, gazing at Ligeia, ready to catch her eye move once more.

Hunter passed his free hand through his hair, bunching it up into an uncombed mess, before inhaling noisily. “Then they find you dead in the morning. They can’t say what happened. It looks like your heart stopped, so they conclude that you died from sudden cardiac arrest, you know, loss of heart function. What’s creepy, though, is that you’re smiling. Dead, but smiling. Like you were your happiest just before you died.” He snorted and spit, right into the smoldering soda can. It emitted a quiet fizz and a puff of smoke.

“My joint!” I gasp, yet my thoughts are with the sirens, reeling with his idea, trying to grasp its meaning.

“Chill. I’ll roll you a new one,” he said, unfazed.

“You say it like you’ve met one.”

“Wha...” It took him a second to remember. “Oh, a siren? Maybe I did.”

I looked at him. I always liked his grin, with that dimple on his right cheek. His hair looked funny when he brushed it back. Of course, when I asked if he ever combs it, he said he has no need to, because a cow licked him when he was a baby.

“You’re such a liar,” I said.

He laughed, causing my whole body to vibrate. It vibrates now, in sync with Papa’s steps returning from my bedroom.

I grip the sides of the tub.

Three short knocks on the door.

“Ailen? I know you’re in there, sweetie. What are you doing in the bathroom so early? Open the door, please.”

“Nothing, Papa, just killing myself is all. Because one minute of fantasy is better than nothing,” I whisper, looking up at Canosa to get her approval for what I’m about to do. My head starts spinning again and I don’t know if I imagine it or not, but she nods her head. It’s time.

I dive in, this time face first, pinching my nose with my right hand to avoid the burning chlorine. I float in the tub with my back to the ceiling, thinking about how our bathroom ceiling reminds me of a giant face. Its long, intricate ornaments look like wrinkles, its décor a bad impression of a Roman bath designed for the gods themselves. That white plaster type, a dirty shade of a cleaning lady’s absence. For whatever reason, I think I must clean it, but then I remember that I need to count.

One. Two. Three.

No need to press hands my into the sides of the tub, I can float all I want, my face submerged in the water, my legs free-floating, the tips of my naked toes barely touch the back end of the tub. Who in their right

mind has an eight-foot marble bathtub at home? That's the Brights' family values for you. Not love, but plenty of beautiful things to admire. I hold my breath until it feels like I can't hold it anymore.

Twenty seconds go by. Papa shakes the door.

I exhale. Bubbles trace my cheeks and speed out of my peripheral vision, rising to the surface.

Pop. Pop. Pop.

"Ailen? Whatever it is you're doing in there, you have one minute to finish. If you don't open the door after that, I'll have to force my way in. Do you hear me? I'm starting the timer." His voice is muffled, yet strangely amplified, by all this water.

Perfect. It's been thirty seconds. Plus one minute of waiting, and surely more than one minute to break down the solid oak door. Thank you, Papa, I don't need to count anymore.

The last of my air wants to come out through my nose, and I let it go, feeling a growing heaviness in my chest and an urge to inhale. Panic rears its ugly head but I slap it across the face to drive it back into its dark corner. There is no other thread of sanity to hold onto except to think back to my last conversation with Hunter. What was it that I stopped on? Ah, yes, his laughter.

He opened his mouth and threw back his head, closing his eyes and giving himself over to an onslaught of stoner glee. Holding onto his stomach, he rocked back and forth. I tried to giggle with him, but the thought of the looming anniversary wouldn't let me. At least his mom was still alive. I pulled myself closer to the tub and propped my feet right over Ligeia's face, to stop her from winking, and to make sure I couldn't see her naked breasts—the ones that reminded me of the whole unfairness of bra sizes.

"Have you ever wanted to kill yourself?" I asked.

He choked on his spit and coughed. "What?"

I tightened my mouth before shedding each word through my teeth, slowly, making sure they came out loud and clear. "I said, have you ever wanted to kill yourself?"

"Are you out of your fucking mind, Ailen? What kind of a question is that?" He raised his eyebrows, momentarily lucid, the stub of his joint dangling from his lower lip.

"God, it's just a simple question. Relax. You're telling me stories about sirens singing out people's souls and I can't ask you a simple question?"

"Of course you can. It's one hell of a loaded question though. Are you all right?" He tapped on his temple, then raised his hands over his face in a protective gesture, as if I was about to hit him. Which I should've.

"Idiot. I'm fine. Just wanted to know is all." I closed my mouth in an attempt to shut up, but my curiosity won, as always. "Ok, let me rephrase it. *If* you ever wanted to kill yourself, how would you do it?"

He blew out a coil of smoke, and studied the ceiling for a moment, his face lax.

"Don't tell me you've never thought about it; I won't buy it for a second," I said, hoping my question didn't plunge him into one of his hour-long stoner bouts.

To my surprise, after a minute of empty gazing, he answered. "I'd get my hands on the fastest motorcycle out there, hop on a highway, and ride as fast as I can, without stopping for cops."

"And then?"

"Then I'd crash!" He grinned and slowly turned his head to look at me, his eyes full of mischief. I imagined Hunter mounting a bike, gunning its throttle, and whizzing past cars heading up a twisty, mountain road. Riding higher and higher, speeding toward the safety rail on some cliff—beyond which there is only empty air and jagged, mountain rocks all the way to the bottom.

"Wow. That sounds like an awesome way to go. You'd have to get a bike for that though. Do you even know how to ride one?"

"Oh, yeah. I snuck out my dad's Ducati a couple of times. He had an old 748, yellow, nice racing sportbike." He bit his lip as if he'd said too much. Then he pressed his joint into the squished soda can, twisted it, and listened to it hiss.

"Hey, not fair. You never told me your dad had a sportbike." I made myself lie, to appear interested. "I wanna go for a ride. If you ever go again, will you take me with you?" There will be no *ever*. "Pretty please?" He believed me.

"I don't have access to it anymore, obviously. I snuck it out before...you know...before he left us. Dad's gone, bike's gone, get it?" He tapped on his head again and looked out the window. I nearly slapped myself on the head, cursing my memory and lack of manners. How could I forget? Duh.

My hand's involuntary movement brings me back to the present. I've been underwater for one minute and twenty seconds now, miraculously continuing to count.

I let go of my nose and spread my arms wide, pressing my hands into the tub's marble walls and forming a perfect bridge from one side to the other, trying not to lift my head and inhale air. *I have to stay down, I have to, I have to*. Circles begin swimming in front of my eyes, and my throat tightens further. Another few seconds and I'll be inhaling water.

"Ailen, your minute is up. Open the door, now." Papa is always impatient. Hearing his terrible voice warbled by water makes me more determined than ever to continue with my task, if only to never hear him yell at me again. Yes, that will be worth it. Except I wish I could see his face when he finally breaks down the door and sees me floating here. I imagine it contorting in surprise, then horror, then regret. Priceless.

One minute, thirty-one. One minute, thirty-two. One minute, thirty-three.

"I said, open the damn door!" My heart pounds in my ears and I begin spinning as if headed down a whirlpool; except, when I look down at the plug, it's not moving.

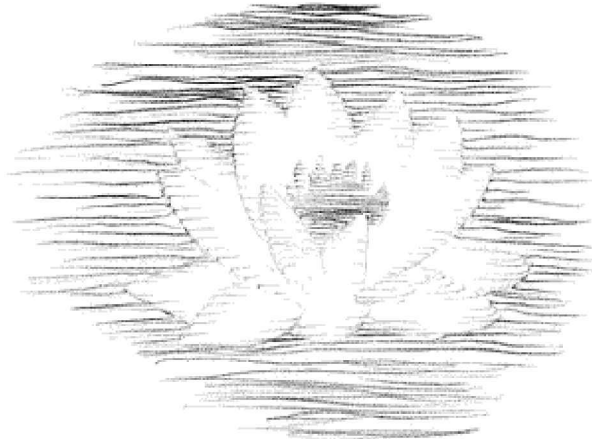
The door rattles under father's fists. He shouts, "Open the door," again and again, slamming his fists even harder. Each hit echoes in my airless chest, making me think it's my ribs he's hitting. My whole body trembles. Every muscle convulses, shaking like crazy, as if they're ready to explode. A strange calm spreads over me. I let out one last air bubble, staring into the marble beneath me; I notice long, delicate silver lines forming a pattern, something akin to an otherworldly landscape with its own slopes, hills, forests, and mountains. All cold and distant, as if covered with a layer of snow.

I reach out and touch it. It's cool, like the water around me. I hope to feel something for myself, some sort of pity or agony before dying, anything at all. But there is nothing left.

I turn numb, numb like marble, numb like the bathroom door. I hope it proves hard to break. It's the only door in the house that can be clicked shut and locked for longer than one minute, under the pretext of my monthly "girly" problems: stomach cramps, nausea, mood swings, tampons. All of the things Papa doesn't want to hear about because he's not my mother. If only I could see her one more time. I will. I know I will. This is my chance.

One minute and forty seconds underwater. I'm ready to go. The door groans under Papa's repeated hits. I want to yell in response. *Do you hear me, Papa? I'm moving out. I'm going to live with my mom and you can eat shit.* Unable to suppress the urge to breathe any longer, I open my mouth and inhale.

Chapter 2



Marble Bathtub

It's not air that I inhale, it's water. There is no other way to describe it except that it feels like inhaling some weird, liquid flame. It burns my throat, burns my chest, fills my ears with ringing and my eyes with dancing dots. In that instant, I change my mind. I want to turn back time, but it's too late. My larynx shuts down in one violent spasm, cutting off the flow of water into my lungs. My mouth clamps shut with an audible clicking of teeth. As if some other passage has been opened at the same time, warmth rapidly drains out of my body through it. Time comes to a standstill. I reach that moment of tranquility I've been craving all along. A land of no pain, no yesterday, no tomorrow. A land where everything exists as a single snapshot of *now*, then is momentarily gone, replaced by the next snapshot.

This is what I see.

A bright light blinds me, like a photographic flash that lasts only one thousandth of a second, and helps illuminate the scene. It stands out in sharp clarity, burning into my retina. It's my hand floating in the water, yet at the same time, it's a wide expanse of freshly freckled soil. No, it's not soil, it's skin, magnified, because it's right under my nose. Iridescent circles form in my peripheral vision, then another flash makes me want to shield my eyes, but my arms won't move. I see my wrist up close, with a forest of hairs shaking lightly, as if scared into dizziness by goose bumps. I bend my neck to look down the length of my body. The brilliant blue of the hoodie is too intense, making my two feet, dangling at the far end of each leg, look even whiter than they are. Then it all turns fuzzy.

I can't tell up from down anymore, or in from out. I close my eyes and listen. I hear something faint. Thump. Thump. Thump. It's my heart. That means I'm still alive. I feel confused and disoriented, yet a strange curiosity pushes my panic down and dominates my mind. Is this how one feels when dying? My father raised me an atheist, telling me I should only believe in science. I always nodded in agreement, afraid to contradict him, secretly believing in magic and wishing that Greek gods and goddesses and all things mythological were real. Afterlife or heaven or hell or whatever you want to call it; what if there *is* something out there, on the other side?

I want to know what happens next. Despite the overly saturated colors and a distorted sense of size, I want to keep looking around, to notice otherworldly things with this new visual perception I've acquired. But my body thinks otherwise. It says, *Get the hell out of the bathtub!* I want to tell it to stop shouting, but my tongue won't move, caught between rows of my clamped teeth. My body says, *This is it. I've had enough of your stupidity. I'm getting you out.*

Involuntarily, I bend my knees. There should be solid marble underneath to stand on, but my feet touch nothing except water as if I'm swimming in the deep end of a pool. Afraid to think about what it means, afraid to look, I throw up my arms in one desperate stroke. There should be two polished-marble rims to grab—smooth, solid, and secure. Instead, my fingers close on water.

I open my eyes and lift my head, expecting to raise it out of the water. Tough luck. I find myself vertical, drifting deeper down into some kind of murk. The liquid around me turns muddy and greenish, with flecks of tiny fuzzy plants hanging here and there.

I turn my head left and right, twist around, flapping my arms and legs madly. The bathtub is gone! Did it expand? Did I shrink? I kick and kick and thrash around, watching the greenish tint of the liquid turn ultramarine. Blue is my favorite color. Three is my favorite number.

An insatiable need to breathe propels me up. After a dozen concentrated strokes, I surface, gasping for air and coughing up stale-tasting water. I shiver, inhaling one lungful of air after another, hyperventilating and sobbing hysterically at the same time. It takes me a moment to calm down and look around.

The water is no longer green, but clear and blue, reflecting the cloudless sky. What's green is a blanket of leaves. I shake my head to make sure I'm seeing this right. I'm in the shallow end of a lake. It's overgrown with lilies, and I'm about ten feet away from the shore. I kick my feet once more and touch solid ground. Standing up to my neck in

the water, lily stems touch my legs, their sweet and fruity smell overpowering my nostrils that still burn from the passage of chlorinated water.

All thoughts vanish from my brain, all feelings desert my body. I can only stare.

On the very edge of the lake, on its dirty, sandy beach full of washed up, colorless logs, sits the Siren of Canosa. My big bronze sister, the boss. Only she's not bronze anymore, and not her typical one foot in height. She's real and as tall as me. With real skin, real hair, and a real body. She pins me with her practiced, innocent gaze that I've seen so many times in the bathtub. Without realizing it, I emit a long sigh of awe.

She's a beautiful thing. Her hair drapes along her body in thick clumps, the ends disappearing into an emerald mess of leaves. The early morning sun paints her pale face a golden hue. Warm wind lifts a strand of hair to her face. If this is what afterlife looks like, I guess I scored. Yet when she smiles, a sinister feeling penetrates my core, as if something in this perfect picture isn't right. It hides rotten secrets inside. There is a lie in the air, and I feel like I'm about to buy it.

She locks her big green eyes with mine and begins to sing. At once, I know my gut was right. Yet I'm spell-bound, unable to retreat, listening with my ears, my skin, my everything that can absorb her voice.

*"We live in the meadow,
But you don't know it.
Our grass is your sorrow,
But you won't show it."*

If there really is a soul inside me, it trembles now, its edges brushing against my ribs. My mind rejects the tune. It categorizes it as fake, sorrow—pitched a little too high, a quarter note off, a hairline away from a genuine song that makes your heart beat faster with its beauty.

You're not real, I want to say. You're just a bronze bathroom figurine. Your song is fake, it's a tool. You don't care for me. It's your job to transport me to the other side, right? And you probably hate your job. When was the last time you got a raise? But the sound of her voice silences my mind and I keep listening, mesmerized.

*"Give us your pain,
Dip in our song.
Notes afloat,*

*Listen and love.
Listen and love.
Listen and love."*

I notice other sirens now, my marble sisters, also at full human height. They crawl out from behind bleached logs and join Canosa, singing together with her. I want to drown in their melody. Its thrilling notes reach to me, as if a stretched out invisible hand, pulling me closer. Lily stems tangle my legs as I stumble through the lake toward the beach, wanting more, drinking in their sorrow, gorging upon their gaze.

*"We wade in the lake.
Why do you frown?
Our wish is your wake.
Why do you drown?"*

They stop singing and watch me stumble forward. I drop to my knees a couple feet away from Canosa, my mouth open in admiration, my eyes teary, my troubles forgotten. All I can feel is a sense of calm emitted by their eyes, their voices, their bodies. It's not the comfortable calm of a clear, happy mind, but rather a chilling calm of violently suppressed pain. I don't care how it works; as long as my pain is gone, I'm cool with their method.

Canosa takes my hands into hers; they feel cold and slimy against my skin. Her breath washes over me in a thousand-year-old stink covered up by water lily sweetness.

"Ailen Bright, silly girl, what took you so long? I've been waiting and waiting and waiting." She purses her lower lip and shakes her head.

I look at her, unable to comprehend that she's really talking to me, and her four sisters are really nodding their heads behind her. There is Pisinoe, the youngest, clutching Canosa's left arm, peeking from behind her mane. Next to her is Teles, the perfect one, cupping her chubby cheeks with both of her hands, studying me. Raidne sits by Canosa's left side, braiding her long, curly hair—the envy of my life. And behind her is Ligeia. I quickly look away so as not to see her breasts.

"How rude! Don't you know you're supposed to say 'Hi!' and 'How are you?' and 'I loved your song, it was so pretty?'" Canosa pushes me away and drops my hands.

I open my mouth to say something in my defense, but she's faster.

"Go away, silly girl." Her lips press into one hard line, her hands propped on her hips, her elbows stuck out like the wings of an angry bird. "I kinda don't like you." At this, the other sirens begin to protest, but

Canosa shushes them with a low hiss. They fall silent and peer at me. I feel uneasy, as if I'm food being studied for ripeness.

"You really exist? I mean, I thought you were just a bronze faucet —" I begin.

"Fine, I forgive you. Let's start over." She dashes at me and grabs my hands. I nearly fall face down into the sand as she pulls me toward her. The other sirens circle us, their knees and hands in the sand, their hair falling over their faces. They lick their lips and, suddenly, I want to break free of them; yet I make no move, like a wounded animal being eaten alive by a pack of predators, paralyzed by primal fear.

"It's no fun to be dead. Booooring. Right, girls?" Canosa says, looking around for approval. The sirens nod, silent, their eyes not leaving me for a second, their circle tightening around me.

"Am I dead already? What is this place, anyway?" I croak, suffocating from the overpowering stench of rotten fish that slides out of the sirens' open mouths. I realize their skin, so clear and white from a distance, has a greenish tint to it when looked at up close. It reminds me of a molding orange.

"You guys, it was very nice to meet you, thank you very much for the song, but I think I've changed my mind." I tear my hands out of Canosa's and edge backward toward the water, leaving an imprint in the sand with my butt. They lunge at me. Ligeia grabs my feet. Canosa clasps my chin and raises my face up, her nose inches away from mine.

"I can give you something you want, if you give me something I want in return." Her green eyes open wide and I feel like falling into them, into a peaceful meadow where no pain exists.

"What's that?" I say.

"Stop asking me stupid questions, silly girl. You know what I mean." Her lips string into a hard line again.

"But—"

"Are you deaf?"

I blink. This is so bizarre, I don't know what to say.

"Listen to me. Over hours and hours of sitting in the bathtub, you asked me a thousand times to help, telling me about a thousand tortures, all aimed at hurting your father. Don't you remember any of it?"

I blink and feel my face turn red, hating how my blood flow betrays me when a lie would be my preferred answer. I swallow and say nothing, hoping that, somehow, if I pretend I didn't hear her, the topic of the conversation will evaporate and we will start taking about the weather.

"All I need from you is your soul. Just a tiny, little thing. You don't need it anyway, do you?" The other sirens hiss at this, their eyes ablaze with hunger.

Hunter's words flash in my mind. *They find you dead in the morning. They can't say what happened. It looks like your heart stopped, so they conclude that you died from sudden cardiac arrest, you know, loss of heart function. What's creepy, though, is that you're smiling. Dead, but smiling. Like you were your happiest just before you died.*

"Are you saying you want to kill me?" I manage, confused. As soon as it comes out of my mouth, I feel like I said something stupid.

"If we wanted to, we'd have already done that, don't you think?" Canosa cackles; they all cackle. Little hairs on my neck and arms stand up at the sound. "No, we want you to become one of us, right girls?" She turns to the other sirens without letting go of my chin. They nod their approval. Pisinoe begins clapping her hands like an excited toddler.

"Why?" is all I can say. "Why would you want me to become one of you?" A childish hope to belong grips me and suppresses all logical thoughts with a simple yearning. I don't care if they are dead or alive or real or not real. I've never belonged anywhere, always an outcast. At home, at school, even when I rode the bus, people wouldn't sit next to me, as if my aura itself was stained. I'd spent hours dreaming, only to have five sisters tumbling, one over another, in an attempt to form words and throw them at Canosa. How can I explain how badly I've wanted this to happen my entire life? I can't believe that someone, at last, wants me. Someone else other than Hunter. My real friend, my only friend.

"I'm tired of repeating myself. Once again, stop asking stupid questions. Use your brain. Think, silly girl, think." She taps my forehead with her finger. "Your father hates women because they make him lose control, doesn't he? They are these beautiful things to him, to own, 'cause he doesn't know how else to love them. 'Cause nobody taught him how to love. Am I right?" Canosa says.

"I guess. I don't really know. He's just an asshole."

"It's never as simple as that, and you know it. He must have been a very sweet little boy at one time in his life, don't you think? Large blue eyes, long eyelashes." She smiles and inches even closer to me. "Someone must have hurt him, and hurt him badly. Maybe it was a woman, maybe it was his mother. Why do you think he never visits her grave? Why do you think no family ever comes to your house on holidays? Why do you think you never go to visit anyone?"

I sit quietly, puzzled by her questions.

"I don't know, I never thought of it this way."

“Well, I did. There is only one way to think about it. He’s not a sweet little boy anymore. He is broken beyond repair. There is only one thing you can do—hurt him back. Simply dying won’t do it, it would only make his life easier, don’t you think? How about you become a siren and torture his soul with your songs, almost kill him, hold him by the thread, close to death, as long as you want to. Watch him squirm and plead, like a worm.” As she says it, her entire body trembles, her eyes gloss over with a type of feeding-frenzy fever. “Hurt him, for hurting your mother. You know you want it badly, don’t you?”

Hate fills me to the brim of my being. My mother’s face floats up in my memory, and stabs me with pain. Every single blow and insult I endured from my father’s hand strikes me at once. Every joke and ridicule and mocking at school for being flat-chested, a recluse, a bookworm, stabs me under my ribs. I look at the sirens, all standing on their fours, gazing at me, waiting for my answer. They want me to be their sister, girls who are much more beautiful and powerful than those stuck up bitches at school, more powerful than even my father. Unable to contain the urge anymore, I cry out.

“Yes! My answer is yes!”

Canosa shakes my hand, greedy.

“Good. I want you to come close, look at me, look me in the eyes and open—”

At this moment, the sky amplifies a cracking noise as if something heavy has fallen somewhere, shaking the ground in a mini-earthquake. The sound shock sends big waves across the lake and I feel as if I’m being pulled back into the water with one of them. The lake comes alive with lily stems. I hear the sirens scream. They run toward me, raising their arms above their heads to dive into the water, but the lake’s waves are faster. Lily stems pull me under the surface and I propel down into the murk, from clear water to blue to green, stuffed with floating, fuzzy plants, until I reach complete darkness.

The water turns warmer, my chest feels heavy and my muscles tighten. I raise my head to the light, blinded by its intensity, as if being spit out by the lake—a foreign object that doesn’t belong to it, not yet.

I gasp for air.

The green water turns clear, and rolls off me. I sit.

I’m back in my bathtub, waist-deep in warm water, yet chilled to the bone as if covered with snow. I’m shaking and hyperventilating, coughing and convulsing from the pain in my lungs. They burn with each breath, and I know I must still have water inside from inhaling it. As I cough, I look at the faucet. There she is, the Siren of Canosa, back to her faucety self.

I must have hallucinated her into a singing fiend from Hunter's story, yet it felt so real. *I just had a near-death experience, that's all. I'm alive, I'm okay.* A surge of happiness makes me jitter. I try to remember how many joints it took me for courage this morning. *Oh, Hunter, where the hell did you get this weed? I'm having a bad trip.* I see tiny specks of indigo dance in front of my eyes and remember that I also dropped a tab of acid on top of it. Great.

I reach out and stroke Canosa's bronze hair, to make sure she's really made out of bronze, when sudden silence makes me feel as if someone is watching me. I glance to my left and notice a layer of dust on the floor and a few scattered woodchips. I look farther out and see the bathroom door, its hinges still covered with plaster from having been torn out of the wall. My happiness vanishes in an instant, sucked away by the sheer terror of what I've done and what punishment is about to follow.

I turn toward the opening where the door used to stand.

My father steps on the door and walks toward me, his face set, his hands curled into fists.

"Papa?" I say and see his hand raised in the air, ready to strike.

Chapter 3



Bathroom Door

The wide expanse of the back of my father's hand nears me as if in slow motion. I can see his meticulously manicured nails, a few hairs at the bend of his wrist, his titanium Panerai watch showing a few minutes past six in the morning—all peeking out from the cuff of his silken maroon pajamas. Kicked up from the floor by his handcrafted, Italian leather slippers, a million dust particles swirl and dance in the air, reflecting the early morning light and forming a tunnel of movement for his hand to follow. Aimed at me. Aimed at my face. Aimed at beating sense into me so I won't turn out like my mother. As if it wants to say, *You thought you could play a joke on me, did you?*

Smack!

His hand strikes my left cheek and my head comes alive with livid fire. I convulse in a bout of coughing, sputtering water out of my lungs. My throat and mouth burn with a scorching sensation of chlorinated liquid rushing out. Every breath brings pain and a low whizzing noise. I try to swallow, but it hurts. I try to stand up and promptly recede into

dizziness. The bathroom doesn't just double-spin against me, it seems to turn inside out and fold onto itself in consecutive waves. A pulsing rhythm matching my heartbeat.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Papa yells into my ear. "Answer me."

Perhaps there was a time when my head and my brain were one. Not anymore. My brain floats on its own in my skull, a mere container for its syrupy presence. It sloshes to the side as I tilt my head in an attempt to hide from his yelling. Every syllable, every word that flies off my father's lips, threatens to pierce my sanity and explode my head into a million little pieces.

I don't need to listen to what he says, it's the usual concoction. A string upon a string of swear words and accusations and warnings that one day, you just wait, one day you'll turn out just like your mother. Nothing will ever become of you. Would you look at what you did. You made me break *my* bathroom door. Do you even know how much a door costs? How much it costs to replace the lock? To fill in holes in the wall and to paint it?

All I see is his mouth opening and closing, his thin lips stretching over his teeth in a dance of forceful monologue that's supposed to teach me, to do me good, to help raise me in such a way that I manage to survive in this world, as a woman. Because, in Papa's eyes, women are second class. Women are weak creatures who need to be controlled lest they decide to charm off men's pants and make them do stupid shit. They corrupt men's very spirits. I don't just stop listening to him drone on and on, I even stop listening to my own thoughts repeating to me automatically what I have heard so many times.

I'm really good at tuning things out, years of practice pay off. My focus shifts to the door. It lies on the tiled floor, its oak paneling covered with a layer of white particle board dust. I feel sorry for my only refuge, the only room that can't be locked anymore. And I want out. Out of this room, out of this house. I want to run away and never come back, like mom did on that rainy September morning.

"Did you hear what I said?" Papa's voice jerks me from my moment of contemplation. Out of habit, without being fully present, I play along.

"Yes, I did," I say, shifting my gaze to Canosa, making sure she doesn't move. Suddenly, I have a hard time suppressing the urge to jump out of the tub and look at the marble sirens, touch their marble faces to confirm that I haven't gone insane.

"Then, please, explain to me what this is doing in *my* bathroom?" Papa shoves his hand under my face.

I make myself look up, wincing at the searing pain that starts at my eyelids and continues crawling under my eyeballs and beyond them, directly into my brain, ramming two metal spikes with every blink. I smell

it before I see it and I know what he's found. Papa's unturned palm displays three joint stubs, twisted and stuck to the top of the crushed soda can that I didn't even care to dispose of because, by now, I was supposed to be dead. Every ounce of pain vanishes, swept away by the terror of being caught.

"It's not mine," I say, feeling my face turn red and hot, desperately trying to control the blood flow by gritting my teeth together. No use. It's as if I speed it up instead. Every single blood vessel in my face inflates with guilt. In some stubborn delirium, I insist, "I didn't do it. I swear. It's Hunter's." There, I just betrayed my only friend. Nice move, Ailen.

Another slap on my cheek makes me grab onto the tub's rims so that I don't slide under the water. This is slap number two, one more to go. The world spins. I think I can taste blood and smell my own fear.

Papa hovers over me, the collar of his silk pajamas hanging open and revealing his chest hair, his lips quivering. After an initial surge of anger, this is his typical remorse. "Don't you ever lie to me, Ailen. How dare you. Would you look at yourself, look who you're turning into. It's in your DNA. Your mother was a liar, too. It pains me to strike you, sweetie, but there is no other way for me to teach you. I care for you, I want you to have a better life than her. Do you understand?"

"I'm sorry I worried you, Papa, I'm fine. I'll be fine." I manage, talking through the pain, hoping against all hope that he won't make me look at him.

It's a futile hope, because he grabs my chin, as always, and lifts up my face. His huge eyes bulge out of his head in two menacing horror-balloons that have given me nightmares ever since I was little. I imagine they're two pools of water that I'm staring at, my usual escape.

"Papa, let go, it hurts."

He doesn't hear me. He continues asking. He wants to know what I'm doing, fully dressed, in a tub full of water. Did I take any other drugs besides weed? How long have I been up? How will I go to school? He tells me he has no time to deal with it and I should've known better. I sense the ending to his tirade.

Here it comes. The pitch of his voice rises, balances on a precipice of that familiar place before tumbling into an abyss of rage. Bout number three, the grand finale. Three is my favorite number, because after three it's over. I stiffen.

Slap!

The back of his left hand greets me hard, but to me, he caresses my cheek. I ignore the salt in my tears, pretending it's a taste of sea. My ears ring from the impact, but I imagine it's him telling me how to throw pebbles into a lake so that they skip along like frogs. That's what the slapping noises were, really.

He reaches under my armpits and yanks me out of the tub, drags me several feet, and leans me against the wall. He begins mopping my face with a towel, like I'm five. Shaking violently from being wet and cold, I stare at Canosa, thinking back to our conversation, replaying her words in my mind. *How about you become a siren and torture his soul with your songs, never really killing him, holding him by a thread on the precipice of dying, as long as you want to. Watch him squirm and plead, like a worm? Hurt him, for hurting your mother?*

I think about how my idea of hurting him, the only way I can, is stupid. Killing myself to make him feel sorry? Right. Throwing him deep into grief? Dream on, Ailen, dream on. Look at him, concentrated on drying me like his favorite doll that got dropped into the toilet by accident, with such a grimace of disgust on his face that can only be attributed to how much I stink. Canosa is right, he doesn't care. Never did, never will. He's broken beyond repair. There is only one way to hurt him.

"Yes," I tell her. "I want to. Take my soul, please."

"Who are you talking to?" Papa asks, attempting to trace my line of vision. I drop my gaze to the floor, stare at my bare feet, and watch small puddles form around them. Before he has a chance to say anything else, I remember something important.

"I'm sixteen today, Papa. You forgot," I whisper, terrified at pointing out his mistake. It's me who is always at fault, no matter what. It's me who always has to apologize.

"I can't hear what you're saying, sweetie, speak up, please. How many times do I have to tell you?"

He doesn't hear me, of course. He never does. I want to burst from hurt, as he lifts my head again and looks me in the eyes.

"I asked you a question, I expect a response."

I look at the window, anywhere but at him.

"Would you look at those eyes darting left and right. You think you know better than me, don't you? You think you're so smart? Here, I'll give you a chance to prove it. Tell me what women were made for. Go on."

This is it, his favorite question to quiz me on. His way of making sure I remember it for the rest of my life. I'd prefer it if he was a religious freak who asked me to repeat a daily prayer. This is worse, a hundred times worse. His face fills the crack between my insanity and my freedom. His eyes bulge, his neck veins pushing against his skin. I open and close my mouth, twice, like a beached fish.

"Answer the damn question," he says slowly, as I slide against the wall, leaving a wet trace against it. He clamps the back of my hoodie in his left fist and pulls me back up. *Play limp, just play limp.*

"You forgot, didn't you? That's typical of you, another trait from your mother. Bad memory. Well, let me remind you."

His lips brush my ear, eager to share the big secret. I can smell his cologne from yesterday washing over me and it nearly makes me gag.

"Women were made to haul water, Ailen. Beat this into your pretty little head. I'm tired of repeating myself every day. Have pity on your old man. Why else, tell me, would your mother make fun of me like this? Why else would she give me a daughter when she knew I wanted a son?"

I recoil, not fully comprehending what he said, feeling like I will faint from the fervor in his voice shrouding my head in a cloud of forceful conviction.

"She made fun of me, Ailen. That weak woman dared to mock me publicly. Imagine how that felt. She was crazy, crazy! I don't know what I saw in her. She twisted me around her finger, got pregnant, made me marry her. Then, she had her last laugh. You know what she did? She left me, to raise you all alone. You know how hard it is to be a single father?"

His words sink in. Ailen Bright, an unwanted child. *Good joke, mom, I salute you.* I suppress a terrible urge to cry. If my own parents didn't want me, who will? I glance at Canosa again. She doesn't wave or blink back. *The sirens. I belong with the sirens. How I wish they were real.*

Papa continues whispering in my ear. "I raised you my own way. I want to make sure you turn out different, despite your genetic predisposition. It's in your voice already, those seductive notes. I can hear them when you talk. I'll root it out of you. You'll thank me later, I promise."

He finally lets go of me and wipes his hands on a towel. There is a space of three feet between us. I look to my left. The gap where the door stood is wide open, like a passage into another world. I don't care where it leads, as long as it takes me out of this horrible place once and for all. This is how my mother must have felt on the morning she left. I think I understand her now, and I'm not as mad at her anymore. I see her face floating against the hole in the wall, smiling, beckoning me to follow.

"We'll talk more after school. I want you to be home by three." Papa smooths his hair and turns toward the sink to check himself in the mirror.

"I'm leaving," I say, set in my decision. I press myself into the wall, pushing my hands flat against it to hold my balance. I never talked to my father like that in my life, not once. I tighten my leg muscles, ready to sprint.

"What?" He turns around, his eyebrows fly up.

"I said, I'm leaving. I'm going to see mom and you can eat shit." I lean away from the wall and stumble out of the bathroom on unbending legs, reeling left and right like a drunken sailor, clutching the walls for support. I step onto the carpet and make painfully slow progress toward the stairs, with one clear goal in mind.

Get out. Get out. Get out.**

"You're not going anywhere," I hear behind me. I slide down the steps, my knees buckling, my butt bumping against them. I shake my head and pull myself up against the rail, as my father's arm reaches for me. I let go and roll all the way down. The pain shakes me and a fresh shot of adrenaline give me enough strength to stand up and reach for the front door handle. There are two. I blink. They're back to one.

My father, unable to comprehend what I'm doing, yells at me from the stairs above, unwilling to go down in his pajamas because it goes against his habit. His voice paralyzes me.

"Ailen, where do you think you're going? Get back here, now."

He's never worn his pajamas on the first floor. He only comes down after having meticulously dressed himself in a freshly-ironed dress shirt, silk tie, silk socks, a custom-made Italian wool suit, and leather Ferragamo loafers—twenty pairs, of which, he keeps neatly organized in his bedroom closet.

I ignore him, afraid my moment of bravery will pass and I won't be able to make myself leave. It's now or never.

I focus on the door knob. *Take it, Ailen, just take it.* This doorknob was the source of my nightmares along with father's bulging eyes. In fact, they would morph into each other. First his eyes would float toward me, out of his face, getting bigger and bigger, pressing me against the wall. Then, they would merge into one and her face would appear. *Her* is the woman's head that serves as our front door knob, the one that's on the inside. I don't even want to go into describing the one on the outside. Our house is full of Italian relics of two types: women and fish. As much as I love my four marble sisters and one bronze one, I hate this one.

She let my mother out on that morning, the seventh of September. She didn't stop her. For that, I want to melt her in our fireplace and watch her face come off in a grimace of utter surprise. I hear Papa stepping down and force myself to grab the she-knob, my palm pressed against her round, bronze face, my fingers feeling every groove of her hair. Maybe she is Death herself and it's my turn to step through her door. As if I'm right, the knob feels freezing cold under my fingers as I turn it, gripping it hard so it won't slide in my sweaty hand.

Click.

The heavy front door opens slowly and rainy morning air gushes

inside. I breathe it in and stop trembling for a second, forgetting I'm wet, forgetting I'm scared. I soak in the smell of damp asphalt, fallen leaves, fresh sorrows. Something cold traces my face. It takes me a second to realize what it is. We weep together, the sky and me.

"What do I do now?" I ask it.

It drips silence, full of gray clouds.

"Ailen, don't make me come out into the rain. You know I hate getting wet." I hear my father's steps behind me and, afraid to see his eyes, I run out onto the porch. Something makes me stop and raise my face to the sky. Maybe it's the unanswered question.

"Did my mother ask you the same thing six years ago? Did she ask you?"

The sky leaks more indifference, splashing my face with raindrops.

"Why didn't you stop her? Answer me, you stupid thing!" I curl my hands into fists and feel hot tears roll down my cheeks. The sky doesn't answer. I want to mash it with my fists beyond recognition, when I feel Papa grab me by the arm. I turn and twist out of his grip. He opens his mouth in shock, perhaps not expecting me to resist. His maroon silk pajamas soak up the rain. Before he composes himself, I run down our eleven painted porch steps and turn around, yelling at both the sky and my father.

"I hate you, I hate you, I hate you!"

"Ailen, I understand you're frustrated, but you can't go anywhere like this. Your clothes are wet. You're not even wearing shoes, you'll get pneumonia."

"Like you care!" I yell, my teeth chattering.

His face goes dark. "I'm counting to three. On three, you need to be back inside this house." He stands fuming at the edge of the porch, oblivious to getting wet, which is so unlike him. The only thing I see is his eyes, and I feel them pulling me back.

"One..."

I keep staring, swallowing tears and raindrops, not moving forward nor backward, trembling from being wet and cold.

"Two..."

His gaze fills me with terror, all fifty-two years of his might against my feeble sixteen. *Fat chance, Ailen.* My shivering legs won't move.

"Three."

He leans forward and I unfreeze. It's as if the sound of his steps breaks my stupor, tears off the lid from my suppressed feelings and they tumble out of me in one cry.

"Stop!" I yell. He pauses. "You forgot something." I back onto the concrete path, toward the white gate overgrown with vines.

"What's that?" He comes down the stairs and cautiously steps onto the path, looks at his slippers. I know what's going through his mind. He's thinking about them being ruined, and all that money wasted.

There are ten feet between us, filled with my defiance. I grab the gate as an anchor, and lift the latch with unbending fingers.

"It's my birthday today, remember? I'm sixteen. You didn't even wish me a happy birthday. Well, I won't bother you anymore, you can relax. I'm leaving and I'm not coming back."

"What makes you think I forgot?" He lowers his head and dashes toward me, slippers forgotten.

I fumble with the latch, jerk the gate open, and run down twenty mossy steps, my bare feet sliding against them, the gaps between my toes filling with dirt. At the very bottom I finally lose my balance and grab the fence post so I don't fall. My hands slide on the slick, painted wood. Stable, I let go of the fence and run out into the street. An oncoming car veers around me and honks. I flip its driver the finger and turn to look, my heart pounding hard and fast. Papa is a few feet behind me, dashing down the steps two at a time, not holding on to anything, just staring at me. One of his slippers flies off his foot and he falls on his bony ass, cursing loudly.

For a second, we watch each other.

He hates getting wet, and his right hip gives out after a few minutes of running. He probably doesn't believe I'll go far. He's too meticulous to come out after me unprepared. I know what he'll do next. He'll dart back into the house, grab his keys and coat, step into expensive Italian shoes, run back down, and skid along the sidewalk to the front of our garage door that was built in 1909 for holding horse carriages. Next, he'll grab the metal handle that looks like a man's face, press the button on his keys, yank the garage door open, and get inside his Maserati Quattroporte Sport GT S—shiny, black, and, of course, Italian.

He pulls himself up and I bolt.

Chapter 4



Aurora Bridge

I run through the rain barefoot. I'm not ten anymore. I'm sixteen, wearing jeans and a hoodie instead of pajamas. And Papa is not catching me this time, not locking me up alone and leaving to search for my mother. It's my turn to look for her. A sudden memory from that morning nags at me. I hear echoes of the blows father dealt to her delicate face from behind their bedroom door. Go away, déjà vu, it's only my bare feet clapping against asphalt. I keep running, but the sensation continues. I hear the swish of her nightgown against wallpaper, the one that I loved to peel no matter how many times Papa locked me in the bathroom. Wrong, it's only the rustle of wet branches against my sleeves. Wait, I hear something else. Somebody sings my name. Can it be her voice, calling me one last time before jumping off the bridge? I'd tear out my heart to make it true. All logic forgotten, mad hope sends me sprinting.

"Mom, wait for me, I'm coming!" I yell, out of breath. As soon as the words leave my lips, I think I've gone crazy, but a flicker of the impossible makes me run even faster.

I'll just go and look, to make sure. There's nothing wrong with that. Nothing wrong with simply looking. My legs carry me along the familiar route. My heels hurt from pounding on the ground barefoot. I try to

ignore the pain—the heaviness of wet clothes against my body, the numbness and burning of my skin from being cold, the runny nose, and the sharp earache. I make it to where Raye Street dead-ends into Missis Elliott's cookie-cutter house. I stop to sneeze three times, shaking all over.

Her poodle, Lamb-chop, barks at me from behind the glass, his front paws on the windowsill, as always. His white mane shakes like a dandelion about to be blown off. His hysterics must have roused his owner's suspicion because the front door opens and Missis Elliott sticks out her head, her ever-curious eyes taking in the scene for the latest neighborly gossip. She looks exactly like a human version of her poodle, with white curls framing her pasty round face. Her clothes are an indistinguishable pastel color, and always smell of talcum. I firmly believe that she conveniently averted her eyes when my mother stopped by her front gate, perhaps uncertain of where to go. At least, that's what witnesses told police officers later. Missis Elliott claimed she was asleep that early in the morning. Which is bullshit, because she always takes out her stupid dog for a walk at six in the morning sharp.

"Stop staring at me! And I hate your fucking dog!" I yell and wipe my nose, glaring. It feels so great to finally say it out loud.

"Oh!" She opens her mouth, covers it with her soft hand, pushes Lamb-chop back inside with her leg, and quickly shuts the door. I flip her the finger and mouth, *Fuck you!* as I turn to the left and run down the mossy stairway, shaking from cold and anger.

Knowing this neighborhood so well gives me an advantage because my father has no way of driving onto the Aurora Bridge unless he goes south first, then finds a spot to turn around. And there aren't many. By the time he's done, I'll have gotten onto the bridge by foot.

Why the hell am I going there? To look for my mother? But she's dead; she's been dead for six years now. This is a ridiculous idea. What, is she going to appear out of thin air or something? Thoughts fly through my head as I pound down the forty concrete steps, clutching the railing on my right and inhaling a woodsy smell from the abundance of cypress trees.

I pause at the bottom of the stairs, looking left and right. The street is deserted at this hour. I jog across it, toward the Aurora Bridge. It rumbles under early morning traffic, a mix of commuter cars and huge delivery trucks.

I turn left onto the pedestrian walkway and sprint to the point where the bridge begins to cross water. Another bout of sneezing makes me bend, placing my palms on my knees so that I don't lose my balance. I watch water splatter against the bluish skin of my feet, now covered with road dirt. My throat burns with irritation. I wipe my nose, stand, and

glance around. Except for traffic racing to and fro, there's no one on the bridge but me. All 3,000 feet of its length, deserted. Somewhere here, on this side of the bridge, along its middle section that soars 167 feet above the water, my mother climbed over the railing and jumped. I imagined it thousands of times, staring down, clutching the painted, metal barrier until my hands hurt from squeezing.

"Mom? I wish you were here," I say. "Come back. Why won't you come back? What did I do wrong? Why did you do it? Why did you leave me?" Questions fly out of my mouth on autopilot, the same questions I've been asking since I was ten; they're stuck in my mind the same way I first asked them, flooding me with helplessness and rage.

I look along the bridge, hating the engineers who came up with the idea of building it. Hating its metal guts, its height, and the fact that it has become Seattle's most popular attraction for suicide jumpers.

I can almost picture a colorful brochure for tourists with a printed advertisement, still smelling of fresh ink.

Experience the Aurora Bridge like never before! Fifty deaths over the past decade! Only second behind San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge! We offer unprecedented fatality rates at ninety-eight percent! Choose your style. Would you like to flail your arms as you go? Feel free. Care to slip on the railing and tumble down in a series of somersaults? We've got that covered. Want to call someone dear and say goodbye? Open the yellow phone box and discover the miracle of free calling in an age when those who are dear to you can't hear you, and those who can, don't care. It takes a stranger to lend a hand. That is, if they can make out your last words over the noise of passing traffic.

Did we mention that all of the above is completely and utterly FREE?

The word *FREE* flashes in front of my eyes in bright red. I'm like a bull, tormented and provoked into charging. I begin repeatedly slamming my hands into the railing, pouring my anger into every hit, harder, until my hands feel like two swollen bruises. I stop and curl my fingers into fists, shaking them at the bridge. Magnificent, it spans over the lake in one concrete stroke, solid and high, oblivious to my outburst.

"You stupid thing, I wish you were never built!"

I slam both fists against it one last time and yelp in pain. Tears stream freely down my cheeks, mixing with rain. Steam rises from my mouth with every breath. Fury seems to have warmed me up a bit and I don't shake as much. Propelled by the need to do anything but stand in one place and freeze, I run toward the middle of the bridge, hoping for something, looking for something close to a miracle. I want to see a white nightgown and my mother's long hair brushing the wavy pattern of

its collar frills. I hope for a glimpse of some kind of answer—anything at all. And I get it. Three honks from the opposite lane, going north. I stifle a cry.

My father's Maserati Quattroporte slows down enough for me to see him gesticulate from behind the steering wheel, and then speed up again, clearly with the intent of crossing the bridge, turning around, and picking me up from where I stand, even if he has to stop traffic. Which he will, if it comes to it. I calculate. Three minutes left to either run all the way across the bridge and hide behind the Fremont Troll or even make it to Hunter's house on Linden Avenue. His mother should be at the hospital this week for chemo. He'll let me in for sure, maybe even let me stay for a while. I totally lost track of time; I could've been on the other side by now. Stupid!

I hit my head hard to make sure I remember this next time and take off. Yet, at my first step, energy drains out of me; probably because I didn't eat, didn't sleep, smoked several joints, and took a tab of acid on top of it. My legs feel heavy and a rush of dizziness sways me. At first, nothing happens. Then, a sharp pain shoots up my leg and I crouch down, yowling. A shiver takes over me. Weeping in earnest, I force myself to stand and continue to move at a snail's pace, wincing at every step, afraid to look down and discover that I'm bleeding.

Someone emerges from the stairs on the north side of the bridge and walks toward me with the familiar gait of a sailor. Except this is no sailor. It's Hunter, dressed in his favorite droopy jeans and blue rain jacket, hood over his head, eyes set deeply in the shadows of his face, looking menacing yet comical at the same time. He waves, pauses as if observing my state, and breaks into a run.

"Hunter," I exhale, watching him cover the remaining thousand feet or so between us, wondering why he's on foot and not driving his truck. And why he is he up so early? He's not a morning person; he always makes it to school at the last minute.

"Ailen, hey!" he yells, waving.

His lonely figure bobs up and down in rhythm to his gate. At first, it fills me with glee to see him, making my heart beat faster; then my heart drops at the impending dread of getting him in trouble with my father. Because, for sure, he would think Hunter planned this escape with me, planned to meet me on the bridge. I don't care if I'm grounded, but I do care about not being able to see Hunter. This interrupts my purpose, shatters the goal of looking for my mother, yanking it from under my feet. Disoriented and unsure what to do next, my mind goes blank and my body takes over. I slump against the barrier and quietly slide to the ground, feeling defeated and sobbing.

Hunter runs up to me and takes my face into his warm hands. "Dude, what the hell are you doing out here in the rain, barefoot?" He tries pulling me up, but I don't budge. My legs feel weak.

"I don't know," I say through chattering teeth.

He feels my arms and legs. "Oh, my God, you're soaking wet. You're freezing!"

Water from his jacket drips on my face. He sniffs and swipes a hand over his forehead, like he always does when he's confused or about to make a decision. He peers at me for a moment, his eyes like two pools of indigo paint, pulsing in their splendor. Blue is my favorite color. It gives me an anchor to pull myself out of this state, a concrete fact to lean on, to shake off all these muddled emotions and turn to logic. Yet I can't move. I want to get lost in those pools of blue, all of me, skin and flesh and bones. I want to dive so deep inside his eyes that I'll never be found.

But Papa will be here any minute now, to lock me up at home. The hunt is on, and I need to keep running. My hands begin to shake, and my breathing speeds up. I hyperventilate as I try to battle the oncoming panic.

"Oh, Ailen." Hunter brushes the hair out of my face. I feel the warmth of his breathing, see him lean in closer and then stop at the invisible line that we haven't crossed yet. Because we're just friends. I'm sure he's dying to kiss me, as much as I'm dying to kiss him. But I flinch and pull away, wanting it to be a special thing, afraid that he'll find me cold and slimy and disgusting. Perhaps he senses my thoughts, because he leans back a few inches. "Talk to me, please. What the hell happened?"

"I ran away from home," I say, forcing a smile. "And I don't want to go back, ever. Papa is coming any minute to get me though, so, I guess...fat chance." The end of the sentence comes out half chuckle, half cry.

"What? How come you're soaking wet? You look like you came out of a bathtub full of water. Jesus, girl. Let me give you my jacket." He props me against the railing, unzips his jacket, and takes it off.

"No, it's okay. Don't. It won't do any good." I sneeze several times and yelp in pain. My throat is on fire and my toe pulses as if it's broken. "Hunter, I shouldn't have done it. I don't know why I did it. He'll be mad. What do I tell him? What do I do now?"

"You'll get sick, that's what. Let me give you my jacket and let's get you home first."

"I don't wanna go home!" I sob hysterically, pushing him away, pulling myself up.

"I'm sorry, it came out wrong. I meant some place dry!" He reaches out to me, but I'm livid. My breathing speeds up so rapidly I think I'll faint. My ears hear strange cricket noises, my eyes see dancing dots. I smell iron.

"Look at me!" Hunter grabs my chin and pulls my face up to his. "Ailen, look at me. Breathe. You have to slow down and breathe. You're just having a bad trip, that's all. We'll do it together, okay? I'll count to three."

That does it, that count-to-three phrase that my father has used on me for as long as I can remember. I flash cold, then warm, feeling sweat break out from every single pore. I heave, suffocating. There is not enough oxygen in the air. It's as if I've forgotten how to inhale.

"Listen to me! Breathe!" Hunter shakes me. My head rolls around as if it belongs on a rag doll—mouth open, eyes closed.

"Come on, talk to me, Ailen. Talk to me, please?"

I manage to suck in some air. "Remember what I asked you about yesterday?" I say.

"Yes?"

"I asked if you ever wanted to kill yourself."

"Yeah, I remember. It freaked me out, you know. And?"

"And, I tried to kill myself this morning," I say. I exhale, happy to have told somebody.

"What?" he says, incredulous. His mouth opens wide and his grip on my shoulders loosens. "Did you try to drown yourself? Is that why you're wet all over?"

I nod, feeling my face turn red.

At this moment, father's black Maserati slowly rolls up. I hear Papa yank up the handbrake, see orange emergency lights flash. A couple cars behind him honk, begin edging around him. One driver rolls down the window of his silver pickup truck and shouts his displeasure, waving his arm furiously and finally flipping the finger, his tanned face contorted in a grimace of hate.

Hunter turns around.

Papa steps out of the car, clad in his favorite Gucci waterproof leather half-booties, his black wool suit, and a black Armani trench coat on top of it. He leans deeply into the car for his umbrella. He pulls it out and opens it, holding it by the curved wooden handle, hand-crafted, of course. He slams the driver's door shut and walks around the back of the car toward the sidewalk barrier.

"Hey, Hunter. Good to see you, son. How are you doing?" My father is always full of pleasantries when it comes to people outside of our family, so that you'd never guess about his true nature. He stops at the waist-high barrier and sizes it up and down, probably deciding how to climb over it.

I note that he didn't bother to ask me how I was, or if I was okay. But, then again, those are mere details.

"Hello, Mr. Bright. I'm okay, but Ailen here... I think she's having a panic attack. I think, I'm not sure. She doesn't look so good though and she's freezing." It must be something in my father's face that makes Hunter abruptly stop talking. I don't need to look, I know it by heart—the menacing stare that's about to transform into a bout of uncontrollable rage, barely contained under the cover of his politeness. For now.

"Hunter, do you mind leaving me alone with my daughter, please?" He stretches his lips into what's supposed to resemble a smile.

"Sure." Hunter glances briefly at me.

"No, don't go! Don't leave me!" I hear my teeth chatter as I talk, my body shivering violently again. Both are symptoms of hypothermia. I don't care about getting sick, I just don't want Hunter to ever leave me.

Hunter spreads his hands wide, as if to say, *Dude, there's nothing I can do, he's your father.*

Papa presses his left hand onto the railing for support, and, with the umbrella still in his right hand, he lightly jumps over the barrier, landing softly on the sidewalk like a black panther getting ready to pounce.

"Strange to find you here, Hunter, so early in the morning, without your truck. Going anywhere special?" My father walks up to me, and switches his umbrella to his left hand. I shrink instinctively to avoid a blow, but he simply places his right hand on my shoulder. It seems to weigh a ton. I'm lucky we're not at home.

"Oh, I was just... taking a walk, you know. Actually, I wanted to surprise Ailen with something on her birthday. I can't say what it is, though. It was supposed to be a surprise. I guess I'll do it at school then." He shrugs his shoulders.

"Please." My father tilts his head to the left. I can sense his impatience.

"Sure, sure. See ya, Ailen."

I want to say, See ya, but my lips won't move. I think this is the end of my life. I know what's coming and I know it will be ugly.

Hunter slowly walks away, turns back a couple of times, and keeps walking. I attempt to stand up, but Papa presses his hand into my shoulder and pins me down. I see a vein bulge on the side of his neck and slowly lose all feeling in my limbs. I hold my breath, afraid to move.

"Get in the car," he says, barely opening his mouth. I forget I'm wet and cold and hurting. It's now or never, Ailen, now or never.

I nod as if in agreement, bend my legs, and begin straightening to stand, carefully judging Papa's strength. After a few seconds, convinced I'm going to obey him, he loosens his grip and I duck from under his

hand. Without thinking about what I'm doing or why, fueled by the last of my energy, I dash about ten feet away from him and fling myself over the barrier. I hold on to the fence and face the water, like hundreds of suicide jumpers have before me, one of them my mother. I always wanted to feel what it was like for her to stand here, to think about taking her life, to let go.

Merely a few seconds go by.

Afraid of my own boldness, yet strangely calm as if dipped in a thick syrup of determination, I slowly turn my head to the right. Defiance oozes out of me. For the first time in my life, I feel in control. I grin.

Papa rushes to me. I let go of one hand and lean over a little, my left hand getting sweaty from fear. I'm flooded by an emotional high.

"Take another step and I jump," I say.

My father stops a few feet away from me, closes his umbrella furiously, and throws it on the ground.

"Get back here. What do you think you're doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing, Papa?"

I glance into the distance and see Hunter turn around and jog back. I look behind me and see passing cars slowing down to a crawl. Not just to drive around my father's Maserati, but to gawk at me, perhaps out of curiosity or merely for entertainment. One car stops directly in front of father's car. It's a deep green Subaru, a typical northwestern hiker's car, with a typical hiker sitting behind the wheel. A woman in her forties or fifties, her graying hair pulled up into a bun, her neck buried deeply in the collar of her REI rain jacket. She looks at me, looks at Papa, takes out her phone, and begins to dial. Great, police will be here soon and then I'll have to go home, whether I want to or not. I have no other legal guardians.

"Ailen, sweetie, please get over onto this side. Let's talk about this. You don't really want to do this, do you?" Papa takes another step toward me, his hand outstretched.

"Stop right there!" I yell and edge away, passing my hands over the railing.

Hunter comes up behind my father.

"Ailen, what the fuck? Don't do this, please, don't do this. Want me to help you to get over?"

Papa turns to Hunter, his rage about to burst.

"This is a family matter, young man. I asked you to leave me alone with my daughter. It's none of your business, so please, leave now."

"But she's my friend."

"I'll make sure she won't be soon."

I try to understand what he means by that, when I hear someone sing my name again. The sound comes from the lake. I look down.

"Ailen Bright, silly girl, we're waiting here. Come join us. Remember what we talked about? We already got interrupted once, I won't let it happen again. Come on, don't make me wait." Five small dots float in the water beneath me. I squint to make out their faces. Four sirens and Canosa, my big sister, the boss.

My breath gets stuck in my throat and my fingers slide off the rail from sudden sweat. Canosa waves her tiny hand from 167 feet below, her tangled hair bobbing in and out of the water. Her voice reaches up to me in a melodic purr, amplified by the open air.

"Ailen Bright, do it for your mother, remember? Hurt him, for hurting you mother. All I need from you is your soul. You have no use for it anyway. Come on, jump. It's fun," she giggles, and the other sirens join in. Their laughter echoes across the water. I look up at Papa and Hunter to see if they heard. They're engaged in a conversation, their voices reaching me as if from the end of a tunnel.

"You swear? You swear you will do what you said?" I shout, looking down.

"Be one of us, come on," Canosa shouts back.

Nothing exists in my mind except the wish to join her. My clammy hands begin to slide. I imagine myself as one of the sirens, beautiful and fierce, my limbs strong, my body womanly, my voice enthralling. I curl my toes, gripping the concrete, and then relax them, ready to fly.

The height awes me. The water is blue. Blue is my favorite color. I wanted something blue for my birthday, something small. Instead I got something big. There is so much of it, and it's so beautiful, so calm. It will never fade, it'll always be there for me. It won't leave me like my mother did.

"Mom, I understand now how you felt. I was wrong. This doesn't look scary at all. This looks like peace."

I hear cars honking, hear Papa shouting and Hunter calling my name; I hear police sirens whine, red and blue lights flashing in my peripheral vision. It's a boring drone against Canosa's voice, and I think, what if she was here when my mother jumped? What if she will tell me why we never found her body? Was this the answer I was looking for? This must be it.

I listen to my heart. It's calm like the lake. And I'm calm, even happy. This is the best birthday ever, with the biggest present ever. And the best part? I don't have to share it with anyone else. It's all mine.

I turn to take one last look. Police officers, people who stepped out of their cars, they all blur into a wave of collective worry for me, one big canvas of open mouths and wild unbelieving eyes. I keep searching for Hunter but he's gone. My heart sinks, shred to pieces. Then I see my father. He's moving toward me with his mouth open, his eyes bulging out, and his fists balled up. He looks as if he's about to punch me.

There are five feet between us and I'm done looking at him. I'm done trying to anticipate his every mood and shaping my life to his wishes, suppressing everything I feel. I want to burst free of his control, to be weightless, to experience flying. I glance across the road and see several yellow phone boxes that are supposed to help suicide jumpers change their mind. I know the instructions inside by heart, having imagined this moment a thousand times.

LIFT THE PHONE.

I turn toward the water, let go of the rail, and lift my arms.

PRESS RED BUTTON ONCE.

I imagine Papa's face, always full of anger and frustration. I balance, waiting for something, some sign that I need to live. But there is nothing. And I'm done waiting, done hoping.

SPEAK CLEARLY TO OPERATOR.

"Today, I'm sixteen," I say to the sky and look down. "Today is my birthday. And, like my mother, today, I'm going to die."

REPLACE PHONE WHEN FINISHED.

I jump.

Chapter 5



Lake Union

Over the last six years of contemplating why my mother jumped off the Aurora Bridge and how it must have felt, I buried my pain and kept myself busy by researching every possible detail about suicide jumping. I read that objects tend to fall at the same rate regardless of their weight, as long as there is no major air resistance. The formula is distance equals sixteen times the amount of seconds squared. That means no matter how much you weigh, it would take you about three seconds to fall down 167 feet. On this rainy September morning it feels more like ten to me. Maybe because I'm so close to dying, my sense of timing becomes distorted. Strangely enough, the things that float through my head are facts. I hold on to them for dear life.

My name is Ailen Bright. I was born at 6:30 a.m. on September 7, 1993, two weeks early, weighing only five and a half pounds, sixteen inches long, head first, delivered by my father in our marble bathtub full of water, my mother giving birth naturally, without pain medication or any professional help. Exactly sixteen years later, I'm leaping to death, at about six in the morning, on September 7, 2009, weighing only 107 pounds, five feet six inches tall, feet first, escaping my father into a huge basin of water called Lake Union, to meet my mother's fate, on a whim, having used acid and weed as pain medication after rejecting professional help.

And one more fact. Today is a Monday. Suicide rates are highest on Mondays. I'm about to become another number.

All of these thoughts take less than a fraction of a second while my toes detach from the concrete. Air sucks me into a vortex of mad rush and kicks all thoughts out of my head. A floating sensation gets quickly replaced by sheer terror and an urge to grab on to something, anything, to keep from falling, but my fingers close on nothing. The wind sticks its cold hand into my open mouth and I can't make a sound, let alone breathe. Funny how your life always starts with a scream, but doesn't always end with one. My arms thrash like the wings of an immature bird, legs climb invisible stairs, ears ring loudly. My heart leaps into my throat and threatens to burst me apart. My skin burns from the freezing wet clothes stuck to it as if glued. I see everything and nothing, caught in a blur of sky, water, air, and tears.

Suddenly, I know that I just made the biggest mistake of my life. One minute of fantasy is better than nothing? Whatever gave me this stupid idea? Forget it, I changed my mind. I want to turn back time, I want someone to save me at the last second, like in the movies. But this is real life, and in real life the surface of the lake rushes at me with inhuman speed.

My survival instinct screams at me to do something. I forget why I wanted to jump, desperate to stop it. Six years of wanting to die go down the drain. All this gazing into water, wondering how my mother felt, every single image I conjured about it vanishes. Instead, a few intense questions overwhelm me. *What the hell am I doing? How the hell am I going to survive this? If I press my legs together and enter the water straight as a rod, feet first, will I have a better chance?*

Even that gets replaced by one internal cry: *FUCKTHIS SHIT, I DON'T WANNA DIE!*

As if to answer my plea, a voice rises from below. It doesn't echo like it did when I heard it from 167 feet away, it rings loud and clear making me want to touch it.

"You could've warned me you're jumping! First, you make me wait, then you let your father interrupt me, and now you're falling right on my head, and I just did my hair. Absolutely no manners. Didn't your mother teach you?" Canosa says, obviously irritated. Her words knock guilt into me and I want to shift my falling trajectory so I don't hit her, but it's too late. As if sensing my intention, she says, "There is no time left to change direction, you know that. Girls, scatter."

I manage to lower my head against the rushing air and look down, unable to blink the tears away. At three seconds of total elapsed time, my falling is about to end. It's as if one moment I fall, and another I don't

anymore. All I see is five giggling sirens swimming away in a five-point star formation and dark liquid underneath me, nearly touching my toes.

Then I hit water.

SPLASH!

Everything I read about diving from dizzying heights turns out to be true. After sailing through air for only three seconds, I pierce the lake's surface with my body, feet first, at the speed of seventy miles per hour. It doesn't feel like plunging. It doesn't feel like pool diving. It feels like crashing into a rock, solid and hard. My science teacher told me that entering water feet first is the only way to survive a fall from a crazy height like that. Right. Try jumping off a sixteen-story building with the intent to break through concrete, and you'll know how it feels.

My leg bones break. The impact rips off my hoodie and T-shirt, turns out my jean pockets. Smell, sound, taste, sight, touch, all collapse underwater into a tight fist of abrasion that scrapes my skin, shatters my vertebrae, and collapses my lungs. Another line I read flashes through my mind. Most suicide jumpers don't die from drowning, they die from the impact trauma. Only then, those who survive drown or die of hypothermia. Two very lovely alternatives, take your pick. The fact that I'm thinking this tells me that miraculously, I'm still alive, but not for long.

Water gurgles in my ears. Momentum carries me down, some concentrate of a girl, hard-packed with agony, hurled forty feet deep, to melt in her sorrow at the bottom of the lake and never come up. This is no marble bathtub. There are no rims to grab and pull myself out. This is the end.

Enveloped in white noise and excruciating pain, I understand what true end means. This knowledge pricks my gut and robs me of any remaining strength. I feel hollow. My mind is blank, an empty box that can't be filled because it stopped being real. Nothing seems real, as if time and space ceased to exist and got replaced by a strange void, a land of no yesterday and no tomorrow. I try pulling myself out of this nothingness, try focusing on the present, on the now. This is as *now* as it will ever get. I want to fill myself with stubborn endurance, a force that breaks every fence, every barrier, determined to reach its goal. On the brink of death, I want to live like never before. Everything that needed to be fixed in my life doesn't need to be fixed anymore. It's perfect, it's absolutely fantastic. All of it. My books, my house, my father, Hunter, even school. Why did I ever think to escape it? I want to keep living, no matter how awful it is at times. But the freezing lake water presses on my eardrums, burns my sinuses, shoots terrible pain through my broken bones.

"Somebody get me out of here!" escapes from my mouth. The words make no noise, only bubbles trailing into murk. I involuntarily bend, wanting to cry out from the sharp pain in my chest. My body

forms a perfect ninety degree angle. The trajectory of my gaze hits the bottom of the lake. I'm suspended about ten feet above, balancing in that place of not moving down anymore and not moving up yet, a momentary pause. It's dark. I'm cold. No, I'm not just cold, my skin is on fire, my muscles are mashed into one gigantic bruise. My head feels as if it's become a heavy bronze bell that tolls loudly, its walls shudder to the rhythm of my still beating heart.

I try kicking up and moving my arms, when darkness parts and a white figure swims toward me. It looms closer, now about twenty feet away, now ten. I find myself face-to-face with Canosa. Her hair resembles a floating white blanket, her wide-set eyes dominate her face, her skin glowing softly as if rubbed with a phosphorescent cream. Her gaze plucks the newfound strength out of me. I can't move, I feel paralyzed. She smiles, showing two rows of perfect teeth, too white for this darkness. It's not a happy smile, it's a type of final smile that's full of knowledge I'm lacking, and I choke on premonition. She licks her lips, cups my frozen face in her equally cold hands, and pulls me closer.

Our faces nearly touch. With one hand, she pinches my nose, and with the other, she clamps my mouth shut, probably to prevent me from inhaling water. As she does it, a little bit of liquid seeps in between my lips. I swallow. It tastes like an old pond where fish go to die, to rot, to float belly up for birds to feast on.

She turns my face left and right, examining it.

"Jawbone too square, nose too small, all features out of balance. Short forehead, eyes set too close, but a nice blue color. I like that. Eyebrows okay. Small ears. Fine, that'll do. But why, on earth, did you have to chop off your hair!?"

If I thought I was paralyzed before, I'm petrified now. Partly because this is the last thing I expected her to say; partly because she told me everything I hate about myself as if it's me talking. And mostly because this is the first time I've heard anyone speak underwater. Momentary curiosity pushes my panic aside. I watch her lips and tongue move freely, with no air bubbles coming out. Every word is amplified, as if spoken into a microphone, yet garbled and slightly distorted. Sound travels four times faster through fluid medium than air. Right. My mind escapes into facts again, but only for a fraction of a second. Lack of air, and an urge to inhale, yanks me back to reality.

I changed my mind, please, let me go. I wanna live. If I don't breathe in now, I will die! I scream in my head, but my body makes not a single movement of protest. I fall limp in Canosa's hold, mesmerized by her stare, fearing my chest will explode if I don't inhale soon.

She digs her fingers deeper into my skin, and scans my body. Her face is radiant with luminosity. Her voice sends vibrations deep inside my ears.

"And no breasts. Fantastic. How do you expect to lure men without breasts? Explain to me, please?"

That does it. I want to disappear. I want to cover up my pathetic chest, remembering that I'm naked from the waist up, but my arms won't move. Perhaps sensing this, Canosa's grip relaxes and she bites her lip.

"Oh, did I hurt your feelings? I'm sorry."

I can't tell if she's making fun of me or is just really crazy.

"I know how to make you feel better. Let's talk about your jump. That was one big leap, wouldn't you agree? You're a brave girl, I'm so proud of you. How did it make you feel? Was it fun?" She cocks her head to the side. I wiggle in her grip, feeling an oncoming dizziness, not caring anymore about my looks or her looks or anything else. *I wish I had never jumped*, I want to tell her. *If you take me to the surface right now, I'll never do it again, I swear. Just give me another chance. Please. Pretty please. I don't want to die.*

She's indifferent to my silent plea. She looks behind her and calls out to the other sirens.

"Girls, come over here. Look who I got. What do you think, she'll work out okay?"

I watch with a mix of horror and awe as the other sirens emerge from the depths of the lake and swim closer, forming a circle around me. At this point, the need to breathe makes me convulse; I feel like my brain will explode from pressure and my lungs will burst into a million pieces. Canosa shifts her hand and holds me up by the neck. I'm a freshly caught fish to her, struggling to get off the hook. Oblivious to my thrashing, the sirens join hands and float in a circle akin to a pack of mocking kids at school, about to call me names and make fun of me until I shed first tear. That's what girls always did, that's what these will do. Sisters? Newfound sisters, really? What was I thinking? How much more hopeful, naïve, and needy could I get? They're devious femme fatales who are about to kill me. Panic takes over and I let go of my bladder, feeling urine warm my thighs, thankful for not eating anything in the last twenty-four hours. That would've been a disaster.

"Look, girls, I think she wants to tell us something," Canosa says. "What is it, silly girl? Go ahead, don't be shy, we're all friends. We're your sisters, remember? It's what you told us for years, didn't you? Isn't that what you wanted, to become one of us? Well then, this is what it feels like to be at the bottom of the sea. Get used to it." Her smile transforms into a sinister grin.

Other sirens call out to me and to each other. They clap, which underwater looks more like doing weird upper arm exercises.

"Hell, yeah, we're getting another sister!"

"I always wanted one."

"Shut up, Pisinoe. Who cares about what you want? She told me she wanted to be a siren 'cause she likes my breasts."

"Don't talk to me like that. She told me she likes my hair, that's why."

"No, she doesn't!"

"She does too!"

After years of imagining them speaking in verses right out of epic Greek poems, this is the first time I hear them talk and it comes as a shock. My thoughts are interrupted. Sirens blur into what's about to become a girl fight, a tangle of limbs, swirling hair, piercing eyes. I'm trying to remember their names, but they're fading quickly.

"Shut up, all of you, you're making my head hurt!" Canosa yells.

My brain feels like it's about to explode from her voice. *Why are you killing me? What did I do wrong? I don't want to die. Please, help me get out.* Like watching a scene in slow motion, I see my limbs struggle to move against the thicket of water; I watch the sirens shift their heads up and laugh, pointing their fingers, emitting noises similar to a pack of dolphins that decided to titter at once.

"Girls, cut it out. She's almost ready," Canosa says. "Now, silly, you'll give me your soul. I hope it tastes all right, I hope it tastes exactly like..." She swallows.

Tastes like what? I want to ask.

"But never mind." Each syllable sends tremors deep into my torso. Circles swim in front of my eyes, distorting the sirens into what looks like fizzing pain killer tablets, the kind that never fully dissolve.

I close my eyes. Canosa lets go of my nose and mouth, and I gulp water involuntarily while someone grabs my feet and pulls me down. My feet touch sand. At the same time, stinky water rushes into my lungs scorching everything in its flow. Yet I keep gulping it, hoping for a thread of oxygen, for a bubble of air to survive.

When my body can't take any more water, gray light begins seeping in shafts through the darkness. Someone pulls my eyelids up. Two light bulbs blind me. No, it's not light bulbs, it's Canosa's eyes. Two gazing projectors—cold flickering fluorescents, with a bluish tint to them. She locks her gaze with mine and begins to sing.

*"We live in the meadow,
But you don't know it.
Our grass is your sorrow,
But you won't show it."*

It's the same song, but it feels as if she sings it with more force, directing it to some being trapped inside my chest; its gentle movement

tickles my ribs, like it did last time. My soul. I want to turn myself inside out and scratch, to get rid of this impossible itch. I notice that I don't feel much of anything anymore, no pain from broken bones, no freezing water, no urge to breathe, no headache. I'm simply numb.

The other sirens float around me, glowing, grotesquely twisted in motion with their arms and legs stretched out, their eyes directed at me. Greedy. I'm fresh meat to them, and they're starving, yet Canosa is the one who's having the meal. I wonder if they hate her for that. Their skin is devoid of color as if someone dumped an entire supermarket's supply of bleach over their heads and forgot to stir. In this darkness, I notice how everything about them is white, not the brilliant white of a new T-shirt, but the white of an old, stinky washrag in the school cafeteria. I shudder.

*"Give us your pain,
Dip in our song.
Notes afloat,
Listen and love..."*

They huddle close to me, reaching out, until the one who I think is Pisinoe, the youngest, touches my arm and then tears her hand away, as if in fear. I frown. My nerve endings must have atrophied from hypothermia, because I feel nothing. Pisinoe smiles widely and touches me again. As if that was a signal, the other sirens begin poking me, their hair floating, eyes glistening, fingers trembling in lust. Canosa keeps singing.

Perhaps emboldened by her indifference, the sirens pinch me, stroke me, squeeze me, and muss up my hair, as if I'm the most adorable baby doll they've ever seen. I gulp in horror because I still don't feel their touch. All this time Canosa floats directly in front of me, her gaze unbroken.

*"We wade in the lake.
Why do you frown?
Our wish is your wake.
Why do you drown?"*

As if deciding that her sisters had enough fun, Canosa snatches me away from them and holds me by the waist, peering deep inside my very core, willing my soul to come up. It beats against my clamped teeth and I know that I won't be able to contain it much longer before it pushes my mouth open.

*"Give us your soul,
Breathe in our song.
Words apart,
Listen and love.
Listen and love.
Listen and love."*

My lips pried apart, I watch a stream of milky substance drift from my mouth and into Canosa's. Her face becomes immobile, her eyes turn blank like two silver spoons licked clean. All goes still. The other sirens stop moving and float quietly, their eyes glistening.

*"We stir up your hope,
Calm down and let go.
Our love is your slope,
Slide here, don't forego."*

Canosa raises her voice higher. It trails through the water, amplified by the lake, reminiscent of a thousand violins filling the space with mint that can calm a sore throat or a high fever. I want it to never end. I'm not scared anymore. The water clears up, and my soul trails through it like a tendril of smoke.

*"Give us your life,
End in our song.
Because you
Listen and love.
Listen and love.
Listen and love."*

I retch and watch the end of my soul escape me into Canosa's mouth. A part of me gets lost in this moment forever. She sneers and gulps it up, licks her lips, closes her eyes, then burps. Our gaze broken, I become emptiness, devoid of any thought or feeling. I hear a strange echo, as if my soul is thrashing in a foreign ribcage. It sounds as gentle as rustling book pages, with undertones from my favorite songs and dripping water. It sounds... tart.

Canosa lets go of me, spreads her arms over her head, and hollers a guttural, painful, piercing cry. It leaves her mouth and enters mine, turning water to milk once again. Its terrible taste makes me want to throw up, yet it forces itself in, frosting my trachea, turning my chest to ice, and making my body feel heavy and swollen. This must be a part of her soul, given to transform me, to mutate me, to turn me into a siren. Before I can think anything else, her voice fills me to a bursting point, as

if someone turned the volume up, louder, louder. I can't stand the vibration, it's about to pop my ribcage, pulsing to the rhythm of my heart.

"Aaaaaah!" I cry.

The skin behind my ears tears apart. Desire to get rid of the noise overpowers my physical pain and pours out into another yelp. Now the muscles behind my ears tear open. I wail, shaking the water around me. And then I realize that I just made a sound underwater without breathing and I promptly close my mouth shut, astounded, processing what I'm feeling.

"Pity I can't have you for breakfast every morning, Ailen Bright. You taste pretty good, actually, just like I expected. How to explain it? A sweet soul-cake of innocence, sprinkled with bits of hope, made from scratch. Delicious...and tart." Canosa burps again, covering her mouth. "Excuse me."

Everything she says sounds impossibly loud. I hear every vowel, every movement of her lips. The pressing and the rolling of her tongue. The gushing of water between her words. And my soul. It rustles softly inside her chest. I clasp my ears to shut it out, not feeling the freezing water anymore or my bones or my skin or my lungs, yet strangely suffocating.

"Go ahead, don't be shy. Inhale," Canosa says.

Wincing at the sound of her voice, I decide to try. Water cools my throat and exists behind my ears. I inhale more water, and it sort of chills me, spreading a pleasant calm through my chest and exiting through...gills? I raise my hand to touch them, two raw wounds that have been recently opened. Two smooth slits under my fingers, rhythmically opening and closing. They must have formed when I was screaming.

"All right, then, you're done. I think we need to make this a proper occasion. Wouldn't you agree, girls? Happy Birthday, Ailen Bright. Welcome to our coveted siren family. Well, we welcome *you*, but *you* are not part of it yet." Canosa spreads her arms wide and attempts a bow, but floats upside down instead to the snickering of the other sirens. They swim up with the clear intent of touching me again.

"Give her space. Shoo," Canosa says.

The sirens float away, unhappy, yet obedient.

"Take a look at yourself, do you like what you see? Much better, I think. A far cry from that flat-chested, broken looking girl with unruly hair, I'd say."

I lift my arms. They're white. I wiggle my fingers, one by one, and try flexing my feet. Everything seems to be working as before, even better. I appear to be a faded self, just a notch, a few grades of

saturation lost. The water feels lukewarm, which means I'm as cold as a fish from a freezer. I reach again behind my ears, unable to believe that actual water is sprouting through my gills.

"This feels weird," I say and clasp my mouth, astounded at the power it emits. I can see with sharp clarity, make out every siren, and remember each by name. My heart wants to jump out of my chest.

"I'm a siren. I'm a siren. I'm not dead. I'm a siren." I want to keep mumbling this over and over again, to believe it. As if sensing my distress, the sirens float up to me.

There is Pisinoe, the youngest, giggling. Next to her Teles, the perfect one, snickers into her chubby fist. Behind them is Raidne, the one whose long, curly hair I envy. And, to the side, as if she's special somehow, Ligeia, the only one not smiling or making any sound; the shrill one, with the perfect bust. Looking at it, I quickly avert my eyes and look down, hopeful. A surge of joy pierces me at the sight of two beautiful, perfectly round protrusions. I quickly cup them with my hands, both thrilled and ashamed at my nakedness.

"I can breathe underwater. I can talk underwater. I'm a siren. I'm not dead. And I've got breasts," I say, and swallow.

"What's the problem, you don't like them?" Canosa floats close to me and peers into my eyes.

"I do, I do," I quickly respond, afraid she'll take them back. I wonder why I don't hear my soul anymore? It's as if she absorbed it.

"Good. I thought you'd approve."

Just as I'm opening my mouth to ask her about my soul, a distant warble distracts me. It comes from above.

"Everything is so loud. What's that noise?" I say.

"Ah, that? It's food. People's souls. Hear it?"

I concentrate. There are car honks, rain patter, pumping hearts, breathing, and, above all, a multitude of noises full of things people do: music they listen to, things they say, sounds from hobbies, the mechanical whirr of tools, a clinking of household items, an occasional hush of a paintbrush, a baby's cries, the smacking of a football, dog barks, and a million more. They mix into one breathing organism, fluctuating in its pitch, overlapping and creating a cacophony of impossible beauty—a pattern of human existence itself. Wishes, hopes, and dreams, orchestrated into a gentle concert that is both overwhelming and mouthwatering. I begin detecting flavors.

"Will I be able to taste them? Does every human soul have a taste?" I ask, instantly shrinking, remembering how I'm not supposed to ask stupid questions lest Canosa gets mad at me again.

"Babies are my favorite; their souls are so sweet, sweeter than candy," Canosa says, then grins. A chill runs down my spine.

"Babies?" I recoil. "Why would you eat a baby?"

"Why not? They'll grow up and die anyway. Would you rather live in pain for years and years or live happy for a few months and die without knowing what got you? Cause of death: lullaby. That's how I wanted to go." She looks through me, at something distant.

"So, if you converted me, then who converted—" I begin, when Pisinoe pinches my arm, hard. I hold down a yelp of pain and stare at her. She and the others glare at me, fingers to their lips.

"Anyway, we can't stay here for long," Canosa says, ignoring me. "Police are about to arrive to look for your lovely body. And I don't like their souls. They leave an oily aftertaste. Ugh."

At the word 'taste,' tightness spreads across my chest, nagging at me like a stomachache, except it's rather a yearning for fullness, a need for sound to fill my void.

"I think I'm hungry," I say, licking my lips and looking up.

Chapter 6



Lake's Bottom

An emergency flare drops into the water about fifty feet above. A tiny dot, it glows pink. I'm amazed I can see it sparkle and hear it fizz so clearly. Police uses flares like these to mark the spot where a suicide jumper landed, so they can locate the body. That means they think I'm dead. They must've dropped it from the bridge, because Seattle Police Harbor Patrol arrives on the scene barely a minute later. The jittering whop-whop-whop of a boat's engine threatens to puncture my eardrums. I curse my heightened siren senses, it's as if I'm raw all over. I cower and raise my arms in an attempt to somehow hide from it all. The created motion propels me down. Before I have time to react, my butt hits the sand and my hands shoot out to arrest the fall. Instead, as soon as they touch the ground, I jet in the opposite direction with ten times the strength! My body is not a weak bag of flesh anymore, it's a powerful machine. Ailen Bright, reborn. It's what I wanted, right? I beam.

My new siren sisters are clapping, giggling, talking to me all at once.

"One at a time, guys, please, you're too loud! I can't stand it, it hurts my brain!" I shriek, flinching at the sound of my voice, afraid to raise it again. Talking seems fine, but yelling promises to shatter my skull. Yet deep inside, something sinister is grinning. That something

tells me, *Try it out.* That something nags at me, *This is so cool. I bet you can do all kinds of stuff now. I bet you can crush bones between fingers, scream at a level of 130 decibels and watch windows burst, swim anywhere you want, chase submarines, siphon entire oceans through your gills, charm people with your song, and kill, kill, kill. Just think what you can do to your father.*

I grit my teeth, ball up my hands in fists, and spread my legs wide, imitating a warrior stance. The sirens watch me silently; Pisinoo throws two thumbs up and Raidne winks at me, chewing on a strand of her hair. I wish there was a mirror. I wish Hunter could see me right now. His face would light up and split into that crooked grin that I love so much. He'd ask me how the hell I did it, and I'd tell him. I'd tell him all about it and we'd share a joint.

Two divers leap over the boat's side and plunge into the lake. They begin descending, trailing two streams of bubbles. Their souls make a racket of noises, amplified by water and my heightened hearing. One is a mix of baseball hits, beer bottle clinks, and what sounds like cracking crab shells, with a touch of ukulele on top. All together it sounds... acidic. The other one emits something close to a breaking of potted plants, gun shots, and a whizzing electric shaver, all on a base of bad shower singing. Rubbery. No, oily. Just like Canosa said. Sensing a soul's taste based on its sound is indescribably cool. Forgetting everything, I crouch to push off toward the surface.

Canosa grabs my arm. "Hang on. Where do you think you're going?"

"Um, I don't know. I just..." I frown, trying to understand why I wanted to go up. "To eat?"

The sirens laugh, Canosa hushes them.

"Not so fast, silly girl, we're not done here. Not yet. If you want to be a part of our family, you've got to earn it," Canosa says. The sirens huddle away and whisper to each other, Ligeia slightly apart from them, in her own thoughts.

"But you said—" I begin.

"Hush!" She raises her right index finger. "I promised you *will* be one us. And by *one*, I mean a siren. So there are you. But I didn't say you'd be part of our family, sharing our hiding places, using our hunting grounds, things like that." She purses her lips, which she seems to be doing a lot. "And you're welcome."

"Sorry. Thank you! I thought... Well, if I wanted to be accepted into your family, how would I earn it then?" I say, sensing divers coming closer without even looking. Acidic and oily. I don't care that he's oily, sounds pretty good to me. My chest grumbles.

"Wanted to? *Wanted to*?" Canosa stomps her foot and a small cloud of sand particles floats up. "Girls, did you hear that? She doesn't think we're good enough for her. After all these years, she's turned out to be a traitor." She shakes with what appears to be fake sobs. It looks pretty comical under fifty feet of water and I suppress a snicker.

"To hell with this, you know it's a crapload of bullshit." Ligeia speaks up, her lips pressed into a line. She's taller than all of them, taller even than Canosa.

"Shut up and stay out of my business!" Canosa shrieks.

I expect Ligeia to duck her head like the other sirens do, but she only shrugs her shoulders and floats a short distance away.

Canosa is fuming. Her nostrils flare, water gushing in and out of them. "What is wrong with you? Aren't you grateful? I went through the trouble of giving you what you want, didn't I?"

I just look at her, unsure how to answer, terrified by her anger, yet unable to look away.

"Didn't I?" she shrieks, directly into my face.

"Yeah, you did," I manage.

"Good." As if someone flipped a switch, she's suddenly smiling.

"I'm still not telling you my secret, until you prove worthy of it." She turns on her heels rousing a little cloud of dust.

"Wait, where are you going? What secret?" I reach out to her, vaguely aware that the divers changed direction and are now swimming away. Bummer.

As if expecting my move, Canosa peeks over her shoulder and turns around. The sirens watch her. I get the feeling that they do this a lot. She's the star of the show and they're the audience. Any time one of them fails to play along, they fall victim to her anger. Lovely arrangement.

"Perhaps I know what happened to your mother."

I didn't think I'd ever feel frozen again in my life, yet here I float, frozen to my bones. In this instant, I decide to play along, to do anything she wants and pay any price to get her to tell me.

"You know what happened to my mother? What? Tell me, what? Please, I've been searching for an answer for six years. Oh, please, Canosa, tell me, I'll do anything you want."

"Really?" Her eyes flash with greed. "Hmmm, let me think." She taps a finger on her pressed lips. I wait, so do the sirens, occasionally whispering something to each other.

"How about, for starters, you kill a siren hunter." She flashes me a row of teeth.

A helicopter flips its blades above us. The rickety noise is bearable this time, I seem to be adjusting. Yet it unnerves me, I don't want to be discovered by police divers. Thankfully, they're searching in the wrong

direction, perhaps thinking that the current carried my body from under the bridge deeper south into Lake Union. That's right, one out of eight suicide jumper's bodies is never found. I suppress an urge to float to them and tell them they should stop looking.

"Where are you manners, girl, did you hear what I said?"

"Uh, yeah. Siren hunter. Wait, there is a siren hunter out there? You mean, like a guy hunting sirens and stuff? Who is it?" I say.

"Oh, yes, there is. And you're the perfect siren to kill him." Lips curled into a sneer, Canosa hisses.

"Why?" I ask.

All sirens converge around me and begin swimming to the right, calling out to me.

"Kill him."

"Kill him."

Their calls become a chant.

"Kill the siren hunter. Sing his mind away. Watch his flayed skin shrivel. Leave his bones to rot in a pile. Bury him in the sweet siren meadow." They swirl and swirl.

"Why me? And how the hell am I supposed to kill him? Do I just eat his soul?" Their spinning makes me dizzy.

"A siren hunter has no soul, stupid."

"We can't hear him because of it."

"He hunts us when we feed, spying on us, catching us unaware when we're most vulnerable. You know how creepy that is?"

"He scares me."

"I think he's a pervert!"

I feel lightheaded at the amount of information. "Okay, fine, if I have to kill a siren hunter, I'll do it. Just tell me what to do and how I can find him."

Abruptly, the sirens stop spinning.

"Oh, that part is easy. It's your father," Canosa says.

"What?" My knees give out and I slowly float down to the bottom, sitting there with my mouth open. "My father is a siren hunter?"

"Duh! Stop asking stupid questions, silly girl. Will you ever learn to think before you talk?" Canosa swims up to me.

"But, my father. It's impossible. Why the hell would he do that? He has a job. He owns his own business and it's making good money. I mean..." I try to find an argument, but somehow, all of this makes sense. His hate for women, his favorite way to drill me about what women were really made for, and his favorite answer to that question about them being only good for hauling water. His hate of noises, and of all things wet. His constant yelling at mom to shut up whenever she sang.

"Wait a second, did you turn my mother into a siren when she jumped off the bridge?"

"Will you kill him or not?" Canosa says, as if she didn't hear my question.

"Did you—" I begin, when she squeezes her fingers around my neck, choking me, and leans her face to my ear.

"Just so we're clear, silly girl, on who's the boss here, okay? If you want to play along with us, do what I asked you to do. A favor for a favor. You kill your dear papa, and I'll tell you what happened to your mom. Do you understand?" She slips her fingers into my gills and a sharp pain sears through my body.

I nod.

"See? I like it when we're all in agreement. Well, then, is your answer yes or no?" Canosa lets me go. I sit, staring up at them all. I'm torn. Here is my chance to do what I've always dreamt of doing; I've never admitted my darkest secrets, my most gruesome ideas about what I'd do to my father, if only I could, especially right after his assaults.

My hate collides with whatever is left of my childish love. I tether on the edge of indecision, hearing my heart beat like crazy, balling up handfuls of sand.

I love him. I hate him. But does he love me? Did he ever? Was there a moment maybe, when I was born, when he delivered me, or when I was a little baby? I'm like a series of petals torn off of a daisy, in perpetual wonder. He loves me, he loves me not, he loves me, he loves me not. I hate myself for this debilitating inability to decide.

"Why are you doubting yourself, silly girl? Didn't you ever wonder where he goes on those long boat trips? Didn't you ever ask yourself *why* he goes all alone? Why he never took you with him? It's because he hunts us, sirens, he wants to kill us all."

"But why would he do that, hunt you, I mean." I study my palms, feeling oncoming anxiety. The pressure to decide looms over me akin to a guillotine. Another second, and it will fall, snapping off my head.

"Ailen Bright, not bright at all. Because we're sirens and he's a siren hunter. We exist to kill each other. That's our game."

I look at Canosa's face, forever young.

"I've read every single book about sirens, and none of them mentions anything about siren hunters. It can't be true." Yet I know she's right. And I know why me killing myself would've never hurt him like I'd wanted. It was a wrong idea. He doesn't love me. Never did, never will. He never loved my mother, either. He's probably incapable of loving anyone. Of course he can't love, he doesn't have a soul! Another thought strikes me.

"So, you guys are saying that a siren hunter doesn't have a soul, which makes sense, because then sirens can't hear him. But how did he become a siren hunter? Who turned him?"

"Too many questions, silly girl. We'll talk after you do what I've asked you to do," Canosa says.

"So you know?"

"I really don't like repeating myself. Yes or no?"

"All right, I'll do it." My heart sinks at the idea. "Yes, that means, yes."

"Good."

Above us, and about fifty feet south, water boils with police activity.

"I'm tired." Canosa swims away from me. "See you."

She huddles between the sirens and they float away.

"Wait!" I follow them, when Ligeia looks back and waves me away. I understand what it means. It means, all right girl, do what she told you to do or stay away. You want to be a part of our family, you've got to earn it. Now, go do what you've been told, and then come back and we'll talk.

I flap my arms and legs lightly, alone in the murk, unsure what to do next. And I'm starving. My chest grumbles with a rolling emptiness, as if it's a vacuum asking for music, for the divine vibration called human soul. It's tugging at my core, and I turn my attention upward. There, above the water, hangs the Aurora Bridge, with cars chasing across it north and south, with plenty of souls to feast on. Or, I could surprise a couple of bikers on the Burke-Gilman Trail, or I could...

"Wait, I have no idea how to feed!" I say to nobody and to myself at the same time. "And she didn't tell me how I'm supposed to kill a siren hunter. I mean, if he doesn't have a soul, then how the hell am I supposed to sing it out? Does this mean that all this time my father had no soul?" I shudder at the thought, scratch my head, and consider following the sirens. But something tells me my effort will be futile and that this is a test, like an initiation or froshing of sorts. I'm expected to figure this out on my own. Stubbornness takes over.

"Fine, Canosa, I don't need you to tell me how to do this. Watch me."

I kick with my legs and swiftly propel myself upward in a couple of butterfly strokes, then pause about five feet from the surface. Where do I go now? I suppose Papa is still on the bridge, but no matter how hard I listen, I won't hear him because he has no soul, if what Canosa says is true. Great. I could try going home, but he's probably at the police station right now giving a report on my disappearance. That means I'll have to wait till he gets home, which he probably won't do as he'll have to go check on his store like he does every morning, tell his employees he won't be there today. After that, he'll get home. No, I know what he'll

do. He will get on his boat, to hunt. He'll probably figure out by then that, because they didn't find my body, there is a high chance I got turned.

I wonder if Canosa turned my mother into a siren. Then, when Papa was looking for her, she turned him into a siren hunter. No, that doesn't make any sense. Why would she turn someone into a siren hunter so he could hunt after her?

Puzzled, I frown. I decide to give up for a while, hoping that I will uncover more clues in the future, or simply kill Papa and Canosa will tell me. And what if she doesn't; why would I trust her?

My thoughts get interrupted by the sound of a human soul, about twenty yards north, on the Fremont side of the shore. There are other sounds around it, but this one stands out and rings special. On impulse, I swim toward it. It comes from the Lake Washington Rowing Club marina. Papa is a member there, it's where he parks his boats and kayaks. The soul seems to be moving toward me, it detaches from the dock area and glides south across the canal. I hear the drizzle of the rain and the splashing of paddles. Someone is rowing out on the boat. In this weather? Must be a rescuer looking for me, or maybe another diver. But why would he row out on a wooden boat and not use a motorized one?

Curiosity wins, and I inch closer. It sounds delicious. A mix of homey sounds, like the clanking of dishes at dinnertime, and the chirping of birds from behind a window, slippers shuffling across a parquet floor, a guitar, and some kind of rumble, a mechanical rumble. Delicious was the wrong word for this. I think this sounds sweet, sweet like a baby, like what Canosa said about babies' souls. Only this is not a baby, it must be an adult.

Tongue over lips, anticipation makes me shake. I'm very hungry now.

"I'll show you what women were made for, Papa. Just you wait. I'll feed first, and then I'll be after you. I bet you miss me right now, oh, I bet you're crying."

Rare fish swim past me, their souls ringing like bicycle bells. Jing-jing. I wonder if all animals have souls and if I can maybe eat them too.

The rowboat is closing in on me fast, as if the person in it knows exactly where I am. That creeps me out, but then I hear the soul's sound with new clarity, and forget everything I ever knew or wanted to know. No sound exists in the world except this.

It's familiar and warm, like home, like hands, like breakfast. Even a bit like Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*, which Hunter made me listen to whenever we got stoned, under the pretext of cultural enrichment and a divine experience, because somehow, classical music supposedly makes you feel higher, or something like that. I admit, after a couple of

joints, it did sound good. As it does now. Everything I hear coming from this soul feels sweet and warm like a freshly baked homemade apple pie, like comfort food. I decide I don't care who it is, I have to try it.

I float up and drift, submerged a few inches from the surface, holding my face below the water, thinking about how I will strike. I'll probably grab the boat and overturn it. But what if this person drowns before I have a chance to sing? No, I'll have to do it in the boat.

Hunger punches my chest from inside out, twists my muscles like wet rags in the hands of a washing woman. I want this soul so badly, I gag. Dry heave slides up my throat, its fingers scraping my mouth. This is too much to bear and I retch. This must be how people feel when they haven't eaten for a week.

The boat inches closer.

I hug my pain and float like driftwood. How will I do it, then? Crawl into the boat? What if it's a woman, what if she freaks and starts screaming? There are plenty of police around. *Fuck!* I can't decide what to do.

The boat is about ten feet away. A few seconds, and it will be upon me. The soul bursts into such a sweet melody that it wipes every thought from my mind but one; *I want to feed.*

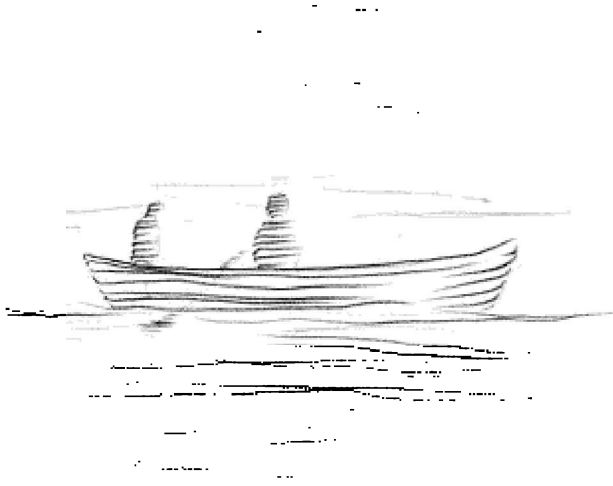
I tense and close my eyes, to concentrate.

One. Two. Three.

The boat slides directly above me, its hull nearly touching my face, its two paddles methodically plunging into water and then stopping. Whoever is in it, for whatever reason, decides that he or she needs to stop. Right over me. Inertia carries the boat and it glides away. I watch its tail clear the space above me, its dark shape bobbing slightly up and down.

I don't know how a siren is supposed to feed! The thought enters my brain a second too late. It all happens on some newfound instinct. I strike.

Chapter 7



Brights' Boat

I tense and kick, leaping into the air with inhuman speed, shrieking mid-jump to scare and arrest my target. But the second my head pierces the lake's surface, noise, smells, light, all hit me with unexpected intensity and I promptly shut up. The sky is too bright, the air is too warm. Raindrops are too sharp, and the sounds are too many. There is screeching, talking, whirring, honking. Propelling upward like a bullet, I lift my legs, crossing my arms over my face for protection, as if it'll help. Good luck. I'm not human anymore, I'm a newborn siren. With my eyes closed, scared to see who it is I'm about to kill, I hang midair for a split second, and fall. A new sense of direction makes sure I land into the boat and not the water. My feet make a loud plopping noise within inches of someone warm. It's someone emanating such a multitude of scents and sounds that a bout of nausea rolls over me. I want to throw up, yet at the same time, I want to taste this overwhelming sweetness. I want to eat.

There is metallic odor of anxiety, mixed with fresh sweat and a touch of cigarette smoke, trailing from his skin. It's a he, I don't know how I know, I simply do. As if done waiting for an opportune moment, the melody of his soul hits me full force, a beautiful harmony broken up by a hinge of pain. It emits emotional vibrations, I can almost taste them. Surprise. Fear. Awe? Why would he feel awe. Is this how it's supposed to be, some kind of killer admiration? Before I can think anymore, a fight erupts inside of me, the new versus the old. The new

demands I open my eyes and feed right this second, the old squints even harder till I feel like my whole face will collapse in on itself. The new opens my mouth, the old clamps my mouth shut with an audible click and makes me shudder all over. The new is the siren, the old is the human, and the siren wins. The syrupy substance of my victim's soul pours over me and I break into a song on instinct.

Perched like a bird, and holding the sides of the rowboat for balance, the first few verses of *We Can't Be Apart*, by my favorite UK band, Siren Suicides, rings from my lips. I don't know how I decided to sing exactly this, but I always listen to it when I miss Hunter; it makes me ache and feel comfortable at the same time.

*"There you are,
Without me you cry.
I surround you,
Love me or I die..."*

Deep notes weave out of my mouth, dripping into his—a kiss of death without touch. A surge of goose bumps passes over my skin as I feel his living force resonate to my tempo. It's like that tremble from singing in the school choir, that one rare moment when everyone hits the same note and you become one huge voice-conducting column. Until, of course, some idiot screws it up and the feeling is gone.

I feel human warmth roll over me in waves of breath, it makes me hungry. All logic squandered, my new primitive side drives to push for more, but something is blocked. There is no flow. I don't know what flow there is supposed to be, but the process seems to have gone wrong. Whoever it is I decided to feed on, is trying to say something. I don't want to hear it or I'll lose control. I'm supposed to be mesmerizing and enthralling in a new and powerful way, right? Then why do I feel like dying all over again?

*"I adore you.
See me or I fly.
I dream of you.
Dream with me, don't lie..."*

His soul reverberates to my rhythm, tunes in and morphs into a submissive harmony. I imagine it happening. I imagine bending it, telling it to shed its host, pulse to my beat, slink inside of me. I imagine the warmth filling my chest, unclenching an agony of hunger, replacing my void with fresh soul. What's really happening is, nothing. Nothing

happens. Something is wrong, I'm doing something wrong. Still, perhaps out of sheer stubbornness, the siren in me urges me to keep trying.

*"Can you hold my hand,
Can you hold my heart?
Can you hold my soul,
I can't be apart..."*

A warm hand touches mine and I choke on the last note, nearly shrieking, hunger piercing me with a jolt. I open my eyes. Light sears my retinas with excruciating clarity. Visions filter through a kaleidoscope of colors and shapes—neon instead of pallid, pencil-sharp instead of blurry. I blink through tears. My song dies at once, because two things happen.

Number one, I can't believe my eyes.

"Hunter?"

Because it's Hunter's hand that's touching mine, Hunter's face that's blinking inches away from mine, Hunter's breath that warms me. On some level, I knew. Only Hunter's soul could sound so deliciously homey and overpowering at the same time, only his soul could bring me endless comfort. My heart rate speeds up to its maximum possible beats per minute and threatens to pop my eardrums. I'm both horrified and ecstatic to see him.

And number two, I realize what's gone wrong. When Canosa turned me into a siren, she made direct eye contact with me, which must be an essential part of the turning process and, probably, the feeding process too. What did I do? I tried killing with my eyes closed. Thank God.

"*Fuck!* I thought you were some random guy, I almost killed you," I say, and fall down on my ass, unable to hold my balance anymore, and thanking my poor memory instead of cursing it, as usual.

Of all the things Hunter could say or do, he grins his crooked smile, with that familiar dimple in his right cheek. He looks nonchalant, as if we just met up on the Aurora Bridge and decided to go for a boat ride to observe rain from the open lake on a cloudy Monday morning. A fancy new way to skip school.

Hunter brushes hair out of his face, blinks off raindrops, and looks at me with his blue eyes. All I see are his irises, two mini Ferris wheels, spinning. Spinning to the magnificent *Summer* season concerto by Vivaldi, a clear undertone of his soul. It makes me dizzy, makes my senses twist into a funnel and curl.

"Say something! I hate it when you're quiet like this. How did you know... what the hell are you doing here, in..." I notice the finely polished paddles, the maroon paint of the bench Hunter is sitting on. "... my father's boat?"

"Um... being snuffed out by a siren?" He swallows hard, his pupils enlarged to the size of quarters. "You look awesome, by the way." His chest heaves up and down, he licks his lips.

I realize both my T-shirt and my hoodie are missing, having been torn off on violent contact with the water. The only item of clothing I have on are my favorite skin-tight, faded jeans, wet and clammy against my skin. Which means that I'm naked from the waist up.

"Oh, my God, I forgot. Stop staring!" I hug myself, covering my chest with my arms. Hunter's expression doesn't change, it's as if he's now looking *through* my hands, his gaze steady, drooling.

"I said, stop it! Don't look!" I cringe at hearing my own voice. My body is a natural sound amplifier for it. Yelling will take some time getting used to.

"I wasn't looking, I swear." He gulps and focuses intently on his rain jacket zipper. In one swift motion, he unzips it, takes it off, and throws it to me, pulling the hood of his cotton sweatshirt over his head. Raindrops quickly stitch dark dots on his shoulders.

"But what about you? You'll get soaked in no time. It's just cotton."

"I'll be fine."

"No, you won't. You'll catch a cold or something."

"Don't worry about me. I'm fine. I can go like this for hours. I was born in Seattle. We don't believe in rain. So please, put on the fucking jacket already? We're running a risk of being spotted."

"Oh," I say. I've been so preoccupied with Hunter and my own new existence, that I completely forgot about the possibility of witnesses staring down at us from the bridge. Not to mention the Seattle Police Department Harbor Patrol and their motor launch, gently bobbing about twenty yards away, or their divers.

I quickly ball up the jacket and press it against my chest. "Turn away or close your eyes. I'll tell you when you can look."

"All right, all right." Hunter raises his hands and theatrically puts them over his eyes. "See, I'm not looking."

"Don't peek!"

"Put the damn jacket on!"

I thrust my arms inside the sleeves, run the zipper all the way to the top, and stick my hands into the pockets.

"I'm done," I announce, and only now look around. We're sitting in the rowboat way south from the Aurora Bridge, having drifted off past the marina and out of earshot of the commotion. Red and blue lights flash on top of the bridge, and a couple officers peer down from the side

where I jumped. If they look from the other side, they will undoubtedly see us. Further north, a Harbor Patrol boat floats idle. I seem to be taking in noises better, as well as colors and smells. Out of the depth of my sluggish memory, a question surfaces.

"Wait a second, how did you know I'm a siren?" I turn and look Hunter in the eyes, he quickly glances up as if to check out the rain, then looks at me, steady.

"Who else could you be, to survive a drop like that?"

His answer comes too fast, without any doubt or surprise on his face, as if he expected me to ask.

"You say it like you knew it ahead of time."

"No, no, not at all. Are you kidding, how could I know? I mean, there I was, strolling along the bridge this fine morning..."

"Yeah, what exactly were you doing on the bridge? It's not like it's a new way to walk to school, is it?"

"I tell you what, let's get out of here and talk on the way, I'll explain everything. Cool?" He grabs the paddles and plunges them rhythmically on either side of the boat, heading east and deeper into Lake Union.

I open my mouth, swarmed with a sudden urge to ask a million questions, but not knowing where to begin. I'm shaking from the sinking understanding that I am, indeed, alive—and a siren at that. I'm tempted to jump into the water and test how fast I can swim. At the same time, hunger raises its ugly head again and I try to push it down, because Hunter's soul sounds too tempting. I take a deep breath. So my lungs work on land, and the gills work underwater. Nice.

"First, where exactly are we going?"

"I don't know, we'll figure it out. Let's dock the boat somewhere and catch a bus to my place. The brakes on my truck have gone bye-bye, so—"

"Fine, that works."

"Do you have any shoes?"

"No, I'll be okay barefoot. Don't you change the subject! Did my father give you his boat, to look for me? Is that how you got it? Did he tell you where to find me?" As I talk, I think back to what Canosa said about my father. He is a siren hunter. He must have known that if my body wasn't found, I've probably turned.

"No, I sorta... borrowed it."

"Borrowed it?" I repeat.

"Yeah, but I'll return it, I swear."

"Where is he, anyway?"

"At the police department, I'd guess."

We pass a few morning commuter yachts. A woman my mother's age leans over the side of one and waves hello to us, her practiced, polite smile makes me want to punch her in the face. Maybe because I

will never have a mother like that, the proper type, one who makes lunches for you to eat at school and ferries you around to your activities. Disgust with myself for thinking this poisons my mood and turns it to anger.

“Why the fuck didn’t you tell me it was you? Why didn’t you stop me? You could’ve at least said something. I could’ve killed you, you idiot, don’t you get it?” Though I try to say it as quietly as I can, it comes out close to yelling, and I wince. I need to be tuned, like a brand new piano.

“Who says I didn’t try? I swear, I tried calling you by your name a couple of times. Honest. You were gone though, you should’ve seen yourself. It was like, hello, can you hear me? I liked your song choice, by the way. Kudos. It’s your favorite by Siren Suicides, isn’t it? What was it, *We Can’t Be Apart*, right?” That grin again. “And your voice, man...it was like you sang into a microphone off the stage, like at a rave party or something. It was wicked.”

“Nice try, Hunter. Flattery will get you places, I’m sure you know that and are using it to your advantage.” As much as I try, I’m not mad anymore. Hunter has this tricky way of dissolving my anger with his words. I don’t know how he does it. “Regardless, you’re still full of shit.”

“Oh, yeah? How so?” He pushes on the paddles, leaning forward, then lifts them out of the lake and leans back, all in one fluid motion like an Olympic competitor. We’re making good time, floating past Gas Works Park’s monstrous pipes, dark and twisted in the rain, shimmering in my new field of vision.

“You were checking out my boobs, and now you’re hoping that a compliment will make me forget it.”

He makes an innocent face and I can almost see his mind trying to work out an answer.

“You don’t need to make up an excuse, I get it. ‘Oh, we’re only friends.’ Bullshit. And,” I say, before he has a chance to come up with a lie, “somehow, you knew exactly where to find me, as if you knew I was being turned into a siren. And yesterday you were telling me all those stories about sirens—girls next door and other shit like that. I thought you were stoned out of your mind! Yet, here we are. I’m a real siren now, and you’re helping me run away. How do you explain this?”

“Well, let’s see here.” He lets go of the paddles for a minute and scratches his head. With my new senses I can almost see steam rising from his worked up muscles, warm under his cotton hoodie, now an unidentifiable shade of wet rug. “For one, you don’t strike me as the Fremont Troll’s wife...”

“Stop it. It’s not funny, okay? I’m being serious. I could’ve killed you.” Talking is easier now, I’m adjusting. My ears stopped hurting and objects stopped looking as if they were traced with a neon marker.

"That would've been a pity. I'd feel so sorry for myself. Poor Hunter Crossby, snuffed out by a siren."

"You're impossible!" I lean toward him and lightly punch him in the stomach. A momentary surge of hunger pangs me. Surprised, he doubles over, slides off the bench and smacks his forehead on the edge of it; he plops in the puddle at the bottom of the boat. I quickly pull back and study my hands. The boat swings on the waves, left and right, so I grab its sides in a naïve attempt to steady it.

"Owww!" he yelps.

"Oh, shit. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry! I keep forgetting I have this new strength. Are you okay?"

He gasps for air and rubs his forehead, then, miraculously, he breaks into a grin. "Dude, that was awesome. Totally worth wetting my pants."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"The punch."

"Oh, God." I cradle my head. It's no use. I inhale and exhale loudly, pondering the deep meaning of the difference between the female and male thought process, when Hunter tugs on my sleeve.

"Hey, I got something for you."

"What do you mean?" I look up to see him fishing in his jeans' pocket and pulling out a crumpled envelope made of blue recycled paper. He places it on his right knee and attempts to flatten the creases with the palm of his hand, which proves to be a futile effort because the paper gets wet in the rain. I think I know what it is and study my toes, wiggling them, trying to conceal my excitement.

Hunter pushes the envelope at me with one hand, and with his other, he wipes the snot from under his nose, now pink from being outside in the wet and cold for so long. I watch raindrops paint dots on the paper. At first they appear dark blue, then they turn to indigo, and finally, they settle on a deep royal purple.

"Happy Birthday, Ailen." He peeks up at my face. "Is that a smile I see?"

"Go away." I press my lips together, still trying to be mad, but unable to. My heart's racing, and one thought pounds in my head: *He didn't forget. He didn't forget like he did last year. He got me a birthday present! Does it mean that we're more than friends now? Is he trying to tell me something? What could it be though, some gift card or maybe cash? If it's cash, I hope it's fifty bucks. I could buy some weed and a new Siren Suicides hoodie, because mine is gone now, torn off by the stupid water.*

I hear my fingers touch the envelope, hear the slightest movement of skin against paper fiber. Over this gentle rustle, I hear Hunter's soul, the impossible sound of happiness wrapped in that homey, comfortable feeling. And in the background, I hear the rolling waves, the drizzle of rain, boat and car traffic, and, above it all, the buzz of human souls, each amplified by the open sky over the lake. I realize I've gotten used to the constant noise and have managed to tune it out while focusing on my conversation with Hunter.

"Are you gonna keep guessing or will you rip it open already?" Hunter says, tapping his foot.

"Stop, it's annoying."

"Translation: I act like I hate you but I want you to stay." He shakes his head like a dog, water flying everywhere from his wet hair.

"Stop it! It's not that." I swallow and cradle the envelope close to my belly to keep the paper dry. "It's just hard. I'm hungry. And you're..." I fall silent, unsure how he would take it if I said *delicious*, if I tried to explain to him that the waves of his warm breath make me ache and touching him makes me want to gobble him up whole.

"...so sweet and delicious?"

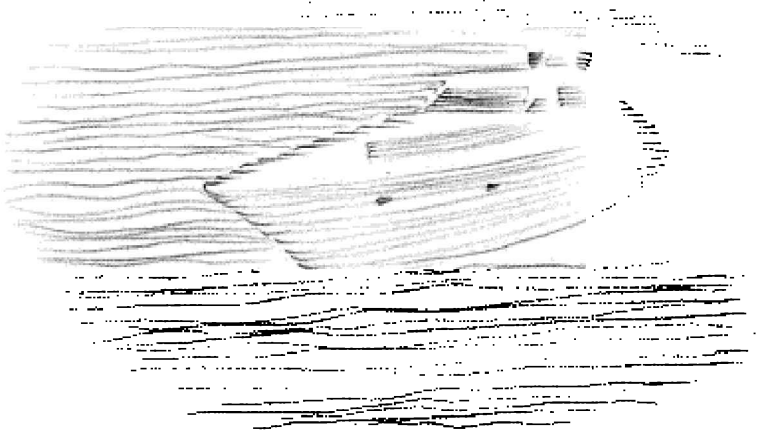
"How the hell did you know?" I shout out of surprise. My voice carries across the open water and I shrink in fear, having a bad premonition about how quiet and easy it was for us over the last half hour or so. Just then, as if to confirm my suspicions, the quiet bubble bursts. The racket of the patrol boat's motor echoes off the lake's surface, moving toward us. Another noise joins it, a mechanical purr that I know all too well, even though my father never took me on any of his trips. His boat. I strain to see where the noise is coming from, and it seems as though they're speeding along the shore just behind the Gas Works Park's half-island. That means, in another couple of minutes, they will pass it, turn the corner, and see us.

We look at each other.

"That's my father's motor boat, hear it?"

"Yeah, and the Harbor Patrol." Hunter grabs the paddles. "We are so toast."

Chapter 8



Seward Park

I look at Hunter but I don't see him. A brilliant image of my father's face flashes through my mind, asking me his favorite question, *Tell me what women were made for, go on.* My legs seem to fill with lead, my stomach flips up and down. A familiar fear makes me want to die rather than face him again. For as long as I can remember, he would ask me this question, and I'd always stumble, not knowing what to say, not understanding what he meant. He'd wait until I was filled with humiliation, and then offer his answer, *To carry water on their backs.* If I asked why, he'd slap me, and say, *Because back in time, if you had weakness in your character, you were forced to deliver water. And women are weak. I want you to fight it, to grow strong, to do better in life than that, do you understand?* And I'd nod, afraid to anger him any further. *I want you to stop being servile, to learn to protest.* But I'd always just shrink further, which would anger him even more, until his hand would hurt and he'd leave me be, silently crying.

"They'll be here in a couple of minutes. Three minutes, tops," Hunter says, breathing heavily from rowing. I look at him, not remembering who he is, or where we are, or what's happening.

"Huh?" I say, blinking. Reality rushes at me and I realize I'm clutching the blue envelope Hunter gave me, still unopened, as if it's a rope thrown to me overboard a ship and I'll die if I let go. I quickly stuff it into the rain jacket pocket and try to act normal. "Three minutes, you

said?" While I say it, I try to remember who *they* are and why I should be worried. Then I hear the engines and the world rights itself. Panic replaces my wonder, but before it has time to flourish, a strange tranquility calms me. I remember that I'm not a weak girl anymore. I'm a siren, and I can do wicked things. *You just wait, Papa, I'll show you what women were really made for.*

"More like two, now," Hunter says.

"Don't worry, I think I can handle them. At least I'd like to try and see what I can do, but I have a feeling this is going to be good. This is going to be fun," I say and flash Hunter a forced smile.

"Fun? You're going to take on a Harbor Patrol boat full of cops and have fun?" He chuckles, raising his eyebrows and questioning me with his eyes.

"What, you don't believe I can?"

"You just tried, unsuccessfully, taking on a kid sitting alone in a rowboat, so I'm sure this will be easy." He waves dismissively toward the approaching boats. "Take your time, go ahead." He continues rowing, shaking from adrenaline, his heart pounding like crazy. His grin fades, his eyes focus on me, and his arms move in one fluid motion. We're advancing at a turtle's pace compared to the motorized boats approaching.

My heart falls. This is Hunter's favorite trick to talk me out of doing something stupid. Paint a picture of a gruesome outcome and then nudge me on, knowing that I'll start doubting myself and eventually agree with him.

"I hate you, because you're right." I bite my lip. "I didn't think of that."

He grins, victoriously. "I'm just saying. Though we might not have much chance." He motions with his head behind me, and I turn to look, but I don't need to, because I can hear them. Both boats have sailed past the peninsula and are clearly on their way to get us. They're closing in fast, perhaps twenty yards away or so. An incomprehensible headache pounds a spike into my head. Great. I'm supposed to kill my father so that Canosa will tell me what happened to my mom, yet here I am, fleeing.

"Fine, you win," I say, and drop my eyes.

What a coward, always running, never daring to face my fears. I promise myself that, one day, I will. One day, I'll work up the courage to do it. For now, I'll simply focus on getting away and lying low, until I can figure out what I can and can't do, and get some practice.

Harbor Patrol is advancing on us, my father's boat just behind it. Both are going at the speed of seven knots, or eight miles per hour, and are painted an indiscreet shade of gray. Yet, they couldn't be more

different. The Harbor Patrol's boat is a standard motor launch, about twenty feet long, clunky and squarish, with black letters spelling *SEATTLE POLICE* on its hull, and blue stripes with the Seattle Police logo. My father's boat is three times bigger, a sleek Pershing 64 made by Ferretti, Italian, of course. It's more like a stylish bullet than a boat; a pleasure for the eye, with a maroon inscription on it that reads: *Talia*. My mother's name. He bought the boat in 1992, when they met, and named it after her. Then they got married, and honeymooned in Italy for Christmas, where my mom got pregnant. I always wondered what went wrong after that, but nobody ever told me.

Compared to these two motorized beasts, our rowboat goes at three miles per hour—as fast as Hunter can row. This fact trails through my head, and still, I can't move. I can't even talk for some reason, looking at the word *Talia*.

Hunter drops the paddles. "Dude, this is no use. We're screwed. I hate the idea of jumping into this cold brine. Brrr." He touches the water and shivers. "You probably won't even feel it, will you?"

I look at him and through him, hear him and don't hear him.

"Ailen?" He snaps fingers in front of my face, I don't move.

"Shit, Ailen, snap out of it!" he shouts. I don't blink, mesmerized by the advancing boat, like a deer caught in headlights, paralyzed, understanding that I'll never be a part of my previous life again, that I'm dead.

"Ailen, we're not gonna make it if you sit like this, do you hear me? Ailen! *Ailen!*" he yells in my face. I look at him, not seeing him again, thinking about my name. Ailen. It's a boy's name. My father picked it out, because in Old English it means "made of oak." It meant strength to him, only I was a surprise. He wanted a son, and, instead, he got a weakling.

I feel a tear silently roll down my cheek. Hunter pauses, takes a deep breath, wipes the tear off my cheek, and holds up my face. A wave of hunger sweeps me away like a wave of nausea and I gag involuntarily.

"Hey, you okay? Listen, we've got to get in the water and swim to the shore, do you hear me? You're a siren, for Christ's sake, stop acting like you're freaking stupefied!" My head lolls back and forth in rhythm to Hunter's attempt to revive me. The warmth from his hands makes me want to retch from hunger. To suppress it, I scan the horizon until I see downtown Seattle in the distance, the Space Needle to the right of it. A floatplane takes off and the rumble of its engine suddenly makes the world come alive with sounds, colors, and smells, as if a muted veil has been torn off.

I force myself to focus on Hunter, terrified by my desire to eat him. “Yes, I hear you. Water. Jump. Swim. Got it.” I turn back to check how far our pursuers are and see two rounded domes on top of Papa’s boat, two satellite antennas, a mere ten yards away. The domes shimmer as if looking back at me, slowly morphing into my father’s eyes—huge, round, terrifying. I begin hyperventilating, like I always do before he strikes me. Suddenly, all of this is too much. The sounds, Hunter’s touch, the hunger. My hands go numb, my skin feels as if it’s being prickled with a thousand needles. All I want is to get away from here, as far away as possible, to somewhere colorless, tasteless, and quiet. To hide under a rock. Disappear.

“Shit!” Beads of sweat roll off Hunter’s forehead, as he leans over me. I don’t remember how I slid to the bottom. “Don’t you pass out on me now, breathe! In and out, in and out.” I breathe, and hear the boat engines. Someone is shouting into a loudspeaker off the patrol boat to our left, announcing themselves and asking us if we’re okay. To our right my father’s boat levels with us. I can’t see him, but I can hear him take quick steps out of the cockpit, through the saloon, and onto the deck. He leans over the rail and I see his face, set in a strange mix of pain and anger, dark against the milky sky. Our eyes lock. I gasp for air, trembling, shaking my head *no!*

“I’m not coming home, Papa,” I say. “I’m sorry, but I hate our house. I don’t want to go back there. And you can’t make me, I’m a siren now.”

My breaths come out in sharp draws, fast, faster.

Then I see father raise his hand, and, like a signal, instead of my usual paralysis, it throws me into action. I no longer know how to think, my body seems to take over. The siren in me, she drives me. I sit up, push Hunter to the side, and lean forward, laying flat on my stomach at the nose of the boat, like a carved figurehead at a ship’s bow. I touch the lake’s surface, ignoring Hunter’s swearing, Papa’s repeated shouting, and a police officer’s voice through his loudspeaker. Except for the lulling sound of water, all noise vanishes into a long tunnel, far away.

My fingers are wet, then my hands, wrists, and arms up to my elbows. I feel the cool water. It calms me down. I dive deep into its rhythm, letting my arms hang and lightly bob on the waves, my eyes gazing into the deep blue liquid. I listen to the lake’s vibration, it hums to my bloodstream, reaches my heart, answers its beats. And I answer back, humming.

I begin with a low drone, deep from within my chest, through closed lips, blending with the gentle rush of the wind and the chirping of morning birds. It grows stronger, fueled by my moan of pain, flapping its wings like a swan and landing into the lake’s fluid sorrow. It

understands me, we speak the same language. I feel like it nods; I nod in return. And then it hums back. Together, with the lake, we create motion.

Perhaps mesmerized by this, the rain stops.

The rowboat begins to slide forward, in between the Harbor Patrol and my father's yacht. I take a breath through my nose and hum more, producing a tune without opening my lips. No words are needed. It sounds like a long and drawn out *mmmmmm*, the beginning of the word *mother*. The lake hums with me, and I feel a stream of energy passing through us. The water's surface becomes a corridor of speed and the rowboat happily glides down it. Foam sprays my face in a shower of droplets. If this was a floatplane, we'd have taken off by now. Going from a speed of three knots to twenty in a few seconds, it really feels like flying.

"Whoa! This is fucking awesome! We've lost them, look!" I hear Hunter yell to me from behind, over the noise of rushing wind. "How the hell are you doing this?"

His question interrupts my flow and I abruptly stop humming. Still, it takes me a moment to get back to reality and focus on what he asked. The rowboat instantly slows down and we pass through a shadow from the Interstate 5 bridge that's blocking the sky above us. I lift my upper body, twist, and sit up facing Hunter.

"I don't know. It just, sort of, came out on its own. But you interrupted it."

"Shit, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to." Hunter works at righting his hair, but it only bunches up on top of his head.

"No worries. I think I can pick up from where I left off." I bite my lip, hoping I'm right, mentally mapping out our journey. Another two and a half miles, and we'll make it to long and narrow Lake Washington. It's a dead end. After that, we'll have to escape on foot, somehow.

I take time to breathe. The sky clears from behind patches of clouds. The wind picks up, and small waves break against the boat's body, swaying it gently. I inhale the wet stink of marshes hidden under the fresh breeze that penetrates Seattle mornings right after the rain.

"Do you know how to do it? I mean, will you be able to do it again?" Hunter says, turning his head left and right. "Because, if we've gotta swim..."

"I think I can talk to the water. I'm not sure how though, I just kinda feel it..." I trail off, searching for some kind of answer.

"Awesome. Can you talk to it right now? Like, tell it to get us out of here? *Now?*" Hunter hugs himself, shuddering. His cotton hoodie is wet and sticks to his chest, his jeans soaked from the water's spray.

"Oh, my God, you're wet!" I want to reach out to him, but stop myself. I realize that if I touch him, I'll experience hunger again. The closer I am to him, the better I can feel the warmth of his breath, which has the effect of a freshly prepared meal wafting off its aroma toward a hungry person. I drop my hands into my lap.

"I'm fine, let's not worry about me right now, okay? Do you think you can keep us moving?" He waves his hand in a circle, telling me to speed it up. I find it a little too insistent, irritated at myself and trying not to spill my irritation onto him.

"Where?"

"I don't care where, anywhere!"

"Wait, why are you so eager to get away?" I think that if I get angry with him, maybe it will help me keep myself away, so I scoot closer to the nose of the boat.

"I was rescuing you," he says. I hope that he didn't attribute my moving away to me being somehow disgusted by him in any way.

"Then why didn't you simply hand me over to police or to my father?" I ask, while carefully monitoring my hunger.

"Huh," he chuckles. "Like I had a choice? You started your humming thing, and *Bam!*, we're speeding at some forty miles per hour." He grins, and I see a flash of mischief deep in his eyes, maybe for a split second.

"I'm not buying this, you know that? And you know what else I think? I think you're full of crap. I think you're hiding something from me. So why don't you tell me what you were really doing over there," I say with real emotion. Then I hear the rumble of the motorboat and forget everything else. "Oh, God, they're catching up with us."

"No shit, of course they are," Hunter says, that victory knowledge playing in the corners of his mouth.

"Fuck you!" I throw at him, without really meaning it, more out of habit than anger. He only grins back.

Trembling, I turn and lay down on my stomach to become one with the boat, its sides pressed into my armpits, my head positioned over its nose.

I touch the water and try to concentrate. It feels like touching the strings of a well-tuned guitar that's waiting to be played, still warm from the previous song. Instantly, it vibrates to the rhythm of my breath. It grabs my desire to connect and, as soon as I hum the first note, it hums back. Relieved, I inhale and hum more. It's as if the connection was so strong, that it wasn't fully broken, its presence waiting to be picked up again, eager even.

My whole body shivers to the tune. The rising hum surrounds me, barely interrupted by short inhales. I get lost in this sensation, ecstatic, giddy. Happy. And not hungry anymore, swept by movement.

I propel the boat east, into the narrow ship canal, under the Montlake Bridge, past the marshy greenery of Union Bay, and spit us out into Lake Washington at the speed of nearly forty knots to the bewildered gasps of early morning kayakers. I don't see them, but I can feel them staring at my back, burning a hole with their curiosity, and distracting me with their juicy souls.

I veer to the right and we glide along Lake Washington Boulevard to the surprised shrieks of its usual joggers and dog walkers. I realize that I'm aiming toward Seward Park, and I know why I turned here. The park is positioned on top of a peninsula and is covered with almost virgin woods, where we can quickly get lost and hide from our search party. Even though it used to take me three buses and almost two hours to get there, it's where I'd go when skipping school. I'd wander along hiking trails, eat wild berries, and then sit alone on the benches of its outdoor amphitheater. I'd smoke the afternoon away, pretending like I was watching a live performance of *The Odyssey*, or listening to my favorite songs by Siren Suicides.

I hum one of their tunes right now.

A couple more minutes, and we reach the park's north shore, the tip of its tongue-shaped land that sticks out into the lake as if in defiance. Its shoreline is traced with a layer of pebbles, then a strip of dried out grass dotted here and there with Douglas firs, then a ribbon of an asphalt trail, and, finally, a thick mass of trees behind it, mostly old growth. The last time I tried venturing inside, I nearly got lost and twisted my ankle after stepping into a raccoon hole.

The boat's bottom scrapes against gravel and we stop.

"Perfect," I say, wiping water and specks of sand off my face. "We made it."

"Why here? It'll take us like three buses to get to my place," Hunter says through chattering teeth. He throws one leg over the boat's side, probing the pebbles with his sneaker and seemingly studying the amount of water that oozes out.

"Well, where else? You told me you didn't care. If you had a better idea, you should've told me beforehand."

"Yeah, like you would've listened."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Never mind, the important thing is, we made it," he says in his theatrical voice that he uses when consoling me or trying to diffuse a brewing conflict.

I give him an evil stare.

"What did I say?" He raises his hands in a protective gesture that is also theatrical.

I purse my lips and climb out of the boat, examining the pebbles with my bare feet. I can feel the roundness or sharpness of each stone, yet the familiar pain you'd expect from having them dig into your soles doesn't register. I take a few steps, pretending to feel for pebbles, but I realize with horror that my whole body is dialed in on Hunter's warm breathing and longs for it, hungrily.

"Let's get this baby out of sight," I say, glancing back over the lake, watching for our pursuers, and casually registering the distance between me and Hunter. A few feet. I feel like I can control this. I scan the horizon. It's clear, only punctured here and there by the shaking masts of parked boats in the marinas along the shore.

"Sure, boss. Yes, boss." Hunter pushes against the end of the boat to help move it forward. I tug at the front, and accidentally tear it out of his hands. In one move, I manage to drag the boat out of the water and propel it a few yards toward the woods. It screeches across the asphalt loop road and stops smack in the middle of it.

"Holy shit," I say, staring at my hands, still not fully comprehending my new strength.

"Nice throw," Hunter says behind me. I hear him lift himself up and brush off his jeans. I want to turn to look at him, to say sorry, but I can't tear my eyes away from one of the trees that's standing a few feet away, my hunger forgotten.

It's a tall Douglas fir, nothing special about it.

"Uh-huh," I say, distracted by the fir's greenery, studying its every needle. Because it's not just simply green like I remember, like it should be. It's emerald, pulsing with shades of chartreuse on one end of the color spectrum and malachite on another, with every possible shade of green in between. It's green like I've never seen green before.

I hear the wet slosh-slosh of Hunter's sneakers behind me, and take off, intending to put a greater distance between us. Sure enough, my hunger diminishes as I run across the trail and to the blackberry bushes that grow at the beginning of the forest line. I catch my breath. Every tree and bush, and every blade of grass, looks magnificent. I try to take in as much of this beauty as I can—the colors, the smells, the feel when touched. It's as if my senses have been dialed up a whole turn of a volume knob, to the max. Water is brilliant blue, trees are brilliant green. I hear movement whisper to me from across the entire park—muskrats, beavers, river otters, turtles, owls, eagles, woodpeckers. Their souls form a cacophony of life, punctured by the souls of rare hikers. It all adds up to a divine concert that makes my empty chest rumble with hunger. I'm ready to hunt. An idea crosses my mind. I gently pull a blackberry off the nearby bush and place it in my mouth, bite on it, expecting a familiar taste.

Instead, I shriek and spit it out as soon as it bursts between my teeth, wiping my tongue with both hands like mad, tears breaking out in my eyes.

"What? What is it?" Hunter runs up to me from behind. "Ailen, what's wrong?" I immediately feel his warmth and hear the melody of his soul, they overpower the rest of the noises. A soul so sweet, I want to gobble it up right there. I close my eyes and squint to suppress the urge. A series of coughs has me bending over. "Would you tell me what the hell happened?" Hunter comes closer and looks up into my face.

I can't talk, pointing to my tongue, undoubtedly stained with blackberry juice, because the palms of my hands are purple.

"What did you do, eat a blackberry?"

I nod, breathing hard with my tongue stuck out, blinking tears out of my eyes.

Hunter begins laughing. I pick up and we laugh together. The burning sensation on my tongue slowly fades away and I swallow. My insides feel as if they've been scalded by acid, yet it's bearable. I cough again.

"Did it sting you or something?" he asks, and slightly brushes my cheek with his right hand. Both ravenous and terrified, I flinch at the warmth in his fingers; instantly hungry, I take a step back. He drops the hand away and pretends as though he was simply reaching into his hair, to right it. Which, of course, is impossible. He sniffs loudly and wipes his nose, looking at his feet.

"It burned me. It was like ten times the sourness and the sweetness and the tartness. I think I won't ever be able to eat human food again. It's too much. Too strong, you know."

"I hear ya," he says, still looking down and hugging himself, clearly struggling not to show me that he's cold. I'm afraid to reach out, afraid to feel the hunger again. Listening to his soul's vibrations, hearing its sweetness... I want to lunge at him and feed, feed, feed.

An awkward silence stretches between us, and I try to fill it with the only conversation crutch I know. Facts.

"Well, this is as close as it gets to the flowery island of Anthemoessa. Seattle style, you know, forever damp and green."

"What's that?" Hunter asks and raises his eyes at me. I think I detect a flicker of pain and then it's gone.

"The island. Where the sirens live. You know, femme fatales who dwell on an island in a flowery meadow? Whenever I sat in the bathroom staring at them, I always imagined that during the night they escaped here, that they really lived here, only coming to my house to visit."

"Ah," Hunter says, not impressed.

Not knowing what else to say, I inhale the smell of pine, pungent after the recent rain. I can focus on the sound of a single droplet of water splashing to the ground, or I can choose to hear it all in one loud stream. I attempt to tune out the overpowering melody of Hunter's soul, which is like trying not to gobble up candy after starving for a week and having someone wave it in front of your face. His warm breath, that comes at me in waves, touches something deep and cold inside me and makes me hungry. His touch is worse. I feel it more now, compared to how little I felt it when he first touched me on the rowboat under the Aurora Bridge.

So this is how a hungry siren feels.

I look at Hunter, understanding that I would have to tear myself away from him, in order not to kill him.

In this moment, I hear the racket of a motorboat. One very specific motorboat: an Italian-made Pershing 64, named Talia, for my mother.

Chapter 9



North Shore

In a fraction of a second, I gauge the amount of shit I've gotten myself into. Sound is my compass. My new attuned hearing is the sense that overpowers all others with its extreme acoustic sensitivity. I listen. Less than half a mile away, a group of joggers is running. Within a minute, they will stumble on a rowboat lying smack in the middle of the road. Behind me there's movement in the woods that I don't like. It doesn't sound human nor is it produced by an animal, because I can't detect any souls accompanying it, only the quiet rubbing of tree branches. In front of me, my father's boat cruises at top speed toward the peninsula as if he knows exactly where we docked, or, rather, had been carelessly butted into the shore by my humming. And next to me is Hunter, shaking like a leaf, freezing in his wet cotton clothes, yet still warm and sickeningly tasty.

Pretending to get rid of the blackberry aftertaste, I gather saliva in my mouth and spit it out, guy-like. "Well, fuck!" I say, waiting for Hunter's reaction.

His mind is elsewhere, because he turns to look at me and, without saying anything, hugs himself tighter and absently traces lines in the dirt with the tip of his sneaker.

“How the hell does he do it?” No reaction. “I mean, how did he know where we went?” Silence. “Hunter, my dad is on his way here. Somehow he found out where we went, do you hear me?” He nods, without looking at me. I have a feeling that he knows something and either doesn’t want to tell me or doesn’t deem it important to tell me. Both scenarios make me fume. I suppress the urge to flood him with questions—from how he knew where to look for me under the Aurora Bridge, to why he didn’t ask me how I turned into a siren, to what he is thinking about right now. This blends into an incredible urge to share the fact that the sirens from my bathroom are real, all of this is real, to... I take a deep breath, because somehow it feels that this is not the right place or time to talk to him, and even if I try, he will ignore me. I try a different tactic.

“Hunter, we need to move the boat and get out of here, we have like a minute left before all these people will show up and start freaking out,” I say, my heart beating faster, my ears sensing the engine revolutions getting louder. Hunter keeps doodling in the dirt with his sneaker. “All right, I’ll go move it,” I concede.

Still no answer.

“Are you okay?” I come behind him and carefully touch his sleeve, wanting to grab his arm and feel his warmth through the wet cotton, restricting myself to simply stroking it with one finger.

“Can you open it already?” he says into the sky with the passion of an erupting volcano.

“Open what?” I’m momentarily stumped.

“I thought so. You forgot,” he says in a fallen voice.

“I forgot what? Hunter, what did I forget?” I plead, rubbing my hands on my jeans, as if it will help somehow.

“The present. You don’t really care, do you? It’s just a piece of paper, I get it. It’s not like I bought you a boat or something.” He sucks in air loudly through his nose, snorting up the snot, and wipes his nose with a sleeve.

“What? Oh, the present!” My hand goes to the pocket.

“Yeah, exactly.” He glances at me and takes a step away.

“Hunter, stop it! Stop acting like a baby, all right? I just had a lot of crazy stuff happen to me, and you know that my memory is fucked up. Of course I remember your present, but it’s kinda the wrong time to open it right now. My father is going to be here any minute, there are people jogging this way, and whatever else is happening in the woods behind us, and...” I want to say I’m hungry and I want to eat him, but I bite my tongue.

“Of course,” he says. “I should’ve expected that.”

"Please, I didn't mean it like this." I want to grab his neck with both hands and squeeze it hard, his breath coming to me in waves of heat. "What's wrong, why are you so upset all of a sudden? Why now?" I ask, nervously glancing at the road and wondering when the group of runners will turn the corner and start screaming. "Look, there are so many things I want to tell you, but I feel like I can't for some reason, and I'm afraid to face my father without being ready, because he's..." I almost say, *a siren hunter*. Hunter raises his eyes at me and quickly drops his gaze. "So, would it be okay if I did this a little later?"

"I..." he begins. "Ah, never mind." His lips take on a shade of purple, shaking.

"Fine!" I sigh. "You win, damn it."

I see the beginnings of a familiar grin play on Hunter's lips. He rarely gets upset about things like this, but when he does, he starts acting like a total baby. Whatever it is that upset him is very important to him. For the life of me, I could never fathom the transformation, but I knew that if I didn't act and didn't do what he wanted, he'd erupt into a burst of anger later, and it usually wasn't pretty. Or he'd smoke weed and drink cheap beer till he puked his guts out, claiming that it cleared his psyche and was for the better of humanity, so that he wouldn't unleash himself upon the world. He'd sweep his arms open at that and then fall asleep, snoring.

I pull the crumpled envelope out of the rain jacket pocket.

"I hope you like it." Goose bumps trail up his neck. I know it's no use arguing with him about freezing, besides, I can't give him my jacket because then I'd be naked. And I can't warm him, being as cold as a fish myself, and hungrier than hell.

I focus on the task at hand—sticking my finger under the flap, tearing the envelope open, and peeking inside. There are two long rectangular pieces of thick, glossy paper with something printed on them. My heart beats faster. I take them out and read, suppressing a gasp.

"Oh, my God! Two tickets to Siren Suicides! Wait, what—tonight?"

I watch the tickets tremble in my hand, unable to believe it. I've been a fan for years and years, ever since they released their debut album, *Under the Mirror*, in 2004. They've had several tours in the US, but never in Seattle. This was their first time here and I was dying to go, but I had no money, Papa wouldn't buy me tickets, and he wouldn't let me go anyway, for sure finding a reason to lock me up in the bathroom for the exact amount of hours the show lasted.

"Yeah, they're in town. I knew you wanted to go. I wanted to keep it a secret, you know, to surprise you."

"Oh, Hunter, this is the best birthday present ever!" I throw up my arms to hug him, when my whole body zings from craving his soul. I tear myself away violently, shaking all over. He grins, perhaps having attributed my retreat to shame or confusion or something else.

"It's okay, I don't bite." He gasps. "Did you hear that?"

"What?"

"A siren."

"Where?" I whirl around, and realize with relief that the group of joggers decided to turn back before making it around the corner, but my father's boat is visible now. I turn back to Hunter. His breath coils into puffs.

"There she is, right under your nose." He points to my chest.

"Listen to this. Twenty minutes ago, I'm taking a little cruise on a rowboat, then *bam!* she jumps out of the water. Scared the shit out of me."

It takes me a second. "Hunter!" I scowl, and then point at the boat that's now a few yards away. "Oh, my God, he's here."

Before I can say anything else, Hunter cups my face, his palms on fire. His breath is like summer filled with bird whistles, laughter, and all things home, and I give in to it, to this feeling, unable to care about anything anymore. "Forget about your dad for a second. Look at me. I'm not your enemy. I'm just trying to make you feel better, okay? Why did you jump off that bridge? Give me the real reason."

"Right now?"

"Right now."

I blink and try to look away, making my arms hang limp so I don't bruise Hunter with my grip.

He exhales. "It's okay, no pressure. You don't have to answer right this second, I get it. Listen, I'm happy that I found you, that's all. I thought I never would. I thought you really drowned." His soul emits such a heavenly melody, that I think, *I don't deserve such beauty.*

"I did drown, if you haven't noticed. I'm dead, Hunter. *Dead.*"

"No, you're not."

His eyes lock with mine.

"See this?" I crane my neck. "Those are gills." I place his hand on them and wince at the heat. "Feel them. I'm not human anymore. The human Ailen is gone. Gone! I'm a siren now, understand? S-I-R-E-N. A soulless killing machine, slimy and clammy and rotten and..."

"You're not rotten."

"You're so stubborn sometimes, I hate you."

"No, you don't."

I want to slap him but my hands won't move. I feel like an idiot and I'm hungry, so very hungry. There is food, right in front of me, delicious beyond comprehension. All I have to do is sing. He trusts me, we're friends, he'll do anything I ask of him, like he always does. But I won't. I know I won't. I can't.

"Happy Birthday, Ailen."

And I can't resist this anymore. Another moment, and we're kissing.

We've kissed and made out before, when stoned. Everyone does. But this is different. It's not tainted by being high or drunk, it's real and it's wonderful. The taste of that first Linden blossom fills my mouth, like an edible flower dipped in stolen honey and set on fire. Melting. I'm a thief, I have no right to take this, but I draw on it like a thirsty fiend. More. More. I want more. I want this to never end.

The tickets trail out of my hand, I hear them flutter as they fall to the ground, but I don't care. My world is spinning. The sky and the ground tangle into one impossible mess, and Hunter's kiss bursts on my tongue like a million sugar pellets.

I hear a few squirrels climb up a tree and then something else. I freeze, the magic moment broken.

Hunter pulls away. "What is it?"

"He killed the engine, hear the silence? Great. We could've made it into the woods by now, you know." I nearly want to cry from disappointment and pull on his hand toward the forest.

"No, we couldn't. Not yet."

"What do you mean, not yet?" I say with tears in my voice.

"I need to know one more thing." He breathes into my ear, and I think I will faint soon from being so close.

"I'm confused, Hunter, you keep doing things that make no sense, and then you—"

"Do you love me?"

I stare into his eyes, not fully understanding why the tone of his voice is so melodramatic. But I decide that I'll ask him later, feeling an oncoming panic settling its greedy fingers into my heart, terrified yet prepping myself mentally to face my father. I study Hunter's face—his hairline with that funny cowlick, his nose red from sniffing, the stubble of his nonexistent facial hair that he shaves every day in an effort to make it grow. I think back to our love declarations in the past, all done while stoned out of our minds and not sounding very serious. This time, his question feels real, like our kiss.

"Yes, of course I love you," I say, knowing that I didn't search long enough inside myself to fully mean it. I hold my breath, knowing what I have to ask him next. "Do you love me?"

"Yes. I love you very much, from the bottom of my heart, from the depths of my soul. No matter what shape you come in, get it?" I see his pupils widen with emotion, and I can't believe it's the Hunter I know, as if he grew into some otherworldly creature called an adult and changed forever. Before I can say anything, he puts his finger over my lips. "I just needed to confirm this before deciding on something. Now we can go." He grabs my hand and pulls me toward the forest.

I glance back. The yacht's silver bullet of a body bobs gently several yards away from the shore. Its engine revs up again, sounding like Papa is tweaking the throttle and burns out his bow thruster in an effort to stay put in one place and not drift. Then, he sounds three blasts on his boat's horn and I cup my ears, wincing from the loud sound. I understand it's some kind of a warning signal and decide there is no use in waiting for the right moment, there will never be one.

I grab Hunter's arm and wheel him around. "He came here for me. He's a siren hunter. Canosa told me. Canosa, the bronze figurine from the bathroom, remember?" I say.

Hunter looks at me, unperturbed. "I know," he says.

"What?" I gasp.

"That's why we need to get out of here, now."

"You knew? Then why the heck did you drag your feet?" I turn back, thinking that we have another ten minutes, easy, considering my father's distaste of getting wet and the amount of time it will take him to open up the yacht's tender garage and lift out his small inflatable boat. Not to mention paddling all the way to the shore and then risking getting wet. I badly want to see him do it.

"I hope he wrecks it," I say. As if to answer, Papa gets out from the back of the cockpit and carefully steps forward, toward the nose of the boat, to the very end. He kneels, with a large, gray plastic loudspeaker in his hands. I wonder what he's about to shout at me, and, seeing the distance between us, I turn bold.

"I hope you fucking wreck your stupid boat!" I yell. A few Douglas firs sway in response to my voice, and I see a path of waves follow its trajectory on the lake's surface.

"Don't!" Hunter pulls at me. "Duck, now!"

"Hell no!" I say. "What's he gonna do, yell at me? I can yell louder, just watch."

"I said, get down!" Hunter pushes me, but to no avail. I have so many things I want to shout to my father, so many obscenities and hateful statements and...

Instead of putting his mouth to the loudspeaker, my father sort of looks though it, and before I understand what's happening, a wave of a concentrated sonic boom hits me in the face.

Bam!

My eyeballs threaten to turn to jelly and I think my brain will burst from the pressure of its impact. Every little cell I have in my head wants to jump out and separate itself from my body. The sensation reminds me of walking into a glass door, yet magnified a hundred times.

"Owww!" I yelp and fall first to my knees and then on all fours into the grass, taking in its brilliant greenery through tears in my eyes, smelling its fragrance, grabbing tufts of pine needles into my fists.

It needs to be a clean blow, Papa used to tell me, when his hand began to hurt after hitting my face several times. The most effective way to teach a woman a lesson is to slap her, it humiliates her and makes her remember better. Here is how you do it. You keep your palm open, like this, then strike with the back of your hand as if you crack a whip, deliberate and fast. Blast her. It hurts but leaves no mark. How about it? Genius, I'd say. That makes her shut her mouth, makes her stop all this incessant whining. Have you read Walter Perry? No? You should. Wise man. "Their song," he said, "though irresistibly sweet, was no less sad than sweet, and lapped both body and soul in a fatal lethargy, the forerunner of death and corruption." Listen to his words. You, women, corrupt us, men. That's what you do. And because I happen to have a daughter, I have to work hard on root this out of you, do you understand? It pains me to do it, but it has to be done, for your future.

He'd slap me one last time to drive home the message and then blow on my cheeks, in an attempt to make me feel better. *I'm really, sorry, Ailen, but I believe that one day you will thank me for this.* I'd stick out my tongue and lick off my tears, quickly, before he'd notice.

One day you will thank me, his words echo in my mind.

I raise my head, glare across the fifteen yards of distance between us, and whisper, "Never."

"Ailen, no!" Hunter shakes my shoulders, but I throw him off me in one movement and stand.

Hatred floods me. I open my mouth wide and roar. I roar for me, for my pain, and for my mother. For all those years she suffered at his hands under his maniacal control, feeling his mix of intense love and hatred toward her at the same time. I watch my father's posture grow slack as my roar reaches him, reaches his rotten nature hidden behind an expensive polo shirt, classic khakis, and Gucci boat shoes. I want him dead.

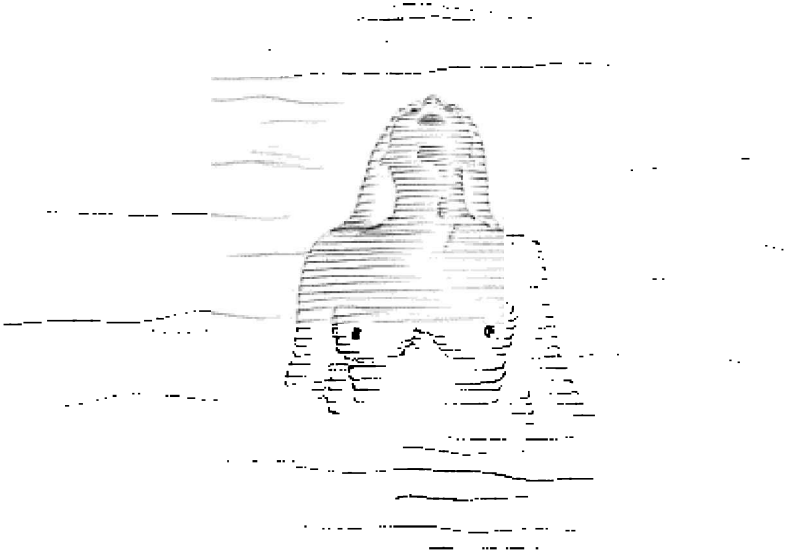
The wind generated by my voice knocks him down, his knees buckle and he slides into a sitting position, dropping his loudspeaker to the right. I know now that it's no loudspeaker; it must be some kind of a sonic gun designed specifically to kill sirens, to blast us into oblivion. I inhale and holler more. As if from strong wind, waves form on the shore and roll toward the yacht, crashing against its hull, sending droplets

flying into my father's face, into his closely-cropped, curly hair. His boat bobs and floats backward, the name *Talia* teasing me with its lovely inscription.

"Ailen, watch out!" Hunter shrieks.

I turn my head to see what's going on, when someone slips out of the woods, slinks behind me, and grabs my arm. It's Canosa. Her white hair shines impossibly bright in my new and improved field of vision. I'm momentarily blinded, and, blinking to remove the halo, the only thing I can think to say is, "Great. Just what I need right now."

Chapter 10



Douglas Firs

Canosa's hysterical cackle pierces my wounded ears, still hurting from the sonic blast. I watch with horror as she opens her mouth wide and drops her head back, her face to the sky, spit flying from her mouth, her chest heaving up and down in a series of jerky moves. One second she's gorgeous, the next, ugly. Her floor-length hair parts and slides off her shoulders, yet she makes no effort to conceal herself from my stare, nor from anyone else's. Ligeia jumps out of the woods and knocks Hunter off his feet, slapping her hand over his mouth as she pins him to the ground by the neck. I recognize her by her height. Raidne follows her and sits on his ankles. They're both giddy, smiling wildly. Hunter's eyes revolve in his sockets like that of a caught animal. Teles and Pisinoe emerge last and join in on the fun, holding Hunter's arms. How did I miss them? No souls, creaking branches. It was sirens, hopping toward us from tree to tree. This must be their hiding place, just like I always imagined—a flowery meadow where they lure their victims to die. Perfect.

"You sure like to take your time, Ailen Bright. Were you always slow or did your father drop you on that pretty, marble bathroom floor when you were born?"

The sirens giggle. All, except Ligeia, who purses her lips as if she's mad at someone or something, I can't tell, her hand still on Hunter's mouth.

"It's 'cause he kept searching for a little penis, turning her this way and that," Teles says.

"But there was none!" Raidne giggles into her fist, and then they all erupt into laughter, even Pisinoe who has been looking around as if she didn't understand what was going on.

At first I'm at a loss for words. I feel like laughing, then crying. I say the stupidest thing that comes to my mind, "My father what? How did you—" I choke on the rest, because Canosa seizes me by the neck and lifts me off the ground. It hurts, and yet I can breathe through my nose okay.

"Watch this, siren hunter. I'll tear off her head if you fire a single shot, and that would be a pity," Canosa shouts toward the lake.

I strain to look as far to the right as I can and glimpse my father's figure aiming at the sirens. He lowers his sonic gun, putting it on the deck and raising both of his arms. Does it mean he cares? Could it be, for real? Didn't he try shooting me just a few minutes ago? I blink and suppress the urge to become unglued, right then and there. One thought circulates through my mind: *He wanted a son, and he got a daughter. Canosa was there when I was born. Did he really get so mad that he dropped me on the floor?* I feel tears break through my will and spill over onto my cheeks.

"That's better. Keep it that way," Canosa shouts to the boat, then focuses on me. "Oh, don't be sad, I was only joking. I'm proud of you, silly. Look at what you've done, instead of one siren hunter you managed to wrangle two, and you even almost, *almost*, disposed of one of them. I'm impressed." She winks at me, as if to tell me that I scored and might be accepted into her siren family after all. "But I remember you wanted something else." She lowers her voice to a whisper, "You have to finish him, if you want to know what happened to your mom. Remember, a favor for a favor. I will let you go and you'll do as I say, okay?" she hisses, and drops me. I fall down like a sack of potatoes with a low thump, and rub my neck.

"Two? Did you say two siren hunters?" I wheeze between each word, turning nervously to look back at what Papa does. He simply observes us, his gun on the deck.

Canosa hunches next to me and circles her cold fingers around my neck but doesn't choke me this time. "Don't tell me your friend didn't let you in on his secret. You really didn't know?" she gasps. I shake my

head and slowly understand who she's talking about. "Girls, did you hear that? What a gentleman. He loves her so much, he decided not to burden her with his problems."

I swallow and turn to look at Hunter, who stares back at me, all the color drained from his face; four sirens surround him, as if living nails whose job is to crucify him into dried out grass sprinkled with fallen pine needles.

"Hunter? Is that true?"

Ligeia takes her hand off his mouth to the hiss of others.

"Let her go," Hunter says, then licks his lips. "Please."

I gape, unable to comprehend how this is possible. I can hear his soul just fine, so how could it be? I can't hear my father's soul; there is nothing but an ominous silence that hangs over you in a sticky cloud of fear. I can feel it on my skin.

I hold on to my jacket, because I have to hold something. Canosa lightly tightens her grip on my neck.

"Why didn't you just tell me?" I say to Hunter.

"I was going to, I swear. After you told me... I had to know. I couldn't before then, because... there is this rule... I just—"

"I get it," I say, and suddenly I know. All those times Hunter came over to see me and ended up having little chats with Papa in his study. I liked it because I thought that meant Papa approved of my friend. The only friend he approved. Of course. The son my father never had, the one he'd pass all of his knowledge to—how to slap a woman, how to hunt and kill a siren. Splendid. I feel an edge of betrayal squirm between Hunter and me, smiling, knowing, tearing my love apart and stomping on it, cackling wildly. My heart drops to my stomach.

"Traitor," I say, my hands shaking from bitter disappointment and hurt. An urge to do something equally mean makes me grab a handful of needles and throw them at Hunter. They scatter in the air without reaching their destination, and my feeling of being an idiot is complete. Canosa jerks me back down when I try to stand.

The other sirens watch me silently. So does my father. He holds on to the boat's rail, in what appears to be deep thought.

"Ailen, it's not like that, you don't understand—" Hunter begins, but I cut him off.

"Of course I don't, how could I? I'm a woman. We're stupid in the head by birth, didn't you know? On top of that, I hear my father dropped me on the floor when I was born. So what does that make me then, double stupid? Huh?"

"Don't say that. It's not like that. I simply didn't want to scare you."

"Scare me?" My laughter echoes off every single Douglas fir in a fifty foot diameter around us. "You didn't want to *scare* me? I'm honored, O esteemed Hunter Crossby." I lower my head as much as I

can in Canosa's grip. "I need to erect you a statue or something, for me to bow to. Looks funny bowing to a guy who is plastered on the ground and surrounded by four naked girls, don't you think?" I catch movement on the boat from the corner of my eye. Papa disappears into the cockpit.

When I try to stand again, Canosa pinches my arm hard and I suppress a yowl. "That's enough theatrics for today. You go take care of your father, and I'll take care of your friend here. You want to be part of our family? Then hurry up, I haven't got all day." She lets me go.

We both glance at my father's yacht, but he is nowhere to be seen.

"What are you going to do to Hunter?" I say, suddenly scared.

"He's my friend," I add, but the word *friend* wavers in uncertainty.

"He's no friend to you or to any of us, Ailen Bright. Why are you so naïve?" Canosa hisses. "He's a siren hunter, do you understand what that means?"

"Siren hunter," echo the sirens, leaning over Hunter, Ligeia's hand on his mouth once again. Then she starts intoning words I've heard before, slowly at first, "Kill the siren hunter. Sing his mind away. Watch his flayed skin shrivel. Leave his bones to rot in a pile. Bury him in the sweet siren meadow." The other sirens join her whisper until it becomes a rhythmic chant.

"Can we eat his soul right now, Canosa?" Teles asks, taking her right hand off Hunter's arm and biting on her forefinger, in a cute toddler-like way, anticipating a treat or a candy.

Raidne picks up Teles' request, lifts her buttocks off her heels and moves in a rhythmic manner as if unable to contain herself, ready to jump up.

"Yes, can we, can we?"

"Shut up, both of you. You're giving me a headache. The deal was whoever gets here first, gets his soul. Maybe, I said maybe. Who was first? Ligeia."

Ligeia presses her lips together into a thin line, her elongated features become even longer, to the point of importance. "I told you, he was mine," she says, and lowers her face over his, looking at him upside down, her hair hangs in a silky cascade and hides him from me.

"You tricked me. You made me fall off that pine tree so you could get here first. Not fair!" Teles shrieks, letting go of Hunter all together and pushing Ligeia off him. Raidne jumps up, too. Only Pisinoe stays put, watching her sisters with an open mouth, her child-like lips open in a wide O.

"No, I didn't. It's a load of crap! You fell down because you're clumsy and fat, which is not my problem," Ligeia sneers. Teles gasps at the insult and then grabs a handful of Ligeia's hair, and Ligeia clasps Teles by her ears. They fall over each other and roll on the grass.

Raidne falls on top of both of them, screeching, and they proceed tumbling across the asphalt road. Then they break apart, stand, and chase each other all the way to the water, where Teles picks up a handful of pebbles and starts throwing them at Ligeia, who ducks and dives for Teles's feet. Raidne claps her hands, obviously excited by the fight.

I watch this and wonder if I truly want to be one of them.

"Don't you make a single move," Canosa whispers at me, and the next moment I see her running toward the water. Hunter sits up, Pisinoe next to him, no longer pinning his arm.

She simply smiles and says, "Hi, I'm Pisinoe. What's your name?"

"Hunter." Hunter swallows, carefully looking her in the face only and nowhere else. "Hunter Crossby."

"Nice to meet you, Hunter Crossby. I want a pet. Do you also want a pet?" She gently circles his waist, her arms slightly damp and yet lovely in their fullness. She doesn't look older than perhaps thirteen, if sirens have any age at all. Her face is shaped like a moon, with a small sharp chin and large oval eyes blinking rapidly. Her hair falls down in gentle waves, not curly, but not straight either, somewhere in between. Overall, she is petite and is the smallest of the sisters, just like I always thought. She must be the youngest as well.

Hunter turns to look at me, bewildered. I shrug my shoulders. I'm lost in confusion and the multitude of emotions that span from love, to hate, to longing for him. Disgust turns to fear, then to a strange premonition that something bad is about to happen. In one word, I feel confused.

"You didn't answer my question!" Pisinoe purses her lips and pulls Hunter back toward her, like a cranky teenager who wants her new friend to interact with her now, right this second, or else.

"Um, yeah. I want a pet. I guess."

"How lovely! What kind of a pet do you want? I want a lamb." She breaks into a smile and edges closer, her fingers interlacing into a tight grip. "I'll just watch you until the girls get back, okay? Because Canosa told us we can't eat you yet."

Hunter looks at me again, his whole body stiff. I consider moving closer and punching Pisinoe in her face for ogling him so openly, when shrieking diverts my attention.

Twenty feet away, Canosa shouts at her siren flock in a piercingly shrill voice, but Ligeia shouts louder. That's right, she is the shrill one. Teles and Raidne pull at each other's hair now, their primary source of anger forgotten. Canosa attempts to pull them apart and down to the ground, to no avail. Seagulls circle over the lake's shore and shriek their sad cries. On the corner of the trail a pair of runners stand, two elderly women, dumb-struck by the scene, not moving forward or backward.

Finally, Canosa claps her hands together and the sound that produces makes the sirens clasp their ears and let each other go. Hunter quietly edges toward me and attempts to take my hand. His touch feels like fire, but when I grab his hand back, Pisinoe hugs his waist tighter and lays her head on his shoulder.

"I'm so tired. I'll take a nap, do you mind?"

"No, no, not at all," Hunter says and licks his lips.

We exchange a glance that means, *How are we going to get out of this?* I look back to the lake. Teles grabs a handful of Raidne's hair, to which Raidne calls her a stupid bitch and runs off in the direction of the water. The rest of what happens unfolds as if in slow motion.

I see my father appear from behind the cockpit, his sonic gun at the ready. Canosa must have seen the same, because she pulls both Ligeia and Teles to the ground, while Raidne's silhouette stands out clear against the cloudy sky, her long, curly hair cascading to her shoulders and hugging her slender hips.

I cover my ears a second too late. The crack of a sonic boom tears through the breeze, generating a visible shimmer in the air and hitting Raidne straight in the chest.

Bam!

Raidne bursts into nothing.

One second I see her clearly on the lake's shore, and the next, her whole body wavers and parts into a million little particles like tiny droplets of water. Then they shoot apart from each other into space. A thin film of fog is all that's left. Within seconds, even that disappears. I see Teles sit up and clasp her chubby hands, shrieking something, strands of Raidne's hair still trailing from between her fingers.

I see Papa grin like a gleeful boy with a slingshot who managed to take down his first street pigeon. Our gazes cross. And I know that this was for me, Papa showing me what would happen if he hit me. There is a momentary silence in the air, that half-second of comprehension that refuses to settle one way or the other, tipping, tipping, strung on the impossible.

Then a seagull shrieks and the waiting crashes. Chaos erupts. The two jogging women yelp and turn away, running back to where they came from, their arms flailing. Canosa grabs both Teles and Ligeia by the hair and nearly carries them over to us, dropping them at the base of a nearby Douglas fir; just in time, because my father fires another shot in their direction, but only manages to blow a shower of pine needles from the tree. Pisinoe lets go of Hunter, covers her head, and falls to the ground, wailing in fear. Hunter jumps up and jerks me into an upright position, the only obstacle between us and my firing father being an old Douglas fir.

I face Hunter, wondering what this is about, why we can't simply run. All noise recedes into a tunnel of hushed grumble. Canosa's shrieks, the sirens' wailing and squealing and toddler-like calls, Papa's sonic blasts, the cacophony of the runner's souls, and the mangled unrest of animals in the forest, they all dampen and nearly cease to exist.

There is only Hunter's melody—lyrical, homey, sweet—and his blue eyes, inches away from mine. My anger, hate, and confusion break against the languid richness of his eyes. I'm mistaken. I think it's not his eyes, but two pools of fresh water, minty even. They calm me, make me swim into a relaxed state where nothing matters except breathing in and out, and holding hands.

"How could you not tell me?" I ask. My saliva tastes bitter, poisoned by maddening confusion. Still, even that sensation recedes under his calm, until, finally, I feel nothing.

"If you were in my place, would you?" he asks.

I let myself think this over. Would I? If I truly loved someone, would I care who they were? Would anything else ever matter except what I felt? I remember the moment when I thought I'd be dead for sure, under the Aurora Bridge, when my past and my future ceased to exist and there was only *now*. It was as now as it could ever get. Did anything matter in that moment except what I felt right there and then? I let my eyes trace the lines of Hunter's fingers, red from being cold, his wrists barely covered with the fraying edges of his gray hoodie. Then, my eyes take in his arms, shoulders, neck, and chin with traces of carefully shaved stubble; his ears, a bit too small for his head, stick out lightly as if always in question. A chock-full of dark, unruly hair that tends to bunch up any way it wants. The creases in his forehead like that of a surprised dog that doesn't know if it wants to chase its own tail, scratch its side, or chew on a bone. His bushy eyebrows that he has a tendency to wiggle in an obnoxious way, to make me laugh, especially when we're smoking a joint.

"Well, what do you say, turkey?" He grins.

Our eyes lock, and I know he's on my side. There is a trace of mischief at the corners of his mouth, an echo of shared understanding in the lines of his grin. I experience a kind of silent bonding that only true friends can have. No, there's more. A nagging thought pushes at the boundaries of my mind and I'm scared to face it. *This is not a simple friendship anymore, Ailen, this is love*. I want to tell it to shut up, but I know it's right. All these little things about him—every single one of them—I love so much, it hurts. And there is nothing I can do about it.

It's too powerful to resist. Whatever this means, I decide not to think about it anymore. I want to be in the now, and right now I want to be together.

"I'm with you," I say, and then add, to counter his *turkey*, "monkey boy."

He grins.

"Care for a hike?" I say.

"Sure, let's do it. Nothing like skipping school on a Monday. Mondays suck anyway!"

His entire face alight, he grips my hand tightly, and turns toward the forest. Only now, I notice that he was standing with his back toward the shore, between me and the tree, shielding me from my father's blasts. My heart grows wings.

And we run.

Chapter 11



Magnificent Forest

I follow Hunter without looking back. Past Galley oaks, Douglas firs, and poplars, into a thicket of deer fern, salal bushes, and some other trees I don't recognize. We hop over mossy logs that are slippery and wet and impossibly emerald in color. The shouting and shooting behind us quickly recedes into a distant drone, and there is no other sound except our immediate grunting. I purposefully slow myself down to match Hunter's pace. The rank smell of rotting leaves mixes with our breathing. Blackberry thorns catch on our jeans, squirrels scat from under our feet. Occasional drops of water skate off the leaves and land on my head. We stumble into raccoon holes, slipping on the soft ground around them, but we keep running. I barely notice my own breathing, but Hunter is out of breath already. *That's what you get for being a smoker*, I think. But I hold my tongue, remembering that I'd be gasping for air too, if I hadn't been turned into a siren.

Hunter stops under a young vine maple, his chest heaving.

"I need to rest a bit, if you don't mind," he wheezes.

"Sure," I say.

"Those sirens, man, they're so big!" he says, and wipes his face with a sleeve.

"I didn't notice that. They're normal height, well, Ligeia is a bit tall, but Canosa is my height. The others are too. What do you mean?"

"Nothing. Just used to seeing them about two feet tall, you know, in your bathroom. Feels odd seeing them like this."

"Ah," I say.

I hear him and don't really hear him, feeling like this is filler conversation, like we both want to tell each other something important, but neither dares to start first. I decide to try.

"Hey, Hunter," I begin, the image of Raidne being blown up still in front of my eyes. Hunter yelps. A couple spiders run up his shoulder. He furiously shakes them off, blowing at the same time, as if that would make them run away faster.

"God, did you see that? These suckers are huge! They scared the shit out of me. If I ever told you I like spiders, forget that. I changed my mind." He sputters out the sticky strands from the web he walked right into, and brushes himself off just as quickly.

"You change your mind a lot lately," I say before I can stop myself, spilling my fear and the gnawing bitterness out into the open. I thought I'd let it go, so why all of a sudden did it surface again?

"What exactly do you mean by this?" He narrows his eyes.

"You were planning on killing me, weren't you? Just like Raidne, poof! Is that why you were looking for me under the bridge? Because Papa told me, just in case I didn't die, just in case I got turned into a siren, to get rid of me, right?"

"What? Whatever gave you that idea?" Now he glares with open contempt.

The fragile connection we were able to form between us on the way here evaporates in an instant.

A sour suspicion arises in me and wipes all thought from my mind, pounding so loudly with its intensity that I'm afraid Hunter will hear it.

"Did you really mean what you said, over there, on the shore?" I ask.

"About what?" he says, and presses his lips into a line.

"That you love me, that you love me very much?" As soon as I say it, I regret it. But at the same time, I need to know and I need to ask, even if it angers him.

His face falls. "What kind of a questions is that, Ailen? Man, you know how to hurt me, don't you. Of course I meant it. Why wouldn't I?" He takes a step back, away from me, and crosses his arms over his chest.

"It's just, I need to know why. Why now? I'm not me anymore. I'm dead, I'm not even human. You can't love a thing like that. It's... disgusting."

"Because I always have, but never had the courage to tell you. And you're not disgusting, not at all. What's disgusting is you doubting me. It hurts, you know."

"You say so now. Wait till you really see me for who I am. You will leave me, just like everyone else always does. Even my mom left me, why should this be any different?" I nearly cry the last word.

"Thanks for trusting me. Maybe we should part right here and each go our own way." He studies his shoes.

"Maybe we should," I say and feel tears well up in my eyes, knowing that I would crawl after him on my belly—unable to be apart, lusting for his soul, wanting it to be mine, inside of me, to warm my very core and never leave me. I'd cradle it like a baby and carry it to my grave. That is, if sirens have a grave, and if I manage to die a second time at some point in this new existence.

"Fuck!" Hunter yells and dances on the forest floor, shaking his legs and brushing himself like mad.

"What is it? Did you get bitten by a spider?" I say, leaning over and reaching to him. He flinches away, perhaps too theatrically.

"Like you care."

An awkward silence hangs between us. Unable to find the right thing to say, I study my bare feet; they're dusty and dirty, covered with soil, moss, and pine needles, yet have not a single scratch on them. Their perfectly white skin contrasts with the faded blue of my skin-tight jeans.

"I thought we could be friends," I say at last, and immediately it sounds wrong. I want to slap myself on the head for not being able to find anything smarter to say.

He furrows his eyebrows. "We are friends."

"Oh, yeah?" I erupt. "A siren and a siren hunter, friends? Explain to me how that's going to work? I'm all ears. Did you see what he did to her? Did you? Explain to me, please, how the hell you knew to look for me under the Aurora Bridge? He told you, didn't he?"

"Well, what was I supposed to do? What would you have done if it was *your* mom dying of cancer, huh? Tell me." He catches a spider and squishes it between his fingers, then rips off a trailing blackberry stem, cuts himself in the process, curses, and sucks on his thumb.

"So it was my father who told you. I wonder why he didn't give you a sonic gun then, perhaps because you're no more than an assistant at this point, am I right?" I say, as if to confirm out loud what I already know.

Hunter looks away without speaking.

"And thanks for reminding me about my mother. Thank you very much." To suppress my pain, I watch another spider make its way across the maple's trunk and concentrate on the movement of its hairy legs, hearing them shuffle. It feels trippy.

Hunter notices the silence, and a flash of understanding crosses his face. He opens his mouth several times, as if unable to voice what

he wants to say.

I look him straight in the eyes.

"Your mother is alive. And my mother is dead, okay? You know it very well. So don't ever talk to me about my mother. Don't you ever mention to me anything about my mother, you got that? You got that, monkey boy? N-E-V-E-R. Never. You know what never means?" My lips shake.

Hunter dog-shakes his head. "Dude, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that. Come on. I had to have this job. How else was I supposed to buy meds for my mother?"

"I don't think it's your job to do that, you know? She's an adult and you have to stop feeling responsible for her illness. It's not your fault, it's cancer, okay? There is nothing you could've done to prevent it, so stop acting like a martyr!" I notice I shout and lower my voice. "Besides, you're about to lose your job. It seems like you're failing from the get-go. Aren't you supposed to kill me? Isn't this what siren hunting is all about? Go on then, do it. I'm all yours. I'm standing here, waiting. But you can't do shit without a sonic gun, can you? Are you that bad of shooter that my father didn't trust you with a weapon?" I cross my arms and stand with my back straight as a ramrod.

"Fuck you!" Hunter throws at me and falls silent.

"You betrayed me!" I yell.

The air tastes bitter with our defiance. A squirrel shrieks, another answers. Hundreds more scuttle across the park, their souls pathetic squeaks. I wonder if I can eat them. My anger helps me tune out Hunter's soul, as fragrant as those last warm days of summer, ready to be devoured.

"You know what, if we keep arguing like this, we won't ever make it out of here, so it doesn't matter. Let's just go," he finally says and reaches for my hand. I uncross my arms and clasp my hands behind me.

"What's that supposed to mean? Is that truce for as long as we're in the woods, and then we'll figure it out later' kind of deal? Let me be your friend for now because I can't make up my fucking mind as to what else I can say to get out of this?" I wait for an answer, fuming.

Hunter takes a step toward me and stumbles, right up to his knee, into a raccoon hole under a young maple. He brushes twigs out of his face and swears loudly.

"Stupid raccoons!"

That does it for me. I grab the maple by the trunk and uproot it in one great pull. Dozens of insect souls peep in protest. I hold it up high, ignoring the dirt from its roots falling on my face, and give it a good shake.

Hunter throws up his hands. "All right, all right! I heard you the first time, no need to shout. I'm sorry, okay? How was I supposed to know you'd be the first siren I'd come across when I was accepting the job?"

"You'll have to tell me about it later. And apology accepted." I slowly put the tree down, but not before shaking it once more for a dramatic effect. A soul surfaces into my bandwidth of hearing, it's moving about a mile or so away. And some kind of a motor. Then more souls. Now that I'm no longer focused on Hunter, I can hear them all very clearly, probably hikers and dog walkers and runners.

"We're not alone here, in this park," I say.

Hunter doesn't pay attention to me, his eyes are on the tree. "This is so awesome. I wish I could do that."

I want to smack him. "Let's go!" I throw the tree to the ground and tug on his sleeve. He keeps looking back at the tree, then at me, then shakes his head.

"Okay, I heard you. I'm going."

Peace restored, hands clasped, we stagger forward like two divers, parting the feeble spider-silk instead of water, slicing into the ticket of green underbrush and bramble, under the watchful eye of the rare September sun. We wander like this, blindly, for the next ten minutes until we stumble onto a trail. Hunter attempts to brush out spider webs from his hair and I listen for nearby souls, noticing that, miraculously, not a single spider jumped on me and not a single spider web stuck to my skin or my clothes. That confirms that I'm evil. I exhale, struggling to accept it.

"Where to now?" Hunter says.

"Shhhh!" I concentrate on listening to a few people walk around the park. One of them is really close, maybe a mile away, not close enough to be alarmed.

"Don't shush me!"

"Sorry, I had to make sure we're not going to be seen by anyone. I'm not in the mood for facing people yet," I say.

"Why do you care?" Hunter says. "You're a siren, you can suck 'em all dead if you wanted to, no?"

The idea makes my chest convulse with the void, and, at the same time, I feel horrified. I'm a monster, one of those they show in the movies, waiting in the woods for prey. I shudder.

"Do you know how hard it is to accept yourself for who you really are, when it's not who you want to be? But no matter what you do, you know you can't change it?" I raise my bloodless palms and look at them, covered with papery-thin skin. They're fueled by something other than real red blood, because the usual pink tone is gone. My hands look bluish, like those of a floater found on the beach.

Hunter raises his hand to touch mine. I drop both of mine and take a step back, horrified at the color difference in our skin, not wanting to see it.

He sighs. "I understand. On the other hand, imagine that you accept yourself for who you are, but then something happens and you have to change yourself into someone else. On top of that, you have no choice in the matter. Now that's really fucked up."

"But you *do* have a choice," I say.

"Easy for you to say." He sniffs loudly and wipes his runny nose on his sleeve, then looks at me with forced enthusiasm. I know he's about to change the topic, like he always does to avoid discussing life matters and life's meaning and such, covering it up with his usual theatrics.

I see hidden pain in his eyes and keep my mouth shut.

"Hey, I think there is a place you'd like to see." He pulls me with him, and I let him lead, still in throes of conflict with myself. I'm trying to accept the fact that, eventually, I will need to eat; at the same time, I'm pushing down my hunger, hoping it will disappear.

Another twenty minutes, and we crash through the last of the trees into a clearing, and I know where we are. I always got to this place from the road on the other side, walking along it after I got off the bus. I've never seen it from this side of the park before.

"This is my hiding place," I say. "How did you know?"

"Yours? It's *my* hiding place. I come here to skip school. Have been, for years," Hunter says.

"Seriously? Me too!" I exclaim. "I've never seen you here before, always thought of this as my own."

"That's weird, I always thought of it as mine." He grins.

I feel a new thread of connection form between us and, at the same time, a pang of disappointment pins me. He never told me about his secret place. Although I never told him either. That levels it and I let the subject go, taking in the scene.

The sky is ablaze with diffused sunlight, as if a million tiny suns are shining through a thin veil. The air gives off that sweet, after-the-rain aroma. The ground tilts downhill into a grassy expanse the size of a school football field, flanked by fir trees on all sides. About two-thirds into the meadow, there are three sections of circular benches, eight rows in all. I remember counting them when I was bored.

I follow Hunter, and cross the asphalt road, feeling its burnt expanse scratch my bare soles. I step onto the grass, which slinks along the benches and stoops into a piece of concrete slab inlaid with rough stone. The stage. Beyond it are more trees, and then the lake, not visible from where I stand but lulling with its low grumble.

"Hello again, my amphitheater, I've missed you," I whisper.

"It's amphitheatron, from the ancient Greek *amphi* for 'around' and *theatron* for 'place of viewing.' It is...but the siren meadow," Hunter proclaims in a stage voice.

"Oh, really? Fascinating, I didn't know that."

Hunter gives me an evil stare. "Whatever." He jogs ahead.

I raise my leg and stop. There is a nagging feeling in my stomach that this is all too easy, that we are being watched. I turn, but see nothing in the woods. Though it seems like the trees themselves have moved in and are hovering closer, as if they carry a dangerous weight on their top branches, ready to spill it on our heads. I wait a beat, terrified that it might be the sirens, determined not to miss them this time. But there is nothing. No movement, no noise. And I don't like this silence. It presses down on me like it's about to erupt.

I wonder if Papa managed to shoot Canosa and the others, or if they attacked him. Or not.

"What is it?" Hunter hops from bench to bench, balancing, peering into the dark woods behind me.

"I thought I heard something, but it's nothing. Hey, let's get out of here, get on the bus, and get to your place. I really don't like staying here any longer," I say, but Hunter doesn't hear me. He is in his theatrical mood, I can feel it. Stoned or not, he's mesmerized by the stage.

He tiptoes from bench to bench, his arms stuck out as if he's tightrope walking, freestyle, between two high-rise buildings, making terrible faces like he's falling to his doom. I scowl, but then am swept up by nostalgia myself; I decide to stick around a little longer to remember the hours that I've spent in this place, imagining that the sirens were real. "Now, I'm a siren myself, for real," I say under my breath. I shake my head in disbelief, wanting to pinch myself and wake up, as if from a bad dream.

Hunter is already attempting to climb a post, hugging it with both legs and inching up, panting. It's part of a freestanding post-and-beam frame, twenty feet tall and about five feet wide. There are two of them. They flank the stage on both sides like two gigantic doorways into nothing. I have no clue what purpose they serve, having always imagined sirens sitting on top of each, in the way birds would perch. I'd think of their hair as feathered wings flapping in the wind, ready to take them to flight, while I'd watched them from the ground, sending rings of smoke into the sky. Thinking that this is the perfect place for a marijuana-induced mind to conjure up fantastic scenarios. I blink and look for Hunter.

Having not made it too far off the ground, he abandons his effort and jumps onto the stage.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, let me introduce our special guest, the star

of tonight's performance, the magnificent, all-powerful, queen of seas and songs and all things magical, a newborn siren and a femme fatale, Ailen Bright." He points at me in an elegant sort of way and nearly falls from balancing on one leg.

I feel movement in the woods behind me, a very quick succession of steps, almost too careful to be noticed, and then there's silence again. I turn, but it's only a squirrel. Then I hear a motor rev up and die not too far away. Goose bumps wash over me.

"Hey, we really don't have time for this. Let's go," I say in a loud whisper, as I come up to the stage and look up at Hunter from below. His hoodie is now almost dry from running around, but it looks like he crawled around in the dirt for hours. I wonder if the bus driver will let us on, with Hunter looking so filthy, and me having no shoes on. "Do you have any cash on you? How are we gonna pay for the bus?"

"Oh, who cares about time and money, when the magnificent Ailen Bright graces us, poor mortals, with her jingling presence. Like a thousand bells on the wind—"

"Hunter, stop it! Are you listening to me? You enjoyed having naked girls around you, didn't you? Is that what it's all about, the romantic side of being a siren hunter? Did it ever cross your mind that it's not a game? They can kill you. Weren't you the one warning me about the killer sirens, remember? I don't want to lose you. And I don't want my father showing up here and blowing me into nothing like he blew up Raidne. Bam, and she was gone. Did you see that? And I don't want Canosa to rip off my head, okay? And..."

"Okay, okay!" He sighs, and pulls me up on stage. "I'm sorry, all right. Got carried away a little."

"It's fine. Let's go catch the bus," I say.

"Right. Bus." He looks away.

"You don't have any money on you, do you?"

"Don't worry. We'll figure it out when we get there, I'll come up with something." He grins.

"As you always do," I say, but my sarcasm is lost as he pulls me by the hand off the stage toward the lake, through a thin growth of trees and to another parking lot.

By now the morning is in full swing and I can hear the souls of parents and kids about a quarter of a mile to the west, crowding the playground. And one more soul nearby, but not too close, perhaps twenty feet away. I relax a little.

Thankfully, this particular parking lot is removed from the busy park entrance and there are hardly any people here and no cars parked. No, there is something. We cross the road and I squint to see better. It's a bike, leaning casually on its stand at the very end of the parking lot, under a huge Douglas fir. It's hardly noticeable, blending into the

shadows, an unusual silver-gray color with bright white letters on the side of its fairing. Even with my new enhanced vision, I almost missed it.

Hunter stops abruptly and drops my hand. "Holy shit, Ailen. It's a Ducati 748, just like my dad's! They must have done a custom job, look at the silver. Gorgeous. Stock only comes in yellow, red, or black."

Hunter breaks into a trot, crosses the road, and squats next to the bike. I follow.

"No, it's not a custom job. This looks like original factory coloring. Man, I think I know what it is. There were only one hundred of these babies produced, Neiman Marcus limited edition. It's a 748L! Look at the metallic shading, carbon fiber fender, Christ..." He continues mumbling under his breath, stroking the bike, admiring it.

"Um, is that supposed to be cool?" I ask, not impressed.

"Are you fucking kidding me? Forget about the bus. This is what we need." He passes his fingers through his hair and wipes the palms of his hands on his jeans, standing up.

I slowly understand how Hunter managed to take out his father's bike for rides without his father knowing anything about it.

"No, you're not thinking that," I say, and tug on his sleeve.

"Oh, yes, I am. Got my tool on me, too." He taps several times on his jean pocket.

"You're out of your mind."

"So what? We're talking life or death here, no? Weren't you the one telling me you wanted to get out of here as fast as you can? Besides, I always wanted to ride one." He pats the bike's leather seat.

I bite my lip, trying to suppress my rising excitement. I know it's wrong—very, very wrong—and yet I can't help but wonder how it would feel to ride this beast behind Hunter, hugging him, pressing my face into his back; how we would look on this silver drop of speed glistening with that wet, after-the-rain shine.

"Who in their right mind would ride a motorcycle to Seward Park on a Monday morning?" I raise my eyebrows, trying to change the subject.

"Who cares." Hunter squats next to the bike and peeks between the front wheel and the fairing.

"Whoever it is—I'm assuming it's probably a guy—I heard him ride up here and I can hear his soul now. He's about twenty feet away, east of here. What if he comes out and sees us?"

"That's what I have you for, let me know if you hear him get too close." Hunter stands and rummages inside his jeans' pocket, taking out gum wrappers and change, dropping them on the ground, and reaching in again.

"What are you planning to do?" I ask.

"Watch."

He kneels into the shallow puddle next to the bike, hardly noticing that he gets wet again. He hugs the front of the fairing with his left arm and stick his right into the bike's guts.

"You sure you know what you're doing?" I say and resent my mounting excitement, trying to not jump up and down at the prospect of doing something so utterly illegal and scary.

"Yeah, I do. Watch the road." Hunter takes out his hand, readjusts the short piece between his forefinger and his thumb, bends it with his teeth and shoves it back under the fairing, his face swallowed by its curve. A quiet click later, he is up on his feet again, mounting the bike, pushing the start button. The engine roars to life. My world explodes with brilliant noise. I cover both ears.

But even through this racket, I hear the owner of the bike coming toward us, quick.

"He's coming!" I yell.

"Shit! Get on!" Hunter yells over the noise. I lift one leg and slide on the back seat, feeling the heat from the exhaust penetrate my jeans and scorch the bare skin on my feet. I manage to find passenger pegs and unfold them by grabbing them with my toes and pushing them down.

"Hey!" A man in a black all-leather suit surfaces on the road, a silver helmet swinging in his left hand, bike keys dangling from his right. His closely cropped scalp sports graying hair and the sinister features of a weathered rider. I feel ashamed at the excitement of stealing something so precious to this man. At the same time, the sinister side of me, the siren, grins greedily. *You must have been on your way somewhere when you urgently needed to take a dump, I think. Tough shit, mister, bad timing!*

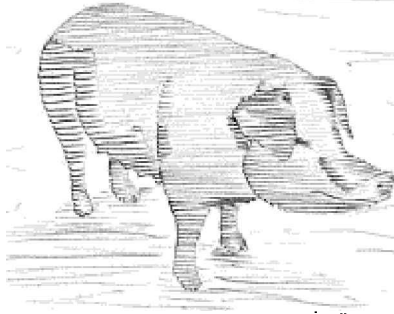
"What the hell are you two doing? Get off my bike! Get off, get off!" Seemingly shocked at first, the man breaks into a clumsy run, clicking the heels of his riding boots on the asphalt.

"Hold on!" Hunter holds in the clutch and waddles, rolling the bike backward, out of the parking lot, so that he can turn into the road. The man closes in on us, another ten seconds or so and he'll grab the back of my jacket. Just then, Hunter stops, shifts into first gear, and gives the gas. The bike roars. I wrap my arms around his waist even tighter, clasp my fingers together, and turn my head.

"Back off!" I shout, with evil glee.

My call cascades across the parking lot in a powerful acoustic wave. The man freezes in place, his mouth open, the tips of his gloved fingers a few inches away from the bike's exhaust. Hunter guns the throttle and we take off.

Chapter 12



Highway 99

Three sounds join in one resounding crescendo. Hunter's victorious *Woo-hoo!*, my *Yeah, baby!*, and the bike's roaring engine sputtering and growling as if upset that we separated it from its rightful owner. Faint cries reach us from behind, *My bike! Help! Help!* then turn into echoes and disappear entirely. We lunge forward, one solid being, a precocious hooligan on two wheels, going from zero to thirty miles per hour in a few seconds. I ignore my pain from the loud noise and hot exhaust. I let myself be mesmerized by our movement, by the smells of cedars and maples and firs. I inhale, watching all this greenery fly through my field of vision as we speed down Seward Park Avenue, weave along its S-curve, ignore stop signs and the honks of rare cars, and finally emerge from the park onto an open road. It makes me feel like there is no way back, only forward; like it's been three years and not three hours since I became a siren. I don't know why, but suddenly, my eyes brim with tears.

I clasp my arms tighter around Hunter's waist and bury my face in the damp cotton of his hoodie, hoping he won't notice my crying. He turns onto Lake Washington Boulevard. For a second, the back wheel skids sideways, and I think we'll crash, but then it rights itself back up.

"Just a puddle!" Hunter yells over the wind.

I nod into his back, afraid my voice will sound too shaky if I answer. I'm feeling overwhelmed with everything that has happened this morning, still trying to find the end of my sanity so I can pull it up to where I can see it and make sure I'm okay. Make sure everything will be okay, no matter what *it* will be.

We speed by the sunken eyes of the houses to our left and the quiet lake to our right, waking up the sleeping neighborhood with our loud rumble. The bike splashes across puddles, and dowses early risers in mist, making their dogs bark like mad for a few seconds before going back to their business. I can tell Hunter is having the time of his life. His heart beats at an alarming rate, his muscles shake from adrenaline, and his entire body buzzes with excitement, adding a general overtone to the melody of his soul. I want to sit like this, clutching him in my arms, racing into who knows what future, and never let go. Slowly, I begin calming down and dare to peek out from behind his back.

The wind hits me in the face, mussing my hair. I squint to see better. The view is beautiful, almost too serene for our purpose. Tall oaks spread a canopy over the boulevard, forming a shadowed tunnel. A few yellow leaves wave as they fall, giving us permission to gun past them in a series of great, motorized coughs. The lake lulls in rhythm to the jingling masts in the nearby marina. I smell water lilies and pond algae, sweet and rank at the same time. Hunter shifts gears and the bike jerks, its back wheel brushing the curb. And it hits me that we both have no helmets or gear on. In my case, if we crash, I'm not sure what will happen, but I'll probably survive. In Hunter's case, however...

"Slow down!" I yell.

He doesn't hear me, because of the noise and because the wind carries my voice backward not forward. Reality, and all the facts connected with it—my attempted drowning in the bathtub this morning, jumping from the bridge, my rebirth as a siren, our escape, the image of Raidne being blown up, my father and Canosa pursuing me—everything rushes into my mind at once. The bike lurches again and it wakes me up completely. My throat goes dry. I turn my head and glance over at the lake, to the beach where we docked and left my father's rowboat sitting smack in the middle of the road. His Pershing 64 should be moored not too far from the shore.

I peer and peer and see nothing. His yacht is gone, and so are the sirens. From our distance of about half a mile away, and while riding on the back of a bike, I can't make out any white shapes on the beach nor can I hear any of them for miles. There's the immediate, dry clicking sound of the Ducati's engine, and, underneath it, a low drone from the traffic's white noise, punctured by the souls of a few morning joggers and car commuters and dipped in human chatter from their blasting

music, news on the radio, or talking on the phone. I wonder if the poor chap whose bike we stole has called the police already and when they'll be on our tail, because I remember Hunter mentioning that it's illegal to ride a bike without a helmet. Great. My gut tells me we're about to pay for our madness.

Straight at first, now the boulevard turns twisty.

There are irregular engine revolutions, and then an oncoming clunky old Beamer appears from behind a blind turn a second too fast, driving in the opposite lane, perhaps having turned too wide. Its headlights are turned off, and I smell weed.

"Shit!" Hunter yells and veers to the right to avoid it, skirting the pavement. The bike's back wheel skids and I yelp in fear. The car's driver sees us, opens his mouth in shock, and yanks his steering wheel in the wrong direction. Old tires slide on wet asphalt and his Beamer passes us so closely, I can almost touch it. We squeeze by. I turn and see it roll onto the grass and smash its bumper into an oak.

Crack!

I can hear the snapping of the seat belt and the unfolding of an air bag, mixed with the freshly burnt smell of a car wreck. The driver's soul—a mix of football shouts and an old guitar—flares up and joins in tempo with his heart rate, which is going berserk. He sounds... salty. A salty soul yanked out of his Monday morning boredom. I lick my lips, hungry and mad and disgusted at the same time.

"You're crazy!" I yell loudly at Hunter. With the amount of force I put into my yell, he should hear me, but he pretends he doesn't; he's either focused on the road or washed in a cardiac high from his reckless riding. Reluctantly, I admit to myself that I'm high on it too, and enjoy it every bit as much as he does. He swerves into the next side road turnout in one vicious slide. The bike leans and my left knee scrapes the road.

"Watch out!" I scream.

"It's okay, I got it!" he yells back, slightly turning his head to the left and then snapping it back to look at the road.

"Yeah, right, I see as much," I whisper to myself grumpily, thinking that no matter what I say, he'll still ride any way he wants. That's Hunter, stubborn once he sets his mind to something.

We ride up the hill, to the honks of cars politely huddled by an all-way stop sign on Genesee Street, then lurch ahead without waiting and merge into heavy morning traffic spilling onto Rainier Avenue.

"Shit!" Hunter pushes on the brakes, and we idle in-between two cars, their passengers glaring at us. One is a young woman with her hair made up, in a business suit, a cup of Starbucks coffee in her hand, looking up from a green Volkswagen Beetle. The other is a mother with a sleepy face and a tired frown, two kids in the back of her old Subaru

openly staring at us and waving. I smile and wave back, listening to their souls, so tender and creamy, I want to feed on them right there and then.

I curl my toes around the foot pegs and stand up, using Hunter's shoulders for support. "Let's go around," I say into his ear and sit back down, wincing as my thighs connect with the hot sides of the bike.

"I know, I'm trying," Hunter says back nervously, power-walking between rows of cars. I revel in the multitude of human life, the blaring hullabaloo of their souls' melody. Some are perspiring, doomed, and unhappy; others are fidgety, sticky, and full of fear. Peppery. Soupy. Moldy. Only a few children's souls awaken my appetite, the rest promises to taste spoiled. A wave of dizziness hits my head and I nestle into Hunter's back again.

"Please, go faster," I mumble into cotton.

As if in answer, Hunter's words echo in my mind, about what happens to you if you're a siren's victim. *They find you dead in the morning. They can't say what happened. It looks like your heart stopped, so that they conclude you died from sudden cardiac arrest, you know, loss of heart function. What's creepy, though, is that you're smiling. Dead, but smiling. Like you were your happiest just before you died.*

I wonder if I'd be doing a service to these folks, giving them one minute of fantasy before they died, jerking them out of their daily misery and making them happy, making them die in such a fashion that they wouldn't know what hit them. Mesmerized by my voice.

And I really want to tell Hunter this idea—to hear his opinion, right now, right this very moment—to somehow justify my desire to kill.

"How much longer to your house?" I yell over the noise.

He doesn't answer. He edges toward the intersection, guns the throttle, runs a red light, passes way too closely by a school bus, and shoots up Alaska. The stink of exhaust gives way to manicured lawns dotted with an occasional kid or two, backpacked and on their way to school, milk still sweet on their after-breakfast breath. *Yummy.* I can't believe I think of them as meals and shake my head to get rid of this sensation.

We leave Beacon Hill, head south, pass under Interstate 5, and slow down. I can tell Hunter is lost and I can tell a police car is speeding our way, accompanied by a faint echo of a mechanical siren.

"Cops! I hear cops!" I yell.

"I know, I heard them!" Hunter yells back.

"Are you lost? Do you know where you're going?" I realize I want him to answer this question because I have a hard time orienting myself, having never been to this part of town.

We hit a cloud of freshly-baked bread aroma hanging in the air. It doesn't tease me like it used to; just the opposite, it makes me want to retch. To our left another large body of water opens up, with huge, red cranes stretching out their necks over boxes and boxes of stuff delivered to the port on long barges. Puget Sound. Now I know where we are. We're heading north on Aurora, the ugly Route 99 that blocks Seattle's waterfront view from downtown with its dark, unsightly shape.

Mechanical sirens blare closer. Hunter gives it the gas and shifts gears again, lurching the bike forward. We pass in between lanes. Tires screech, cars honk, and people shriek and curse and gasp. One by one, their souls come alight with panic, like flashing dots of plankton when stirred by hand in the sea in the middle of the night. Except it's morning. I gulp, remembering again who I am, or who I was, or who I'm about to become. I feel utterly confused, wanting to drop everything and run away, so I attempt to calm myself down with facts.

My name is Ailen Bright. Today is September 7, 2009. It's my birthday. I'm sixteen now. I died and then I was born again, as a siren, about three hours ago. Does that mean I'll stay sixteen forever? Maybe yes, maybe no. Or maybe I'll die at the hands of my father, exploded into a cloud of mist. I press my head into Hunter's back, and cement my arms around his waist, trying to get rid of these thoughts, to empty my mind, wanting to scream.

Hunter speeds up, jolts the bike to sixty miles per hour, seventy, eighty. Cars honk at us as we near downtown. I can't help but think about how much longer I'll live in this new shape, and who'll get me first—Papa or Canosa. I wonder if they killed each other on that beach or are after us, somehow knowing where we're headed, waiting for us there. Perhaps I will die today after all. Well then, if I die today, I'll die having fun.

The sky agrees with me, because, at once, it opens up into a heavy rain, just like that. One minute there's almost a hope of afternoon sun, the next, huge drops fall on my head, quickly turning into a gush of water. Within a minute, we're drenched. Jagged skyscrapers ahead of us get buried in an ominous cloud.

Hunter veers. "I can't see shit!" he yells. "Fucking rain, I'm blind! Hold on!"

"I am!" I yell back and lift my head to the sky. "Darn you! Why did you have to start right *now*, you stupid rain, just when we almost made it?"

I see red and blue reflected in the wet windows of other cars and turn to look. About five cars back, a cop is making his way toward us. Just then, we pass another cop on our left and spray his windows with

muddy water, skidding and narrowly avoiding a collision. The cop whips up the mechanical siren and turns on his lights, red-blue, red-blue, red-blue.

Wheeeeeee-wee. Wheeeeeee-wee.

The shrill is so authoritative and penetrating, it pisses me off and I gawk back at him, forcing as much power into my voice as I can.

"Shut the fuck up!"

The blast of my scream hits every car in an almost visible wave, echoing and multiplying, threatening to shatter all glass. Windows shimmer under the pressure. But the police siren continues blaring at me, now only one car away.

"Shit," I curse, and inhale to try one more time.

"Getting off the highway!" Hunter yells.

"Got you!"

Rain whips at my hair. I open my mouth wide and scream one more time. This time, it's a simple comment on everything crazy that has happened, all poured into one phrase.

"I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!"

A multitude of rain drops fall on my head at once, as if I caused a wave, as if water listens to me like it listened to me when I hummed to the lake. I'm caught in a momentary pause of this realization.

Hunter swings onto the Seneca exit, two police cars screaming on our tail. There is no time to think. I decide to go with my gut.

I hum to the water. I hum one of my favorite Siren Suicides' songs, *Did You Love Me*, because the lyrics start with the rain, so that's why I chose it.

*"I'm lonely,
Watching the rain.
Drop by drop,
Falling
Into my heart,
Because you're gone."*

Except I don't speak any words, I simply hum the tune, my lips closed, my mind focused on the song. Noises die away and I only hear the rushing sound of the water, the steady rhythm of falling drops as they start out about a mile into the sky and make their way down, merging with the rhythm of my humming.

I close my eyes, lift my face, and let it get wet, feeling the water drip onto me. It calms me, mellows my angst, soothes the abrasion from the terrible thoughts that have circled my mind since this morning. The

world attains an even tone of bliss. I keep humming, merging with nature's vibration, droning on to the sky.

There is a shift in the air and I open my eyes.

The water is moving. It hears me, it listens.

I experience a high that doesn't compare to any weed or acid or any drug. This is beyond cool. This is me doing magic, at will. I watch water drop by drop as it collects into puddles, licking the street clean all the way to the curb as if pulled by a gigantic magnet. The blanket of rain parts in the middle in the way a crystal beaded curtain would part, directly above us, forming a tunnel of dry air. Our passage through.

Hunter cheers and dog shakes his head to get water out of his hair and face. Droplets splatter me. I keep humming, playing the conductor. The tunnel widens, a sheet of rain serving as a gray veil on each side of us. We're lucky. The light turns green as we hit the intersection and Hunter veers the bike to the left, onto 1st Avenue. Astounded drivers roll down their windows and stick out their heads to see why half of their windshield is getting pummeled and the other half is dry. Wipers squelch across dry glass with that annoying squeaky rubber sound.

I grin, unable to contain myself, enjoying this perhaps too much. At the next intersection, a motorcycle cop enters traffic and edges toward us.

Hunter swings to the left too abruptly. My right foot swings off the peg and I instinctively grab his hoodie so that I don't slide off the bike. I gasp and lose my tempo. For the next few seconds, rain continues falling in separate shafts and then detaches from the rhythm of my humming completely. I've lost it. Water gushes on our heads with a renewed force.

Hunter curses and continues veering in and out of car lanes to escalating honks, until we hit red-brick pavement. The bike's resin tires squeak over every single stone in sync with my teeth chatter, then we turn again.

"Are you out of your mind? Where the hell are you going?" I scream at the top of my voice. Hunter simply shakes his head from side to side as if to tell me, *Hey, I'm busy right now, can't answer, sorry*. A few seconds later, we cut into a pedestrian crowd, barely avoiding hitting people, and roll toward the grand entrance of the famous Pike Place Fish Market. Here is the perfect place to get lost—a labyrinth of one-door stores, five layers deep into the ground, selling everything from meat to produce to homemade jewelry and tie-dye shirts. At the same time, this is the worst place ever to approach on a stolen motorcycle, in the middle of its busy opening hour, under heavy Seattle rain.

I register a small, brick plaza about a hundred feet long and forty feet wide, with several trucks parked on its left side. A farmer emerges from behind one of them, a box of peaches in his raised arms. He hears the racket of the motor, turns, and stops smack in the middle of the road, gaping at us. The visor of his baseball cap drips water, his rain boots glistening in the wetness. Hunter leans to avoid him, trying to continue onto Post Alley by turning to the right. Except he misses the turn and pushes both brakes. The bike stutters and its back wheel locks. A split second later and we're about to tap dance on the cobblestones with our teeth. I stick out both of my legs. My naked feet scrape the pavement, shooting a fire of pain up my legs.

As I'm trying to stop the bike, Hunter lifts his left leg mid-fall, hopping on top of the fairing, and maneuvering the whole machine like a gigantic, warbled skateboard, sashaying on its side. My leg is trapped underneath it. I hear my jeans rip and feel excruciating agony shoot up from my knee into my stomach, threatening to eat my guts and make me puke. My left elbow hits the pavement with the full force of the fall and gets dragged along. I stick out my hand to stop the movement but it's useless. Somehow, I know that both my leg and my arm are still intact, that they only got scraped a little. Every bone is solid, perhaps even my skin too, despite the fact that this silver Ducati probably weighs close a bathtub full of water. I hold my head above the ground by sheer will, watching cobblestones zoom past me only a few inches away, my hair leaving wet trails on top of them.

The noise all of this produces reminds me of a train wreck where a head train car hits something standing on the road, and long after that, the rest of the train cars continue piling up and screeching as they come off the rails and bend into a sorry metallic mess. Add to that human screaming and the blaring of police sirens, and you almost have the complete picture. Almost, because we're not done sliding until we hit a pig that is bolted to the ground right under the Public Market Sign.

Thud!

We finally stop moving.

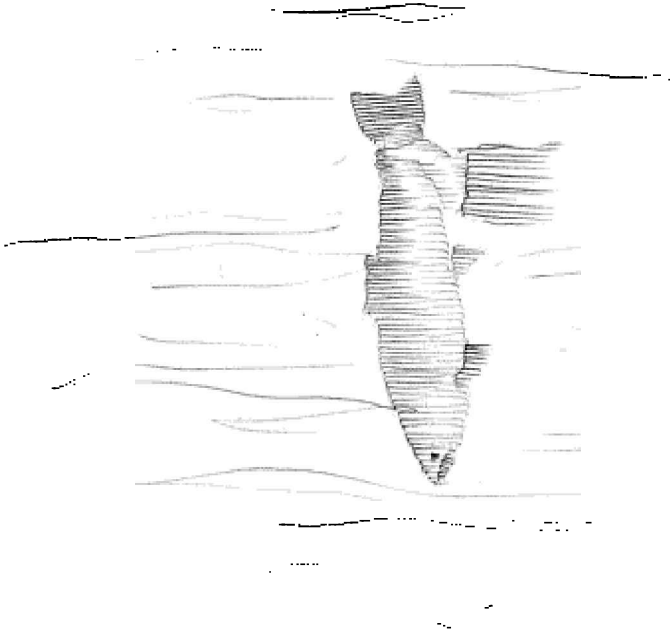
Pieces of silver fairing scatter in all direction, a rearview mirror breaks off and skips on the stones. The front wheel stops from impact, but the back wheel continues spinning with a sickening whizzing sound; and the motor continues running, producing bluish smoke and stinking of gasoline.

The whole thing looks like a beautiful disaster wrapped around pig's feet. Hunter's on top of it, hunched, his arms spread in an eagle stance, as if he's ready to fly. His face is not just pale, but a true shade of gray. His eyes are opened wide, staring at me below. I'm trapped underneath this pile of scrap metal that used to be an exquisite silver Ducati 748L, one of the hundred made, a limited Neiman Marcus

edition. Actually, only my left side is trapped underneath. My right side is fine, just wet from the rain. My face is inches away from the pig's belly, her bronze tits so sharp and positioned in a such a way, that another half an inch and they would've poked out my eyes for good. I eye their very tips, polished and golden in color, and breathe out a sigh of relief.

At this moment, a woman standing right by the pig begins to scream in a high-pitched voice.

Chapter 13



Pike Place Fish Market

I try to ignore the shrill and prop myself up on my right elbow, wiggling from under the broken bike and crawling on all fours till I'm face to face with the pig. I close my eyes to stifle a wave of nausea. When I open them, instead of a bronze pig, I see the bronze face of Canosa, smiling at me with her cold metal smile. She hisses something that sounds like, *You left me, Ailen Bright. You owe me big time now, silly girl.* A shudder goes through me. I blink rapidly and look again. The pig stares at me with its blank eyes, unperturbed. I shake my head.

The woman's cry rises a pitch and becomes an unbearable annoyance that threatens to pop not only my eardrums, but also my shaky sanity. It's worse than scratching a knife on glass; it's like everything I ever hated about myself gets magnified in her scream, because it's directed at me—at my oddly normal appearance despite the crash, and at my lack of blood or broken bones. I'm the monster here.

"Shut up!" I yell at the woman. She promptly closes her mouth, as if on command, and proceeds to stare at me with eyes nearly falling out of their sockets. She's standing just a few feet away, stocky and tall. Her fish-face has this wounded dignity, perhaps to show me that I disrupted something important and will pay for it dearly. She utters

something similar to a sob and leans on the steel column. It's painted minty green and sports a sign that reads, *NO PARKING 2AM – 7AM* and *3 MINUTE PASSENGER LOAD ONLY 6PM – 2AM*. It must be just after nine a.m. right now. *No problem*, I think. *We can make it out of here in three minutes*.

Whatever remained from my gleeful high—about being able to move water—disappears in a flash. This parking restriction was what I needed for my anger to fully flourish. Add to that the screaming woman, police on our tail, Hunter doing his stupid turn, the cacophony of a couple dozen human souls, and my growing hunger, and you've got a pretty pissed off siren on your hands. I'm surprised when I involuntarily utter a low hiss, very similar to the one Canosa produced not too long ago.

"Well, fuck me running," Hunter says into silence, shaken but unscathed. The leg of his jeans ripped, but no blood was drawn. "Are you okay? Oh, my god, your leg..."

He's not my enemy, but it's always easy to direct your strongest emotions at the ones we know and feel safe around, right? So he gets the first blow.

"You almost crushed me with this stupid bike and you're asking me if I'm *okay*?" I say, incredulously.

"Dude, I'm sorry. I didn't see him, all right? I swear we would've made it if that guy didn't just show up in the middle of the road. What was I supposed to do?" He briskly brushes his hands through his hair and reaches out to pull me up. I stand, and a pang of regret stabs me.

"Are you okay?" I ask Hunter, mentally retreating, hoping he will discount it later as me being shaken by the crash.

"Always. I'm one lucky bastard." He grins, his eyes the dark, dilated pupils of an adrenaline junkie. He's trembling all over, yet I know he's fine. "Your leg... wow, awesome. It looks like it barely got a scratch? And your elbow..." He hops off the bike's remnants, squats next to me and pokes at my leg in places where the jeans ripped. I lean to look. A foot-long gash in the skin on my outer thigh reveals bluish tissue that oozes gooey, transparent liquid. I dip my finger into it and quickly lick it off. It tastes like seawater, salty.

This is when I notice the silence. There is only the lapping of the rain and the drone of human souls that only I can hear. The usual market buzz hangs in the air, on pause. Even the police blaring ceased to exist. I glance up.

Early shoppers who dared to come out in this weather stare at us, especially one older lady who stands directly by the fish display, barely ten feet away. Her mouth opens, her index finger swings from pointing at a salmon to pointing at me. Behind her stands a fishmonger, clad in a

bright yellow apron, khaki shorts and black resin boots. His mouth is also open, probably mid-shout, the typical "Wild king salmon, ten pounds..." cry; he's gripping a wrapped fish in his raised hands. Two more fishermen behind the counter gape. I see slow comprehension descend on them, clearing their faces from initial shock.

"What?" I ask, and it unfreezes everyone, as if I've given them permission to move and talk. And maybe I have, maybe that *Shut up!* made them all pause? My thought process gets interrupted.

The fishmonger drops the fish to the floor with a smack.

"What the... Oh, God. Oh, my God, are you two all right? Jesus, you crashed your bike right into the pig. Guys, call 911. Guys?" he says and bends to pick up the fish.

There are gasps and swears and cries and moving bodies and camera flashes, but they're all a good few feet away from me. I sense their fear.

"No need for 911," I say, because mechanical sirens come alive behind us.

Amidst this confusion, the old lady stabs her finger at me, her knee-length nylon raincoat shakes, her crumpled face ablaze with terror. She keeps silently stabbing the air, pointing at me like I'm some horrible movie monster, an ugly Godzilla the size of a building that's about to eat all of Seattle, destroying the entire city in the process.

"Christ almighty, it's a she-devil. White she-devil, mark my words," the lady finally manages to say under her breath. She continues mumbling a prayer, crossing herself. Her words get lost in the general crowd murmur, but I hear them, as I hear her soul reeking of mothballs, old cat meows, and fried mackerel, sharp in taste, almost toxic.

I can't help myself. The lid I so carefully put on my new anger flies open. Everything that's happened since this morning spirals out of my guts, up and up, forming a bile of fear, regret, disappointment, shame, guilt, hatred, helplessness, and anguish. They all demand revenge, some sort of action to express themselves.

Remembering how easy it was to pull out that young maple tree from the ground in the park, I bend, scoop up the bike on both sides of its cracked fairing, lift it with a grunt, twist, and then throw it into the street with a loud yelp of pain. The bike utters a sickening crunch, slides to the middle of the road devoid of cars, revolves once, and lays still. Both wheels quietly turn several times before stopping. Silence again descends on the market. Great, just what I needed. I turn back, hobble on my good leg toward the old lady, and retch into her face and into the crowd.

"Good morning, shoppers. May I offer you our special of the day?" I point at myself. "Siren, hundred bucks a pound. Would you like it whole or filleted?" If I'm in a freak show, I think, might as well act the part.

Hunter yanks at the good sleeve of my rain jacket. "What the hell are you doing?"

I turn to him, unable to contain my anger anymore.

"Oh, you think I'm selling myself too cheap? Good point."

Hunter's face flashes an unhealthy red, his lips quivering, his eyes watering. He looks like a drug addict displaying symptoms of withdrawal. And fear, I see fear.

"Ailen, don't, please."

"Why not? Give me one reason why not?"

I don't wait for him to answer. I turn back to face the people in front of the fish stand, ignoring Hunter, ignoring two cop cars and two motorcycles that finally arrive at the scene behind me, parking before the bike wreck and busting through the crowd. I can't stop now, I've crossed the line.

The crowd gawks, so do the fishermen, the flower lady, the butcher two stands down, a couple of fruit merchants, and a few tourists with their cameras at the ready. I realize that they're all mesmerized by my voice.

I wipe my nose and take the stage.

"Excuse me, dear shoppers, but I have to apologize. I was just informed that our prices went up due to limited supply. Current tag reads at a thousand dollars a pound. However, we guarantee unprecedented freshness." I glance at Hunter, then back at the crowd. "From a girl to a siren in three hours flat. Caught, oh, about thirty minutes ago. Wild, fresh, hundred percent organic. You can't find a better deal anywhere else."

I spread my arms and bow. Nothing shakes the silence. Even the cops join the crowd silently, watching me.

"Applaud!" I bark.

A few claps follow.

"Stop it!" Hunter yells. "Are you out of your fucking mind?"

"And out of my body, too." I say, on a roll. "What, you're not happy with my performance? I'll make it better. I'll sing a song, how is that? Would you enjoy a song? Too bad Papa isn't here to keep you company. I think you both would've enjoyed it very much. Isn't that what siren hunters do to spot a siren, spy on her singing? Isn't it? *Isn't it?*" My every word is a piece of ice, thrown out carelessly, propelling directly into his face, with an aim to bite. Crushed and bitter. To finish off my tirade, I flash him a smile, triple bright. Then I get an even sicker idea.

I turn back to the crowd, point at Hunter with my hands palms up, like models do in fancy car shows.

"I seem to have forgotten to introduce you all to my friend here. My apologies. Please welcome, the siren hunter with his catch of the day!" I curtsy, then decide to spice it up and strike a pirouette, turning once on

tippy toes, noticing that my leg has healed itself while I was talking. So did my elbow; its clean new whitish skin spread tight and peeking through my torn sleeve.

I curtsy once more and stand still.

Maybe it's because my talking ceased that the crowd sighs in relief in one strong exhale. My siren spell must have evaporated. I wonder how long it lasts. I wonder if I can give commands to people and if they'll obey. A flash blinds me, then another. People are taking pictures.

I mouth to Hunter, "Smile, you idiot." But my charm doesn't seem to have an effect on him, or maybe it does, because he begins to grin and then quickly loses it.

"Jeez, what's wrong with you? Did you hit your head or something?" Hunter backs away from me and bumps into a cop with glazed over eyes. The cop wakes up from his slumber, reaches for his gun, and shouts at us like we're armed.

"Freeze!"

Two more cops join him from the crowd, also reaching for their weapons. I shrug my shoulders. Do I have such a lethal appearance that I need to be shot? I decide to test my siren-voice theory and bark, "Shut up and sit. All three of you."

They flop down on command, their asses connecting with wet ground with a loud slap, their dark blue uniforms in sharp contrast with the shiny red cobblestones. They turn their heads up and look at me expectantly. Afraid that my spell will wear off quickly, and still not knowing how long it lasts, I add, "Sit until I tell you to stand up." They nod.

There are cheers from the crowd at this, but my attention is elsewhere already. My anger has fully formed and is flowing, quiet poisonous at the same time. I look Hunter in the eyes, the beauty of their blue forgotten.

"I'm sorry, I forgot to answer your question," I say. "You asked me what's wrong with me. Well, nothing, really. Except that I'm a living, breathing, walking, dead fish out of the water, with both lungs and gills for breathing, and a voice that can control people. Oh, and I can suck out their souls, you know, for breakfast. Watch me."

Hunter's face drains color. His lips form a *no*!

I pick a target, one of the Japanese tourists, a teenage girl with a huge camera standing to the right of me, mesmerized. Her camera is bright pink. And I immediately hate her. I hate her perfectly long hair, her designer outfit, and her manicured nails. I hate her over-protective mom and dad standing behind her, smiling politely, no doubt on some touristy Seattle jaunt, so completely a family, my muscles spasm. I want to hit them.

"Lie down!" I say to the girl.

With a squeal, she tumbles to the pavement, designer skirt and all, stretching out her legs in front of her. Her white knee socks are now wet and muddy, and her designer-labeled short rain boots smell of new resin. I listen to her soul. It's a jumble of animated manga voices, karaoke, and sounds of a sewing machine. She must be obsessed with creating her own outfits. I have a hard time pinpointing her soul's taste, it feels... savory. Even a little spicy, in a bubbly way.

My heart rate hikes up to 180 beats per minute. Another hiss escapes my lips. She squeaks once more and crosses arms in front of her face, both her mom and dad leaning over her, speaking in Japanese.

"See what I mean?" I say, looking at Hunter. "This is breakfast, right here. Want to help me pick a song?"

Hunter blinks and swallows. "Please. Don't...not here." He says in a dry voice that's barely audible.

"You're scared. Why? What's wrong with watching a siren feed? You're a siren hunter, aren't you? You're supposed to stomach shit like this." Another wave of anger flushes me. My blood pressure soars.

Hunter says nothing, his eyes open wide. He seems to see only me, and he's waiting for more, as if he's catching my words like precious gems falling from the sky. Perhaps my voice *does* have an effect on him.

"See? That's it. You have nothing to say, do you? But I'll finish answering your question, because I'm polite. Because it's what Papa taught me, to always answer questions. So here you go. What's wrong with me? Nothing. Aside from being a monster, and aside from the fact that your job is now to kill me, nothing is wrong with me. Really. I'm fine, thank you very much," I say and draw on air in a greedy gulp. The crowd does the same, mimicking me.

"Why are you doing this?" Hunter asks quietly. He steps back into open space from under the market roof, backing into the people who surround us. Raindrops trace his forehead, running into his eyebrows and dripping over. He doesn't blink. People part around us and close back in, moving seamlessly as we move into the open plaza, keeping us in a circle, watching quietly.

"No, why are *you* doing this?" I snap and take another step toward him.

"What do you mean? Doing what?" He licks rain off his lips.

"This! This siren hunter business! What did he promise you? How could you ever agree to it? After all that fantastic bullshit you fed me about sirens, you decided to get a job killing them. Why?"

He blinks.

"*Why?* Stop acting like an idiot and answer the damn question!" I come close to him now and shout at him directly in the face, getting drenched by the rain.

"What, here? Right now?"

"*Yes! Here and now!*" I shake so hard, my teeth chatter.

My voice echoes off brick walls and metal roofs. A hush falls over the entire spectacle. About forty souls pulsate in unison, so appetizing that I want to feed right here, in public.

Hunger suddenly overwhelms me. I bend and dry heave, feeling my gut twist on a stick of desire, as if freshly skinned and bleeding. I could kill them all. And why not? What do I have to lose? What's the use of the power in my voice if I can't bring my mother back? Why continue to exist when Papa won't ever listen to me, no matter how loud I yell, no matter how beautiful my song is, no matter what I tell him. The queen of pathetic, I couldn't even properly kill myself, turning instead into some forgotten mythological creature. Ailen Bright, a siren. Really? Yeah, right. Forget femme fatale, how about a girl who's desperately trying to be someone she's not? It's what they call an *epic fail*.

I raise my head and lock my gaze with Hunter's. A fleeting something passes between us, a feeling of knowledge that it's almost over, the finale to our performance is coming. I see it reflected in his eyes, so blue they're calming, infinite. Against the racket of human discord, I hear his soul, a piercing solo, delicious and beautiful in a homey way. And I know I'm not worth his love. I dare *not* love him back. I should disappear and let him be, let him find a normal girl with a normal voice, normal long hair, good manners, proper parents, an established life. Who am I after all? The dead body of a mystic freak. That's who I am.

"Look," he begins, quietly. "After I lost that job selling car wax, I had to find something fast. My mom... we don't have insurance, so how was I supposed to get her meds? I had no idea you'd turn into a siren, how could I know? And your dad... well, it was a perfect opportunity." His voice is calm. He knows exactly what I'm thinking and what to say when he wants to make me feel better. He knows how to read me so well, I hate it.

"Right," I say, momentarily deflated.

He cups my chin. Warmth shoots up my face, making me feel like I'm blushing. "I don't want to lose you again, okay? I don't care what shape or size you are, or what you're called. It makes no difference to me, don't you get it?" He shakes my face for added effect, and says, "You, turkey." But it doesn't sound funny, it comes out as if he says it through tears.

“But, I’m dead, remember? Like you said. Not the mythical kind, a real siren. The girl next door. The killer kind. The one whose gaze never sits still. The way she walks, the way she talks...every man wants a piece of her. Every man wants to hear her velvety song, the song to die for. Remember?”

“I don’t care,” he says, fogging up my vision with his breath.

“Listen. Real sirens are among us. They’re the girls who come out at night, in the fog, to sing about their pain. Their voice makes you do things. They command you to come close to them, and then they sing your soul out.”

“I know. I still don’t care.”

“Listen to me! I’m not done talking yet. You’re...food to me. I’m having a hard time suppressing the urge to snuff you out. You sound so sweet, it’s so hard to stay away from you. What if one day I won’t be able to suppress this anymore? You know what will happen? I’ll kill you. And they’ll find you dead in the morning. Dead, but smiling. Like you were your happiest before you died.”

“Well, maybe that’s what I want. Did you ever consider that?” His voice catches at the end. Rain drips down his face, soaks his cotton hoodie. He sniffs loudly and wipes his nose, red from being cold and wet.

The anticipation in the air makes me imagine us both on stage, our audience watching us, breathless. I have to deliver the punch line, but I forgot my words. I search Hunter’s eyes for a cue; their bluish expanse reflects rainy clouds so ripe with water, they’re bursting. And at this precise moment, I understand that his is the only soul that will ever fully satisfy my hunger. Do I leave him? Do I stay? I float in indecision, quivering. He’s all things home that I can never have. Never had, never will. I feel one single tear roll down my cheek and drop to the ground with such finality that it makes my heart ache like it’s ripping. That’s it then, decided. *I’m sorry, Hunter, I’m so very sorry. I love you, I love you more than I love myself. And that’s why I have to go.*

“Hey, it’s really creepy having all of these people watch us. I don’t know about you, but I...don’t really...like this. Can we continue some place private?” Hunter tugs at my sleeve.

“Sure,” I say, my tongue barely moving, my mouth feeling as if it’s stuffed with cotton.

Our hands entwine.

I failed to deliver the perfect punch line, but in some weird sense, I still expect applause. Of course, it never comes. There’s only breathless admiration. Faces surround us, mouths ajar, hearts beating like one. The crowd is in a trance, their chores forgotten, the places they wanted to go erased from their minds, leaving them blank.

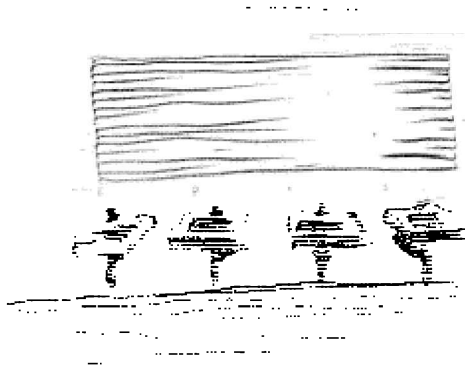
We don’t bow or tilt our heads, we simply exit. We part the crowd,

heading toward the fish stand, down into the belly of the Pike Place Fish Market—the perfect place to get lost. We move like two actors in an ancient Greek comedy that's gone sour and turned into a tragedy instead. With an ending that was supposed resolve everything but instead made things more confusing than before, in a typical *deus ex machina* way, with thunder crashing over our heads as if some god stepped in and told everyone to be friends and go home and forget everything they just saw. Like Athena did in *The Odyssey*. Play completed. Sorry. Thank you very much. We're closed.

But the thunder is real. Lightning flashes, splitting the sky in two. Another boom shakes the air, adding a metallic taste to it. That's when the cops awaken and begin shouting *Freeze!* on repeat again. Onlookers shake off the trance and reach out to stop us.

We clasp hands and break into a run.

Chapter 14



Public Restroom

All I can register of these people is a pattern of blur, one string of masks instead of faces. Atonal, solid, boring. They look like fish, crowded by the glass of a gigantic aquarium, hoping you'll feed them, give them a morsel of something special that will make them forget their misery for a minute. It's like we're passing a wall with moving eyes. Hunter leads and I follow, concentrating on the floor. I mark its square tiles like steps, watching light reflect in them as I skid on wet smears from the dripping shoes of the shoppers. I move through a cloud of that lingering smell of raw fish, and it clings to me, sticky. We reach the stairs and quickly skim down the steel reinforced steps to the market's mezzanine level, deeper into the labyrinth of shops and boutiques and cafes. Here, human traffic gulps us up like a swamp, with a reluctant burp. Right as we reach the floor and are about to turn, Hunter trips and falls.

"Shit! Stupid sneakers." He lowers his head and shakes it, kneeling on all fours on the dirty ground.

"Here, are you okay?" My hand in his, I pull to help him stand. Hunter sways.

Above us, finally out of their trance, the crowd erupts into chaos ready to pour down on our heads. Shoppers on our level measure us with looks reserved for homeless teenage junkies who crawled from under a bridge in a stoned daze, their typical soiled backpacks lost or forgotten. We look like a complete mess. Hunter's face is gray. His hair is matted and bunched up to the side, and his eyes are bloodshot. His hoodie is splattered with mud and his jeans are smeared with it; his

sneakers have forgotten their color. I look worse. My left side is clad in shreds of clothing, the naked white skin of my left elbow and left knee looking through. I can't see my face, but I imagine it's very much devoid of color.

Two young couples pass by. I glare at them, defiant. It takes but a second and they turn their heads away, to tune us out. It's safer. We are their future pickpockets. They trot along with eyes averted. How disgusting. I lose my newfound appetite.

"Ignorance is the pinnacle of convenience," I say.

"What?" Hunter says, looking up at the stairs, perhaps waiting for the mob to come and sweep us up. His skin turns ashen.

"Oh, nothing. Can you walk?" I ask.

Suddenly, Hunter's face goes green and he bends over. The after-accident shock must have finally kicked in. I hear his soul waver and then plummet in a crash of noises, most of them sounding like breaking dishes in a kitchen. He no longer feels warm and homey, but rather a disaster brewing, his heart a struggling motor, valves flapping at an irregular pattern. I decide that if he can't walk, I will carry him.

"Hey, you all right? Wanna hide out here somewhere before the freaks get us?" I motion up.

"We need to get rid of your voice," he says quietly, and passes a tremor. Goose pimples rise visibly on his neck as his Adam's apple moves up and down like crazy.

"What?" I say, momentarily stumped. "What do you mean, get rid of my voice?"

I grip his clammy hand for support, although he needs it more than I do right now. I can tell he's on the verge of collapsing. People look at us weird, making a wide circle to bypass, lest we be contagious or something. And our time is up.

I glance up. Two cops make it to the stairs and descend gleefully, a few spectators from our performance right behind them. Their faces are agape with the stench of anticipation, jeering and shouting.

I glance down. From below the market, cutting through the human souls' discord, comes a sound so familiar I can recognize it in my sleep—the grating of expensive tires against asphalt, the last revolutions of the engine, the hand break, and the driver's door opening and closing. It comes from several levels below, from Western Avenue, the other side of the Pike Place Fish Market. Although Papa ditched his old Alfa Romeo and bought a Maserati only this spring, I quickly learned to recognize the sounds of his arrival so I have enough time to dispose of the joint stubs and crushed-can ashtray by throwing them out the bathroom window. As expected, I hear the gentle stepping of his Gucci loafers, lace free for easy slipping on and off, their precious rubber soles grinding into concrete.

"Oh, my God, he's here. My father is here. He tracked us down!" I say.

At exactly the same moment, Hunter says, "I think I'm gonna puke." His lips turn the shade as a floater.

The first cop, short and stocky, his belly jiggling, his soul bitter—a mixture of clanking beer bottles and bowling balls—makes it down the steps while dropping his right hand to his gun and opening his mouth to shout.

"Freeze!" I yell. It's the first thing that comes to mind.

The cop clasps his mouth shut with an audible click of teeth on teeth. His eyes blink rapidly in the middle of his bald head. And it feels good. It feels so incredibly good to control people with my voice. Feeling greedy, I want to do it more.

"Freeze, all of you!" I yell at the upper level.

Another cop and a dozen people tumble down the stairs like refrigerated lobsters. Some fall, but some grab the railing and stay put, glued to it, unable to move; their sweat mixes with their breakfast breath, coiling toward me along with their soul noises—mostly sour and soupy. Ugh. I arrest a gag and make a mental note to avoid feeding at the Pike Place Fish Market in the future.

"Stay here and don't move!" I tell them and turn to Hunter.

"There," he croaks, and points to the restroom sign. "We still have time. Let's try it."

Whatever it is that he meant by getting rid of my voice, I try not to think about it so I don't panic. I can't lose my voice now, not when I finally learned how to use it!

Hunter pulls at my hand and we dash to the right. Or, rather, I dash and he stumbles after me, into the concrete opening flanked by a woman and a man, inlaid in a black porcelain mosaic, the classic honeycomb motive of the market. We find an entrance to the public restrooms and another stairway down. Like two shadow puppets, we slink inside and pause, pulling in two different directions by instinct, Hunter into the men's room, and I into the ladies'. Hunter veers to the left, but gets spooked by an exiting man, who gets spooked by our appearance in turn and quickly runs up the steps without looking back. I automatically pull Hunter forward, past the door with the sign *For Men Only* and under the sign *For Women Only*.

"Dude, I'm not going in there," Hunter says alarmingly.

"It's empty," I say. "I can't hear a single soul. Plus, my father hates public restrooms, especially women's. He always says they reek of poor hygiene. Come on, please?"

"Fine." Hunter rolls his eyes but follows me.

We walk inside. The restroom sports a classic black and white interior combo. The ceramic walls remain white, while the tiny hexagon

floor tiles have turned a dirty shade of cream, sprinkled with black hexagon flowers along its perimeter. The stench of human waste and chlorine hits my nose. We pass our mad reflections in the dim mirrors above the sinks as we skip the first row of stalls and stop by the second, against the back wall.

“Handicapped stall?” I point.

“Sure,” he says, convulsing in a series of coughs that sound very much like dry heaving.

I yank open the door to the corner stall and we slide inside. I ram the door shut and lower the latch in place. The door rattles loudly for the entire market to hear. I cower, slide down on my butt, and press my hand into the partition to make it stop shaking, hating its muddy beige color. It clashes with the cleanliness of the black and white, resembling the color of vomit.

Just as I think about this, Hunter turns his back to the door, falls to his knees, hugs the toilet, and lets go. In one retch, his stomach empties. I plug my nose and try not to look. Imagine smelling everything ten times stronger. I’m close to fainting, searching for something to focus on, to live through the stink. And I find it. Among the drone of noises I pick out the one I fear most.

“He’s up a level, he’s heading here. How the fuck does he *know*?” I whisper. “I can hear him walking.”

“Your voice. He tracks you by your voice, so stop talking.”

“Why the hell didn’t you tell me this before?” I hiss, before clasp my mouth shut.

“I tried, but you wouldn’t listen.”

I’m tempted to say, *when*, but stop myself in time.

Hunter unrolls a handful of toilet paper, wipes his mouth with it, drops it on the floor, and coughs into the toilet. I close my eyes to avoid seeing what I can hear so clearly—the slimy swish of his juices against the crisp bitterness of toilet water, the dripping of his saliva, the lurching of his stomach, and the pumping of his diaphragm. I cover my ears, wishing myself deaf, if only for a moment. His wet sleeve sweeps the toilet tank. My eyes still closed, I stop his hand an inch from the flush valve, taking a long look at him.

Don’t, I mouth soundlessly.

“Why not?”

Too loud, I gesticulate with my hands in hopes that he’ll understand me. If my father can track me by my voice, surely he’s using some tracking device that will pick up the flushing of the toilet too, since it’s such a noisy endeavor.

Something shifts in the air before Hunter can answer. Humidity goes from nonexistent to damp in a millisecond, adding an odor of mold and decay. It's the unmistakable aroma of a pond where fish go to die, belly up. The smell of...my eyes widen in recognition. *Canosa*.

I look at Hunter, forgetting that I'm not supposed to talk, and repeat what he said on the rowboat, "We're toast."

Hunter raises his eyes at me, incomprehensibly, struggling with another wave of nausea. I look at the foot-wide gap between the stall door and the floor, realizing that I didn't hear the sirens' approach, not a single step. Great.

First, one set of naked feet appears, trailing hair behind it. Then, another. Then, two more. They're all here, *Canosa*, *Ligeia*, *Teles*, and *Pisinoe*. With *Raidne* gone, that leaves four of them. Plus me. Five sirens total.

"You left us, *Ailen Bright*. You ran away and left us to the mercy of the siren hunter. Who does this to their family? Answer me." She takes another step.

I'm about to ask if that means I'm accepted into their siren family, when she cuts in before I can utter a word.

"We were always there for you. Always waiting for you to come and give us your grief; always ready to listen, to give you a shoulder to cry on. Were we not?" Her voice drifts from behind the ugly beige stall door.

"Yes," I say quietly. I swallow, thinking back to all those hours spent in the bathroom, bawling my eyes out and talking to the four marble sirens and one bronze one, for hours and hours on end. Hugging them, stroking their hair, wishing with my childish heart for them to come alive. Well, looks like my wish was granted.

"We never left you, did we?"

I shake my head, unable to bring myself to answer. Hunter, in the meantime, grabs another handful of toilet paper, wipes his mouth, and whispers to me, "What's this bullshit she's talking about?" I want to drop through the floor and disappear into some far, dark corner of the world. Shame floods me with a renewed force, joining in with the guilt. I never told Hunter that I called the sirens my sisters out of fear of looking immature. No need, now he knows. As if she reads my mind, *Canosa* adds to my humiliation.

"You were the one who called us your sisters. You were the one who told us that we mean to you more than your mother and your father combined, did you not?"

I can't even bring myself to nod, I simply press into the ceramic wall, willing myself to shrink and vanish.

"And this is how you repay us? This is how you repay me, for saving your life? For giving you everything you asked for, for turning you into a siren? Tsk-tsk. How come, silly girl? Didn't your mother teach

you any manners? Or maybe your memory is poor and you forgot?" Canosa says, her face now hooked over the stall door by her chin, her eyes darting from me to Hunter, and then all around the walls.

I simply stare, immobile.

"You don't know? Of course you don't. Girls like you never do. How can we accept you into our family now, tell me."

A wash of terror prickles my skin and I don't know what to say. It's as if she knows how to push my mute button and disorient me with simple words. I feel confused about the whole family thing.

"But you just said *who does this to their family* so that means I was already part of the family..." I begin timidly and it comes out wrong.

"You really don't have a brain in there, do you?" She points her slender finger at my head and emits a short cackle. "Girls, do you think she has a brain?" She looks back at the sirens, and they voice their disapproval.

"I asked you not to ask stupid questions." She hooks her chin back over the door. "Forget everything that's been said or done. This is a new life and you have to earn your right to belong, earn your right to call us your sisters for real and to be part of our family. To begin with, you have to start acting like we already *are* your family. You don't just leave your family behind to save your own skin. You stick together, that's what family does. Do you understand?"

A sense of complete idiocy renders me speechless.

I stare at the wall and then notice Hunter gesticulating at me, mouthing, *What the fuck?* I open and close my mouth, but nothing comes out.

While I struggle with a comeback, Canosa hops on top of the partition in one fluid movement with barely a sound. She perches on it like an exotic bird with hair for wings and voluptuous lips for a beak. Then, she flops down on her ass with a smack and sticks out her legs so they dangle right in front of my face. She wiggles her toes and sneers. "Girls, you were right, it stinks in here. Ewww!" She plugs her nose theatrically, pointing a finger at Hunter.

I see Hunter open his mouth to say something nasty; afraid of more confrontation, I press a finger to my lips to shush him.

"How did you guys find us?" I speak louder than expected and clasp my mouth in fear. I glance at Hunter and remember what he said, but then realize that it's no use hiding and being quiet anymore. Hunter raises his eyebrows.

My thoughts are elsewhere already. Papa probably figured out where we are by now. If not for my voice, Canosa's voice did it. But, then, how did the sirens find us? It dawns on me. I left them together at

the lake shore and they must have struck some kind of a deal to get me together. That must be it.

"I asked you a question. And what did you do? You didn't answer. Instead, you asked me a question in return. You know what I call this type of behavior? Rude. And rudeness is not acceptable in our family," Canosa says. "Right, girls?" She looks over her shoulder, and the three remaining sirens soundlessly advance and hook their chins over the stall door the same way Canosa did, nodding and looking at me like I'm crazy to even dare to contradict her. They remind me of their marble selves the way I used to see them every day as mute, pretty dolls with dead eyes, and mouths forever open in perpetual wonder.

"Did you lead my father here? Or did my father lead you?" I think out loud.

"Ailen Bright, I'll forgive your rudeness one more time. Just because it's too fun not to tell. Guess what? We had a little competition to see who would find you first." Canosa smiles her cold, beautiful smile that has nothing good in it. Her words pierce me with that sinking stomach feeling, each of them making a hole large enough for fear to march its righteous parade.

I bite on my finger and don't feel it. *How did I end up here, cornered from all sides? Wasn't I supposed to be the newly born, all-powerful siren? Isn't that what I decided to be? All women are weak, Papa's voice chimes in, the only thing they're good for is for hauling water.* I try to brush the thought aside but it clings to my memory, solid, with a dozen fingers.

"This looks cozy. May we join you?" Canosa asks. "And that performance you gave at the park beach was very entertaining."

I don't know what to say anymore, completely lost in the absurdity of the situation. If my father is on his way here, why aren't they fleeing?

Mane parted in the middle, Teles hops onto the partition, her grin the size of my anguish. Next to her Ligeia licks her lips and waves her hand at me, pulling herself up and over the door. Then they both soundlessly jump off and land on either side of the toilet tank, occupying the far corners of the stall. Now Pisinoe pulls herself up and over, her face and body like that of a porcelain doll coming alive after midnight. She wiggles along the floor, and sits against the wall across from me and Ligeia.

Canosa hops off the door, catches the top of toilet lid with her toes, slaps it shut, and squats on top of it, facing the door. Now the entire stall, barely eight by six feet, is crammed with bodies. Only one of them is living.

Sirens slither by the walls like larvae over leaves, the only sound missing is that delicate caterpillar crunching. If I scratch the surface of their water lily smell, I bet they'd reek of rotten maggots.

Ligeia pouts her lips, on the face of an adolescent who pretends she doesn't know she's adorable. She points at me. "You're cruel, you know that? Raidne was not just a sister to me. She was my best friend. I've lost her now, because of you. Lost her!" She glares, sniffing. I flinch under the hate in her eyes and search for an escape.

I look around for support and realize I've forgotten all about Hunter in the midst of this ridiculous banter.

He sits quietly in the corner, passing his hand through his matted hair. He suddenly speaks up. "You guys done? Can I talk now? Thanks."

Canosa hisses. "Oh, would you look at that. Siren hunter's errand boy wants to talk to us. Shall we let him, girls?"

"It would be marvelous. I like the sound of his soul, it's yummy." Teles claps hysterically, her body jiggling.

Pisinoe joins her, "Yes, please! He can tell me about the pet he wants."

Hunter grins and, instead of fear, I see mischief in his eyes. "Say, I never thought that skipping school on Monday could land me partying with naked girls. In a ladies room. I should visit more often, eh? Fantastic venue."

"Jeez, Hunter, horny much?" I say, feeling a stab of jealousy as it snakes through my gut. I look over myself, a girl clad in an oversized blue rain jacket and soaked skintight jeans. My new breasts don't show so well through this attire. Add to that, my dirty bare feet and messy hair. The essence of high glamour.

"Girls, how about you lift your hair in pony tails? I mean, I think it will look good on you, honest." He swallows.

"Hunter!"

"What? What did I say?"

His face is that of a surprised puppy, complete with stupidly raised eyebrows and floppy ears that decided to perk up in case a bone is coming. But I feel something else behind it, a pretense, as if he's playing stupid on purpose. I decide to trust him, exhale, and press into the corner of the stall.

"Nothing," I say. I lose whatever it was I was going to speak next when I hear Papa's loafers pause directly across the inlaid porcelain man and woman outside the bathroom doors. I hear the crowd shake loose, beginning to talk and move. That means my spell lasted only, what, a few minutes?

"My father..." I turn and look at Hunter, then at the sirens, one by one. "He's here. What do we do now?" I start to stand when Canosa clasps both mine and Hunter's arms and pushes us back down.

"Sit and watch. You'll see."

Pisinoe leans her head on Hunter's shoulder, and says, "You never told me what kind of pet you want. I'm dying to know."

"Hush!" Canosa hisses.

In the following silence, terror prickles my skin and I begin trembling. I hear my father's slow, careful steps, one at a time. They pass the *For Men Only* sign, then move past *For Women Only*. I turn into a jumble of emotions, I'm on the verge of hyperventilating. Hunter reaches over and clasps my hand, his warmth calming me somewhat. At the same time, the crowd pushes its way down, after Papa, toward the public restrooms, in a racket of soupy souls. Another second and they'll be here.

Unable to contain myself and stomach the idea of facing my father, I yelp. "He'll kill us! He'll kill us all. This is madness! Hunter, do something! Why aren't you doing something about it? Let's get out of here, please, right now. We can break through the wall, maybe we can..." I shake hard, catching my breath.

"No!" Canosa shouts, glaring at me, gripping my arm so tightly it hurts. At this, I hear the crowd stop, as if unsure how to proceed. The noise falls down to the cockroach swarming level.

"You're not going anywhere, Ailen Bright. Not bright at all. We came here to show you what being a family really means. I'm sorry you never had one, to learn from."

And I feel like crying. It's as if she poked me in the right place at the right time, like she pinched that nerve on my elbow, the one that you hit in a funny way and yowl, jumping up and down, because it hurts so much. I lick my lips, suppressing tears.

"Do you really mean it?" I say and glance at Hunter, hoping he understands my anguish, hoping he'll give me some clue as to what to do next. He grins, as usual, but I detect a shifting seriousness underneath.

"I'm with you in this. I'm not going anywhere," he says quietly, and squeezes my hand. I squeeze it back, my breaths becoming shallower and shallower. "And I love you. Don't you forget that. Now breathe."

I breathe as instructed.

"When, Canosa, when?" Pisinoe whispers with shiny eyes, trembling from excitement.

"Shut up! She said to shut up!" Teles hisses back at her in a loud whisper, her lips quivering, glancing at Canosa for approval. She nods.

"We heard that, Teles, we're not—" Ligeia begins almost inaudibly.

"Quiet, all of you," Canosa whispers, chewing on a strand of her hair. I think she's nervous.

I hear Papa's loafers gently hug each tile in our direction. In the momentary silence, Canosa snaps her head to look at me, tucked all the way into the corner, and winks. I have imagined this wink thousands of times, while staring at her bronze face in my bathroom. It's an encouraging wink, a wink that says, *Everything will be okay. You just wait and see. From one bad girl to another, if we die today, we'll die having fun.* I remember riding on the back of the stolen Ducati, hugging Hunter, thinking the same thing, *If I die today, I'll die having fun.*

Miraculously, I smile. Canosa smiles back.

And then the other sirens reach out and briefly touch me in unison, before quickly retracting their arms, pressing them to their sides like folded wings, tense and ready to fly. I grin now, thinking, *You just wait, Papa, we'll show you what women were made for, you just wait.*

His loafers pause. In the foot-wide gap between the door and the tile floor, I see Papa's feet step toward our stall. I hear my own raspy breaths. My heart feels afire, my lungs threaten to collapse under pressure, and blood rushes through my veins at a speed that's totally over the limit.

Canosa is all attention, perked up like a perfect predator; her eyes are focused on the door, her pupils tiny, and her mouth stretched in a grinning sneer.

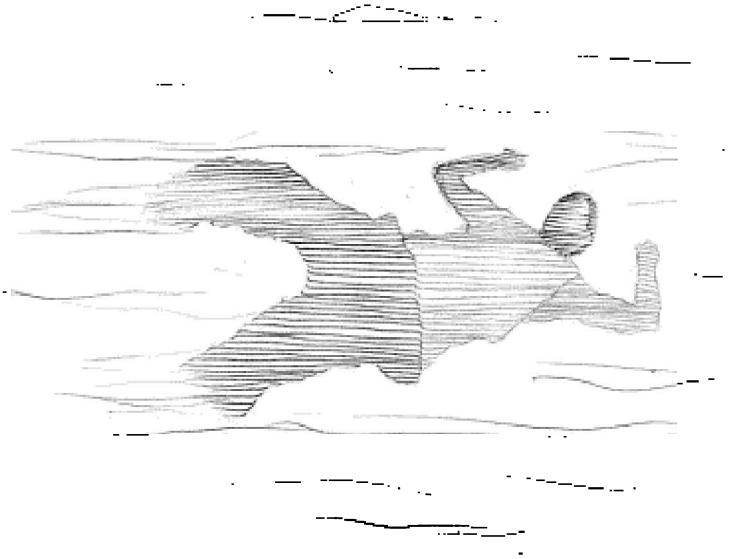
The loafers stop about a foot away from the door. Another second, and I see a looming shadow and expect Papa's face to swim over the stall, but it doesn't happen.

"Ailen? I know you're in there, sweetie." Papa's voice comes at me muffled through my fear, luke warm. Before my throat has a chance to close, I make myself talk, looking at Hunter all the while.

"That's right, Papa, I'm here. And I'm not coming home."

Canosa drops my arms and shouts, "Now!"

Chapter 15



Restroom Stall

Four sirens open their mouths as one. I'm arrested by their terrible beauty. There is Pisinoe, looking no more than a thirteen-year-old if you met her dressed in normal clothes; innocent and cute. Yet, her face opens into a grimace of utter malice. Behind her is Ligeia, tall and lanky like a gazelle, with delicate facial features that transform into a ghostly yawn. Next to her, Teles forms a perfect O with her lips, but there is nothing adorable about it, never mind her slightly chubby cheeks. Her mouth is open wide, her lips stretched to the breaking point as if she's about to reek audible poison. And Canosa. Canosa's skull looks like it will break in two, with every single tooth exposed, her tongue trembling, and her eyes ablaze with hatred. If you dared to lay a finger in her mouth, she wouldn't just bite it off, she'd swallow you whole. Me? What about me? I sit bolted to the floor, dumbstruck.

"Die, siren hunter! Die!" They yell in perfect harmony. Sound waves hit the air and travel outward in one gigantic circle. Walls shake, and the stall door flies off its hinges and drops with a loud clank on the tile floor, barely missing my father. Particleboard dust rises in a cloud, and faucets fizz with water. Mirrors shimmer as a pond's surface shimmers from a light breeze. I cover my ears, so does Hunter. We cower.

The sirens continue yelling at the top of their lungs.

"Lose your mind! Shed your skin! Let your bones rot in a pile! Vanish into our sweet siren meadow!"

Following each of their cries, one by one, other stall doors fly off their hinges, crowding the floor, adding to the dust in the air. The pendant lights zap above us. Shaped like tiny barrels and emitting a yellow glow, they flicker at first, then go out one by one, shattering into a sparkling shower of broken glass.

I watch it in a trance, my gaze fixed on my father. A solitary figure, he stands not more than five feet away, dust on his polished shoes, glass shards in his hair. Yet, he does not move. Only the skin on his face tightens and looks pulled back as if he stuck his face out of a fast moving train, letting the cruel wind hit him. His eyes are on me, and I freeze. He holds a sonic gun in his right hand, and he slowly moves, pointing it at me without hesitation.

Hunter raises his head and looks back and forth between the two of us. From the corner of my eye, I see beads of sweat prickle his forehead, his knuckles going white as he clasps his hands over his ears to shield himself from the sirens' shouting. I don't need to turn my head to know he's studying me, deciding what to do next.

The sirens keep yelling, deafening me.

Papa keeps standing, aiming at me.

Hunter keeps shaking, staring at me.

I feel like I'm in the middle of a terrible dream, where everything that could go wrong, did. And everything that could go right went wrong anyway, just to show me that it's no use dreaming. Life sucks and so do dreams, whether I like it or not, and I'd better get used to it. There are no hopes. Nothing ever turns out the way I want, and there is nobody to blame except myself. I'm the one who plunged into this game, starting from the moment I stepped into the bathtub full of water. Then I ran away. Then I jumped from the bridge. Then I dared to die and be born again.

Maybe Canosa is right, maybe there is nothing more to it than having fun while we can. All people die anyway, so why should it matter if they die as babies or adults? And who says your family is the one you were born into? That's utter bullshit. Who says that guy over there is my father? Who says I have no right to snuff him out like a candle? Who?

I make up my mind.

The rest happens in slow motion. Papa squeezes the trigger on his gun as I tense and jump up, my eyes glazed, my mouth opening in a scream. The skin on my forehead tightens from my eyes bulging out of their sockets. I lightly touch the ceiling with the back of my head as Papa's gun fires and hits Teles instead of me. It only touches her right side, so she shimmers for a moment, a cloud of particles ready to burst into air. Then, she collects back into herself, though her shouting dies at once.

I land in front of my father, barely a few feet away. I grip his wrist and tighten my fingers until he drops the gun on the floor with a thin, plastic-like sound. My grip must be painful, but his face doesn't show it. Instead, I'm afraid I detect a hint of pleasure, and a genuine smile unlike any other smile I've ever seen on his face. There he stands, taking numerous measurements of my body, as if appraising livestock that he wants to buy. I bet he knows I'm not easy to kill.

"Ailen, sweetie, so good to have found you." His face turns into a mask of politeness, covering the cold-hearted indifference of a true siren hunter and a strange exultation that borders on parental pride. I shudder from the thought.

"If only for one minute you didn't devalue me, Papa. If only for one minute I didn't loathe you," I say.

"Don't talk to me like that. Why do you have to be so harsh? Let's discuss this like civil people. I'll give you one minute to get ready, all right? The car is parked downstairs, right by the market entrance. It's waiting."

Suddenly, tears cloud my vision. He doesn't hear me, he never does. This time I'll make him, whether he wants to or not.

"No, Papa. I told you, I'm not coming home. I hate it there, don't you understand? It's not the same without mom. Never will be. It's empty." The echo of my voice reverberates across the walls and I immediately shrink. Did I dare to yell at him? Asphyxiation grabs my throat and poisons it, makes me mute. I begin to hyperventilate.

As if to confirm my suspicion, he rolls out his big, horrible eyes, perhaps knowing what power they hold over my thoughts, my movements. Over my very being.

"I said, we're going home," he says quietly and begins wiggling out of my grip. My fingers slacken, my knees grow soft, and I want to hide from his gaze, all my siren powers forgotten.

I notice that the shouting has stopped. There is an eerie silence, as if we're observed by a breathless audience, waiting to see what will happen next. Then everything erupts into action.

"Lovely, Ailen Bright. I knew it. You've got talent, silly girl. Do them like that, fool them, twist their psyche around your words. Oh, this is so entertaining," Canosa says behind my back and pushes me to the side. Within seconds, we're surrounded by sirens. Teles, anger and hurt in her eyes, circles her fingers around my father's throat, and Ligeia and Pisinoe each take an arm and twist them, pulling them to the sides, making him look like a flattened eagle.

"We'll leave his mouth to you, big sister. As always," says Ligeia with a gleeful smile.

“So that’s what it is. It’s all a game to you both, isn’t it? There is some history behind it, I can tell. And you’re using her as bait to get back at each other. Nice.” I hear Hunter hiss as he walks up to us, his sneakers crunching over broken glass and wood chips. “But you don’t care. Man, you don’t give a *fuck*, do you? If she dies or not in the process, it’s not your worry.”

I see a shocked expression flash over my father’s face, as if Hunter touched on a painful button. But he can’t talk, gasping for air as Teles playfully chokes him.

“You close your mouth and listen, Hunter Crossby, boy. Use your manners and don’t interrupt me. Didn’t your mother teach you that it’s rude to interrupt? What a pity.” Canosa seizes a handful of Hunter’s hoodie and pulls him closer to her, so that their noses almost touch.

“*You* leave my mother out of this, you stupid, bronze, bathroom bitch.” Hunter’s soul melody shifts up a notch, and I know he’s angry. “Come to think of it, your mother abandoned you, I’m sure. What was her name, let’s see here, Terpsichore? Melpomene? Sterope? Can’t remember.”

Canosa snarls and throws Hunter to the ground. He meets it with a sickening crunch. And then there is movement to the left, by the entrance into the restroom—some slaps, some grunting, some whispering and squealing. The first head peaks around the corner. The spectators have arrived.

“Hunter, son, pick yourself up. We’ve got a job to do,” my father manages after taking a raspy breath, free from Teles’s clutches. She circles her fingers around his neck again, giggling. At the word *son* I bristle. Hunter, the son my father never had. Forget the daughter, who needs her? She’s just an idiotic, worthless girl. The weak kind, the kind who can’t defend herself, the kind who was made to haul water. Yet, there is pleading in my father’s eyes as Teles strangles him lightly, and I can’t help myself. There is something left in my heart for him and I’m torn.

A rush of souls hits me in the chest with their sound, but it’s nothing compared to Papa’s silent plea. It’s full of pain and agony, his gaze unbroken as I watch him turn blue in the face. One of us has to make a move, and I know it’s me this time. I breathe in, deep. Yet, instead of making a move to free him, I crumble completely.

I hate this. I hate this! I hate this! I want to scream, mad at my own indecision. Furious inside, timid on the outside. Enter wishful thinking, Ailen Bright style. See if you can slap me to make me act.

What I want is to perform one swift frog-leap, with both feet high in the air, kicking sirens and watching them fly. What I do is drag my right foot to take a small step. A step back. What I want to feel is Papa’s

Ralph Lauren polo shirt roughing up the palms of my hands as I grab him and shake him and yell in his face everything I have ever wanted to say. What I do is take another step, this time realizing which way I'm moving. Backward. I'm retreating, ready to flee. Because I don't know where my allegiance lies anymore, who my family is, exactly—my father or the sirens. Or Hunter. Someone else, or nobody at all?

A blinding thought hits me. Unless I lose control when I'm angry, I can't hurt people.

Something rolls from under my foot and I almost stumble. Papa's sonic gun. I bend and pick it up, seeing it up close for the first time. It's cool to the touch and reminds me of transparent water blasters, made from smoked-gray plastic, with wires coiled inside and a black, conic tube facing me like a tiny loudspeaker. Except there is nothing ergonomic about it. It's two simple cylinders welded onto each other. The big one acting as a barrel, and the small one, stuck out at a slight angle, as a handle. A small, blue button with blue wires leading to it acts as a trigger.

By some blood related impulse, I aim it at Canosa, her eyes widen. A pulsing of emotional exhaustion circuits through my head, ready to explode on anyone or anything, just so they will leave me alone and give me time to make sense of everything that's happened since this morning.

A hint of a smile alights Papa's features.

"Get off my father," I say and shift the gun to point toward the blown up stall. Canosa silently nods and Teles lets my father go, so does Pisinoe. Ligeia is last, hissing her contempt at me.

"That's my girl. Show me, Ailen, show me what women were made for. Show me what you can do, come on." Papa's eyes look like they're growing, until they fill my world with one penetrating stare. The blue of his irises is so different from Hunter's, faded, possessing a clarity of ice, his pupils looking as if two tiny holes were drilled by an auger. And that's where I'm about to drown.

Sawdust odorizes the air, when the rest of the mob bursts onto the scene, complete with screaming women, the police officer with his beer belly, and the fishmonger. I hear their souls behind me, retreating toward them without turning my head, my gun pointed and ready.

"Do it, Ailen," he licks his lips, "show me."

And I want to scream, *Why did you marry mom, did you even love her? Did you, ever?* But my tongue won't move.

Papa smiles with terrible knowledge. He knows he has power over me, no matter what shape I'm in. I know it too. And this knowledge makes me want to kill myself all over again. I can't bear it, it poisons my soulless cavity with emptiness. No soul will ever fill that void.

I wish to scream at the top of my lungs, *Why did you decide to have me? Why did you let her go? What did you do to her, you sick fuck!* What I do is take another step back, angry tears rolling down my cheeks. Shame cooks my face, and I hate it. I want to smash him with the back of my palm, scream in his ear, yell and holler and sing. What I do is keep moving. It's as if my body betrays my mind and does its own thing.

The room's temperature drops a few degrees. Thick fog coils around my feet. Canosa starts singing, her eyes looking straight into Hunter's, his body in her grip, his face ashen. She is aiming to suck out his soul.

"Hunter!" I yelp and step into a puddle that formed from the faucets' fizzing water. I flail my arms and plop down on my ass, letting go of the sonic gun that flies out my hand and makes a peculiar arc, landing in Papa's hands. He clutches it, backs off from the sirens, and runs toward me. He kneels and presses it to my chest, into my ribcage. Freshly-brewed, expensive coffee breath puffs over me through his perfectly whitened teeth, at six hundred dollars per visit. Not covered by insurance.

"Show me what you can do, Ailen, sweetie. Prove yourself to your father. Go on." Then, with power, "*Do it!*" There is expectancy in his urge, yet I can't bring myself to hurt him. What does he want me to show him? What is this all about? Him waiting for me to resist? To hit him back? All those face-slapping sessions while I grew up have served this sole purpose? The idea sickens me, and all of my suppressed confusion and hurt and hatred and disappointment want to exit at once.

Without a second thought, I direct them where my body tells me to. Primitive instincts take over. After all, I'm nothing more than a hungry siren.

My muscles groan as I push hard into the floor and propel myself toward the restroom's entrance, collapsing with the fishmonger, the one who asked to call 911.

"There she is, officer! I saw her myself! I saw her throw that bike. I tell you, whatever it is, it isn't normal. She needs to be locked up. She —" We collide and he folds over me. I hold his body and twist him in the air, slapping him on the tile floor and directing my anger toward him. His thirty-something soul chants at me with its Seahawks' Super Bowl cheer, barking dogs, and lonely strums of a guitar. I stare directly into his pupils and see them widen. There is something else that's like an echo of an afterthought. A feeling, a presence of a girl, tucked behind his eyes but not quite by his heart, and a swarm of beautiful lies. I hear every single one. Faker. It makes me outraged, and then hungry, ravenous, famished.

I'm like a smoker who quit just a few days ago, after smoking for twenty years, and is dying for a drag. I'm surrounded by the smoldering of that impossible soul aroma, acrid, almost musty. In other words, stinky, yet irresistible.

If I don't feed right now, I'll die.

My pinhole of a vision excludes all light. My focus shifts from looking to igniting, sensing life on the other end and willing it to crawl out of its cave and come to me. I squat over the fishmonger's chest like a vulture, scavenging for his essence, at once oblivious to everything that's happening around me. I vaguely remember that Papa has the gun now and can blow me up at any second, but I don't care. Nothing matters except food.

The Fishmonger's resin apron squeaks under me. His plump face turns pallid with terror. His sweat overpowers that distinct after-shave lotion that single men wear thinking it will make them more attractive. His hair, fluffy and flaky, peaks out from under his cap onto his scrunched forehead. He emits a groan. I lower my face to his, ignoring his strong garlic breath, and give away to instinct.

Nobody taught me how to feed, but I know now why I failed to kill Hunter. We had no eye contact. This time my victim's eyes are open, and that's key. They beckon me with magnetic force.

I lick my lips, widen my eyes, and exude a strange glow that reflects in fishmonger's eyes, the electric blue of a fluorescent light bulb. It comes off hot, a degenerating siren glare, the one that corrupts—as my father likes to say—men's very spirits. Eye contact, that's my lighter. It explains what Hunter said about the real siren, the killer kind, the girl next door whose gaze never sits still. Locking eyes with her can mean only one thing. Death.

I imagine myself as a DuPont lighter, the fancy, expensive kind. *Flick open the case, ping!* I open my mouth wide. *Twist your thumb on the igniter.* I inhale, ready to sing. My innards are cotton-soaked in lighter fluid. My stare is a flint that creates a spark. My tongue is my wick, I flick it over my lips, wet with anticipation. The first notes that come out of my mouth are the fire.

*"Why can't you let go of me?
Whispering in my ear,
Pulling on my skin."*

I sing the Siren Suicides' song that I'd always sing in our bathroom at home after yet another violent tirade from my father, my cheeks swelling, hatred fueling my voice. It's called *Let Me Be*. It's a song for him, and I know this time he can hear me.

*"Let me be happy, let me be happy.
And I will be, I will be."*

The fishmonger's cheeks are stained with tears, his eyes forever open to his death. His soul, ignited, makes its first tentative appearance out of his mouth, a trail of smoke, a shadow. I inhale slowly in case I'm too sensitive. It does taste musty, just like I thought. I don't care. As a first siren meal, it tastes beyond delicious. It gives me a buzz, a drowsiness, and then a sharp euphoria that spreads through my ribcage, full of his sounds—Seahawks and dogs and guitar—crammed into one bubbly tumble. I hold it in and it makes me want to float. One second goes by, then two and three. Thick fog uncoils all around me, streaming from my skin pores.

*"Why don't you believe in me?
Cradling my hopes,
Strangling my dreams."*

I take the sharp breath of a maniac, of a druggie getting high on coke, and one thought passes through my mind. *Man, this is the best shit ever.*

"Let me be happy, let me be happy."

More tendrils of fog waterfall from my skin, like I'm a freezer opened on a hot summer day. While I sing, the soul inches into my chest, burrowing into it until it's fully ingested. I inhale another whiff.

"And I will be, will be."

The song is not done, but already the fishmonger's face loses color. His soul is mine now, it buzzes inside me. The room's temperature cools down to about fifty degrees. I feel a first pang of fever. I hold my breath, and let go.

"Why can't I leave you?"

Another inhale. Vapor slinks out of his mouth in creamy streaks, uncoiling into a smooth ribbon. Silky. I suck on it, gulp it up. It stinks of cowardice smeared with cold sweat, and it's still tasting musty. I want to taste different souls, to gorge myself up on flavors. There is a faint commotion behind me.

*"Stumbling in my steps,
Thrashing in my haste."*

Before I can inhale again, Hunter's on my back shaking my shoulders. I send him to the wall with a mere arm-shove. *Slam!* Nothing matters now except food. With more than half of the monger's soul inside me, I'm still ravenous. It seems like I absorb him as I eat, the void rumbling through my chest so loudly, I think the entire market will hear. I inhale and close the song.

*"Let me be happy, let me be happy.
And I will be, will be."*

"Got you!" Papa's voice breaks my trance.

I flip my head to the left. Something happens at the end of some faraway tunnel. Insignificant. I blink, trying to get back. Papa's on top of Canosa, her writhing body in agony. Ligeia and Teles are at his feet, his shoes are off and they are pulling at him, hissing. The sonic gun lies on the floor under the sink, a few inches from his grasp. Hunter wrestles with Pisinoe, and turns to look at me. The tunnel closes. This is not important right now.

I'm back to my feeding frenzy. I have to finish it, I have to. The monger is dying. I push his eyelids apart to make him look at me, to establish eye contact again. Hunger twists me inside out, and I inhale.

"Why can't you let go?"

On the word *go*, the last of his soul slips out and settles into my mouth.

Pop!

Our gaze breaks. His eyes glass over, lifeless. He's gone, and I'm afire. I'm as warm as I was when I was a girl, like I'm back to normal with hot blood rushing through my veins, giggly and excited.

"I said, do her now, idiot. Shoot her!" Papa shouts to Hunter. Hunter rolls with Pisinoe under the sinks, reaching out to the gun. Now she's on top of him, all sweetness and questions about what kind of pet he wants forgotten, grabbing his hair and beating his head against the wet floor.

Body heat drains from the monger. I look down and it dawns on me. He's dead, and it was me who killed him. My giddiness evaporates. My stomach drops. What was I thinking? I try to retch it all back out, coughing. Tough luck. It's gone, absorbed into my seawater blood now. My first feeding is over.

"How could I. How..." I stiffen and tumble off his body into the receding fog, now like a thin layer of tracing paper over the hexagon-tiled floor.

"Ailen, behind you!" Hunter breaks into a shrill. I turn my head to see Pisinoe begin her song and watch Hunter's eyes become transfixed. I want to stand up, but my legs are mush. The classic stoner's relaxation at the wrong time.

I open my mouth to shout, but my father finally reaches the sonic weapon and, with his stomach flat on the floor, he points at me and pushes the button.

Blam!

A focused beam of sound misses me by a foot and sends the air into visible waves. A second later, he fires at the sirens next to him. Canosa roars and the combination of her voice and the sonic blast shakes the ground and every little tile piece in the walls, every mirror, every sink. Toilet water shoots up, pipes break into a shower, and faucets uproot and spray us all with a fierce drizzle of chlorinated water.

My eardrums erupt with pain; I clutch my head and stoop. Ligeia and Teles join Canosa, shrieking. I back off toward the window by the entrance, sliding on the wet tiles.

"You don't understand, Ailen, this is not a game. This is real. I'm trying to teach you something. If you let me," Papa shouts over siren cries and erupting water, his pink polo shirt turning reddish from getting wet.

Remorse floods me with such a force that I begin singing out my pain, not knowing how else to respond, replaying in real life what I wanted to do so many times while sitting locked up in the bathroom.

"Why can't you let go of me?

Whispering in my ear,

Pulling on my skin."

"Where do you think you're going?" Papa asks. I realize I made a step toward the exit, where a breathless crowd is transfixed. I catch myself in the mirror. My reflection looks scary; I'm a bleached-out version of Ailen, with translucent skin devoid of color, pasty, matted hair, and unnaturally blue eyes, bluer than Hunter's rain jacket hanging loosely on my shoulders. My face splits with the grimace of a sea monster, some ghostly beastie. How is this supposed to be charming?

"Let me be happy, let me be happy.

And I will be, I will be."

"I don't think you're going anywhere, you hear me? I think you're going home." He aims at me, standing amidst incapacitated sirens. They're breathing, but not moving. Hunter crawls from under the sinks, particle board dust covering his hair.

He reaches for my father with what closely resembles tears in his voice, "Fuck you, man! She is your own—" but gets kicked in his groin and folds down, moaning.

Watching this hurts worse than a thousand sonic blasts. "Hunter!" I lean forward.

Ka-blam!

My father hits my legs. My head explodes with brilliant pain. The tissue in my legs screams and threatens to separate into a million atoms, yet somehow holds together. I drop to the floor, ignoring the ringing pain, and continue to sing.

"Why don't you believe in me?

Cradling my hopes,

Strangling my dreams."

Bam!

He hits my side now. I slide across the wet tiles leaving a trail with my butt. It's like he's aiming at me, but doesn't intend to kill me.

"Let me be happy, let me be happy.

And I will be, I will be."

I make it to the open frame of the tall window, now slightly ajar as if it had been left open to let in fresh air. The sweetness of the rain greets me. I pull myself up on the windowsill.

"Why can't I leave you?

Stumbling in my steps,

Thrashing in my haste.

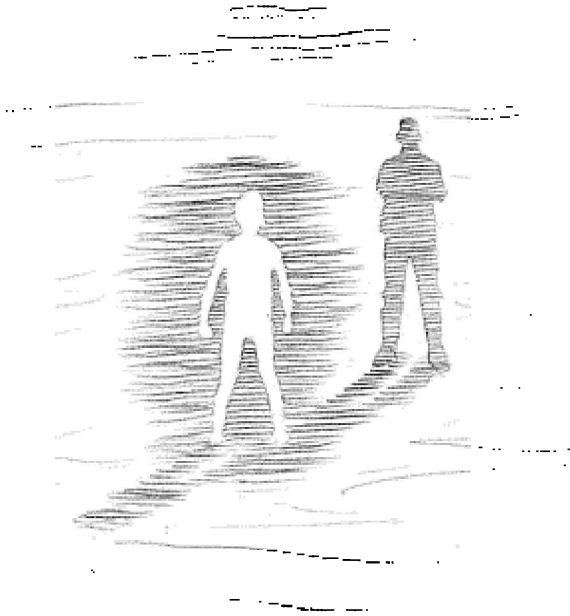
Let me be happy, let me be happy.

And I will be."

Another blast sears my torso with pain.

"*I will be!*" I nearly shout, then hoist myself up into the opening, roll over the windowsill, and drop twelve feet down.

Chapter 16



Post Alley

Rain slaps me in the face, perhaps mad that I once called it stupid. I slide down the brick wall, as if in apology, and hit the concrete. I tip my head back and offer my face to the rain. My gills ache. This is the water I needed. Not the chlorinated spray from the public restroom, but the rainwater collected from the tops of mountains and carried here by fierce Northwest winds. It gives me back my strength. I want to talk to it, the way I hummed to the lake, the way I parted it when we rode at top speed on that stolen silver Ducati. *Ailen Bright*, the rain droplets seems to whisper, *Get in the water, quickly. Escape before you get locked up in a trunk of despair, forever. You know he won't let you out of his sight, out of his control, siren or not. Be quick. Move!*

"Okay, okay. I will," I say, fully aware of how strange I must appear—a dirty girl in torn clothes, soaking wet, talking to the sky. It must be close to noon by now, because several lunch-goers stop to measure me up and down to decide if I pose any kind of threat. I know what I look like, they don't need to show me. I'm a monster, the everyday, variety kind, the scariest of them all.

Full from the fishmonger's soul, and no longer hungry, I'm ready to go. Ready to escape the crowd's screaming and jeering from two stories above. I feel miserable about leaving Hunter like this, but who am I to deserve his love? What did I just do? I just fed on a man. *I'm a monster all right, a siren. And a siren hunter is no friend to us, like Canosa said.* Because I think this, that I even dared to listen to this thought in my head, I feel even worse. I want to simply run away from it all, to hide and think it over. Dip myself into the calming water, my only true friend. Water is all that matters, and my gills agree. I trust that it will tell me what to do.

I take a second to look south and study the landscape, deciding where to go. The Puget Sound spreads in a wide smile past the Aurora Highway and layers of buildings, riding a wave of seagull shrieks and salty smells. I want to grow wings and leap over this entire stretch of stone that separates us, and perform the dive of a century to reach the water right this moment. But I can't, and I hear Papa running toward the window three stories above me. Another couple of seconds, and I'm toast.

I dash left and left again, dragging my feet, weak from Papa's blasts. I head into the a dark maze of the Pike Place Fish Market's guts, with its restaurant's barred windows, garbage bin stink, and sewer pipes hissing steam and liquid. My bare feet slip on the wet and worn cobblestones. I pass a lonely janitor emptying a bucket of dirty water right into the street, his soul a mix of a talking parakeet, boiling soup bubbles, and some mixed martial arts cries, all promising to taste pungent. I slow down a notch without realizing it, the predator in me ready to feed. I could push him into that gaping backdoor and snuff him out in no time. I get mad at myself for thinking this and pick up my pace. I continue into Post Alley, that hidden capillary that crosses Seattle's downtown. I think I know where I'm going.

Ahead of me, a flock of tourists poses in front of the Gum Wall, pretending to be stars against a background of chewed up resin. A dozen of them take pictures and chat excitedly. Some are fresh, even minty, and one is a sweet young girl. Quickly, before getting distracted by their souls, I run between them, no doubt spoiling their photo. I push them apart with my arms, wincing as if I'd touched hot pans on a stove. They shriek. I keep running, skidding on damp stones, and tearing past gaping garages, mesh fences made of metal, and by a row of parked motorcycles—all in the shadow of tall apartment buildings on each side. I run toward the light at the end of the alley, into the open.

One thought pounds inside my head on repeat. *I don't belong. I don't belong. I'm a killer, and I don't belong.*

Water and solitude, it's what I need right now. Water will heal me.

I burst into the opening and shield my eyes from the diffused light streaming down through the clouds. It stopped raining. The Puget Sound glistens with its welcome calm to my right, and I bolt south, crossing the street and reaching a staircase to a lower level. I skip down its forty metal steps, and continue running without looking back, toward grim columns that support the rumbling, elevated section of Highway 99, fifty feet above me. I pass into its looming shadow, ignoring the red light, and jog between beeping cars across Alaskan Way. There, almost made it. I step onto the pedestrian walkway, now just a concrete fence and a plaza away from water. My wellbeing. If there is such a thing as wellbeing for a siren. My legs still tremble from the shock of the sonic blasts, my gills aching with a dull thirst.

It seems as if I don't have to be in the water all the time, like people don't need to be in the sun all the time, yet it's good for them when they do. I wonder if I'd turn into a fish if I stay in the water too long, just like I used to burn in the sun if I tanned for more than a few hours. I smile at the thought, imagining myself as a trout.

There is so much water, and it's somehow very different from lake water. It feels bigger, louder, more magnificent. It hums to me. Enthralled by its slur I miss the danger. A homeless mushroom of a man snatches my arm just above the elbow. His brown bundle of clothes is soaked through and reeks of urine.

"Hang on there, little birdie. Where do ye think ye're going? Eh? Spare some change for this poor man, will ye? Will ye?" His open mouth shows gaps between yellowing teeth. He's short and shrunken and trembling.

"Huh?"

I shake off his arm, ready to pick him up and throw him into the street, annoyed at the interruption of my marveling, yet knowing I might not have enough strength to do it yet. I look into his tiny pig-like eyes and feel his desire. He's heard my voice and he's thirsty for it. He wants to bite a piece of me, to touch me, to see if it's skin or just some weird, milky glass that's poking through my torn jacket and jeans. This makes me livid and I can't stomach the idea of touching this man. I forget all about the water and shout.

"What? What do you want? You like me, do you? What is it about me that you like, huh? My dirty feet? My adorable hair that looks like I've been crawling in shit since this morning? Yes? No? Well, which one is it?" I know I need to go, but I want an answer. I want him to answer me, *now*. I want all of them to answer, everyone who wouldn't leave me alone, wouldn't let me be. And I feel my energy evaporate after using my voice.

The man doesn't appear to be scared; instead, he takes a step closer in lucid adoration. "Oh, will ye look at those blue eyes. Very pretty. Yer mama gave ye those, little birdie? Was she pretty too? I bet she was, I bet. Give to an old man for a drink. I'll drink to ye, and I'll dream of ye tonight, my beauty." The palm of his hand is inches from my cheek. His voice trembles and so does his soul, surprisingly serene, like hushed leaves whispering in an overgrown garden, promising to taste earthy.

"Don't touch me!" I shout in his face, and instantly regret it. The man jerks his hand away. There is so much hurt in his eyes, his lips quiver. And I want to slap myself hard, to teach myself a lesson, to control my anger. To never turn into my father, ever. Siren or not.

Then the flashes come.

Directly over the concrete fence, on the wooden platform that separates me from the water, a pack of Japanese tourists is taking pictures of themselves, of the waterfront, and of me and the homeless man. I know I'd have to make it through them and across the platform to dive in and disappear. And, suddenly, I can't. My knees grow soft at the idea of killing anyone else by mistake, or while in the rush of anger. I'm flooded with remorse and guilt, remembering the mesmerized and terrified crowd by the market and once again by the restroom entrance, the dead face of the fishmonger, and Raidne being blown up. I can't do this anymore. I can't run around and simply hurt people. I can't be a siren, not with my father's DNA. I need to somehow get rid of myself, for good.

While I try to sort through my emotions, things turn from bad to worse. A cop approaches us with the steady gait of an old man, not old enough to retire, but old enough to have hip pain, limping slightly on his left leg. His hair is curly and gray, contrasting with his dark skin and blue uniform cap. A gospel handclap of a soul, he's a mix of Mardi Gras songs, old jazz, and alabaster ghetto shootings, all together tasting perhaps like gumbo. My chest grumbles with hunger.

"Miss? Is he giving you trouble?" He straightens his cap, his fat fingers hairy yet cleanly manicured. I begin to think that the only way for me to escape this situation—weakened as I am—without hurting anyone in the process, is to run away.

The homeless man shrivels and weaves a lie, which seems to come naturally to him. "She took me money, officer. Swear on me life." He crosses himself. "That her right there, took all me change. I'm jus' an honest man, trying to make a living here. An honest man, officer, trying me best. Doing me best, as best I can, in me circumstances." Saliva drips out of his open mouth. I judge the gap between him and the cop, thinking of slinking through without pushing either of them out of my way.

"Shut it, Bonny. I've heard this a thousand times. Get your sorry ass out of my sight if you don't want me to charge you with a misdemeanor." He turns his attention to me. "Miss, can I see your ID? Holy Jesus, what happened to you?" His large brown eyes widen as he notices the big holes in my jacket and jeans.

There is enough space between the slowly moving cars in the lunch traffic on Alaskan Way. As if sensing my resolve, the cop raises his arm. "Let me—"

I lightly brush it aside and sprint, every step rendering me weaker and weaker.

"Miss! Stop!"

I hear the cop shout after me, but I'm off, weaving my way between blaring cars and back under the ugly Alaskan Way Viaduct, its dark expanse hanging parallel to the waterfront like a looming imposter. I turn onto a long stretch of road with metered parking and run further south. I concentrate on the ground to avoid swaying from sudden dizziness. I keep running, between rows of parked cars, the ever-present forest green Subaru's, metallic Volkswagens, unidentifiable maroon-colored vans, an occasional truck, and some bright green hybrids. I think that if I run all the way to the ship terminals, where there are no tourists or gawkers, I'll slip into the water there, without attracting much attention.

I keep looking to my right for a clear side street, a pier devoid of souls. My feet paddle forward, feeling heavy. About twenty feet ahead of me, and behind the next turn, I hear the unmistakable sound of terror from a Maserati Quattroporte Sport GT S engine, the low purring of Papa's car.

"Crap!" I yelp, before realizing that it's a big mistake. Hunter said a siren hunter can track a siren by her voice, so my shouting at the homeless man must have lead him there. Great. Before he whips around the corner and spots me, I have perhaps ten seconds tops to make myself invisible and disappear.

Pain forgotten, I sprint left, scattering a handful of pigeons into a mad, cooing cloud. I run along some side streets toward the harbor's steps that connect this lower area of town with its upper level. I hop over several steps at once in long strides, pulsing with a single idea: *I need to hide. I need to hide.*

Car tires screech onto the side road I took and drive to the bottom of the steps just below me. I don't need to turn to look, I know who it is. And he's not alone. There hangs a hint of that summery goodness and warmth in the air. The lulling sound of Vivaldi's *Summer* concerto gone wrong, as if having turned sour. He's got Hunter in the car with him, and Hunter is in pain. I can't help myself, I stop and turn around.

I've made it two-thirds of the way up the steps and there's about a hundred feet between us. Papa gets out of the car right in the middle of the street, ignoring the honking. Horrified that he'll see me, I drop flat on my stomach into one of the shallow pools of the fountains that run along the steps. The water gives me instant relief yet also burns me with its chlorine. I can't stay here for long. *Think, Ailen, think.* He can't drive up the steps after me, and he hasn't seen me yet. If I keep quiet, he won't know where I am. Can I outrun his car? Not in this injured state. Can I make it out of this maze and into the water unseen? Probably best to wait till night when the streets are deserted.

I decide to find a good hiding spot so I can recover, perhaps yearning for the comfort of confinement I used to experience when Papa would lock me up in the bathroom for hours on end. I wait until I hear the engine start again and move away. Then, I jump out of the water to the shriek of a passing lady and the hysterical barking of her dog, I sprint to my left and into another alley. *I'll hide, I'll think. I'll wait it out, get better, and then I'll dive.*

I splash across puddles with no sense of direction, simply going somewhere, looking for a quiet place. The alley ends in a series of concrete steps and I find myself in an open plaza directly underneath one of the Aurora Highway exits. No, it's not a plaza, it's a dead-end the size of a concert hall. The street ends into a wall that's about thirty feet high with a supporting, cement column in its middle. Perpendicular to it, and straight ahead of me, stands a squat brick building. A concrete staircase, masquerading as an architectural ornament, runs up the building's side from its first to fourth floor. The space beneath the staircase is walled off by a chain-link fence, all the way to the top. Perfect.

It's devoid of pedestrians. I quickly jog across, passing a few parked cars, and break open the metal mesh door. I remember to lean it back so it looks like it's shut. I crawl into the rubble in the shallow end, pushing aside pieces of industrial junk reeking of machine oil and rust. As I scoop away rustling chip bags, damp cardboard, and plain dirt, I discover a treasure. Deep under the lowest rung of the staircase, stuffed with discarded appliances and hidden from view, stands an old, iron, claw foot bathtub. I can't believe my luck and start digging trash out of it, to make enough room.

I slide inside and pull some of the cardboard boxes over my head to cover myself up. There, I'm hidden. I let out a sigh of relief, trembling all over from the effort of running. I notice a shaft of light in the dimness around me. Several shafts. I turn onto my stomach. There are three circular holes in the tub where the faucet used to be. I position myself

so that my nose barely peeks through the largest hole, and my eyes level with the two other holes, like I'm a hermit crab observing its surroundings through a broken shell.

I breathe in rapid gasps, calming myself down.

You're safe, you're safe here. I'll stay here until it turns dark, and then quietly find my way out and disappear into the water. I don't know exactly what I will do after that, but it doesn't matter. I'm safe now. My head buzzes with dizziness, and I feel like I'll puke.

Ailen, stop freaking out. You're good. I begin to relax. It's over with. It's all over. I can gather my strength and think about what I'm going to do with myself and how. Maybe I can use this place again in the future, if need be. Maybe I can even stay here for days, alone, in peace. If not for the constant shaking of the ground and the wheezing from traffic above, this would be perfect.

Involuntarily, I utter a moan, perhaps because too many things have happened, perhaps to release the pain. The amount of stuff that has happened to me over the last twenty-four hours beats all the other things that had transpired throughout my entire sixteen years of life. But as soon as the sound escapes my lips, I gasp and cover my mouth. A noise. I made a noise.

I freeze and wait, hoping against all odds that my moan wasn't loud enough for Papa to detect. The constant drone of cars exiting from Aurora to downtown Seattle should've dampened it. How exactly would he detect me, what kind of device does he use?

Wondering didn't last long, because there's a low purr of a Maserati engine, its eight cylinders pumping pistons and producing a fume that contrasts with any other exhaust by virtue of its ego. Look at me, I'm Italian made. Papa's car rolls in, his tires gripping the asphalt in tight revolutions, crunching along the parking area until they stop directly across from my hiding spot. The metallic gray Quattroporte glistens at me through the holes, as if saying, *You thought you could hide from me, sweetie?* I'm afraid to move further into the dark, afraid to make any movement at all. Hunter's profile is barely visible from behind the passenger door window. His head is hung as if he's sleeping.

I watch all of this unfold with a mortified fascination, where my senses have turned themselves off in favor of a single flood of terror. My bones turn brittle, my muscles spasm, and my skin feels like ice. Above all, the pounding of my heart is so loud, I wish I could push a button and turn the damn thing off before it gives me away.

Move! Go, go now, before he gets out of the car! My mind screams at my body, but my body won't listen, my hand still pressed over my mouth. He doesn't know I'm here, not yet. Surely, it's some acoustic radar that he uses, and as soon as I'm quiet, it'll be quiet too. I hope.

Get out and run, you stupid coward! You can outrun him and make it into the water. Go! But the more my mind reels with agony, the more my body wills itself to be completely still, barely breathing. This is what they must call deer in the headlights, because I have a complete lack of motor reaction. Atrophied.

The car idles for a few seconds, as if my father is deciding something, then it pulls into one of the empty parking spots, its tail lights flashing red before going dark. The driver's door opens and Papa steps out, glancing at his watch. I study his face, about twenty feet away from me. It's cleanly shaven as always, and concentrated on something. The time? I notice he changed into a new set of clothes that he always carries in the trunk of his car in case he gets wet. Right now it's a dull lavender shirt and a pewter wool jacket, no tie. I notice something else. An echo of blue light reflects in tiny halos on his cheeks. Pulsing. Blue light flashing at him from his watch. My guts turn to lead. The radar. It must be an acoustic radar and it's picking up my breathing right now, because I'm not making noise anymore.

Another thought pricks at me with pins and needles. That's what it meant, all those times. He would glance at his watch during a mealtime, excuse himself, and practically run out of the house under the pretext of being late. Then, he'd take off on his boat and vanish for days. My father was never late, and his escapades always puzzled me. I was never allowed to touch, or even look at, his exorbitantly expensive Italian piece of watch-making excellence. Papa always reminded me that it was made of titanium by a company called Officine Panerai and was originally produced for the Royal Italian Navy, telling me how he would make me pay it off if I ever broke it. Nor did he allow my mother to handle it. Every time after he left in a hurry, mom would always go pale and start chatting gibberish to cover up the silence.

Maybe I stare at my father too hard, because as soon as I think about mom, he raises his head and looks directly at me. I know he can't see me, but the sensation is overwhelming. I almost cry out, understanding where my paralysis comes from. It's not so much the fear of him catching me, it's the impossibility of escape, like in a bad dream where you run and run through tangled woods, away from a predator whose breath you feel on your back, but every time you think you made it out, you find yourself back to where you started. You wheel around, and there it is, the monster of your nightmares, staring you in the face.

Papa puts his hand in his pant pocket and marches to the broken door, a sonic gun in his other hand. I get a whiff of his determination and shrink even further into the tub, mentally burrowing myself in it like a mole blind from fear.

You need to run! Now!

Yet, I do not listen, lost inside myself. My head seems to have swapped places with my feet, my heart somersaults down to my stomach, my lungs dry out, and my gills ache with a burning irritation the way a fresh cut stings. My apprehension sears my vocal cords. *Great, Ailen, you're a mute siren now. Congratulations. Fresh catch of the day. You don't stand a chance.*

"Ailen."

I don't see my father through the holes anymore, but I hear him make his way through the trash and rubble.

"Come on, sweetie, we both know you're here. Let's be civil and do it quietly this time around, okay? We don't want to scare people. People do strange things when they're scared, they might imagine things that are not really happening. We don't want that."

More steps and shuffling, then his voice is almost above me. "One minute. I'll give you one minute to come out. You know I don't like to wait."

He starts the timer. I never heard the actual sound, but I hear it now with my extra sensitive ears. It's mechanical and delicate at the same time.

Tick-tick-tick.

I imagine the watch's second hand passing the numbers.

Eight. Nine. Ten.

This feels too much like déjà vu, like me counting seconds when stepping into the bathtub full of water this morning. Panic sets in my chest, my paralysis morphing into dread. He jingles his car keys, takes another step.

"Forty seconds, sweetie."

How he loves to set the timer on me, using his super-precise watch; he has for as long as I can remember. That dreaded one minute, sixty seconds exactly; not a second less, not a second more. I picture the broken bathroom door on the floor and his pristine shoes, suddenly hating all the beautiful things he surrounds himself with. He even treated my mother, who was strikingly beautiful and never even knew it, like this. Like nothing more than a thing of beauty. Canosa turned me into a siren to avenge my mother, that was my choice. So, why am I hiding here, all stiff and afraid?

Pure loathing fills me to a bursting point and pulls my internal trigger. My weakness is gone, replaced by an urge to tear apart, destroy, and kill.

With a terrible shriek, I contract my muscles and burst through a shower of debris, head first. I hit the fence and break it, then turn 180 degrees in the air, and jump into a fighter's stance with my feet apart

and my hands curled into fists. My eyeballs swivel in their sockets until they find him.

“I hate your guts, Papa,” I say, facing my father.

Chapter 17



Aurora Avenue

My defiance is making the air taste like thick cotton wrapped around a probing stick and stuck in between my father and me. Which one of us will push it to cross these last ten feet? Whose face will be slapped this time? Without a moment's hesitation, my father aims and fires at me. An earsplitting bang blasts the air and hits me in the gut. As I fall, I watch two women descend the stairs, give me a quick glance, and saunter off. The sonic gun must hardly make any noise at all, not to their human ears, at least... I can't finish my thought. Ablaze with pain, I bend and fall, vibrating like a piece of glass about to shatter, seeing everything through a film of fog. My jeans catch on the sharp end of a chain link. I try to yank my leg free without breaking eye contact with my father, crossing that terrible bridge into the mind of the one who spawned me. A siren hunter without a soul. I fight the oncoming nausea.

"I said, I hate your guts. Did you hear me?"

"Good. I'm glad to hear it, sweetie. Now, would you please get in the car?" He motions with his gun. I detect nervous notes in his voice. I'm not, not running away, and that must puzzle him. It puzzles me too, but some mad stubbornness is making me stay, to test my theory. Plus, I can barely move.

"You're not going to kill me, are you? You can't. This is all for show," I say, slowly moving my stiff tongue, verbalizing something that's been bugging me since he first fired at me on Seward Park beach. If he wanted to dispose of me, surely he would've done it already.

Behind me, the passenger door remains closed and Hunter sits there quietly, his soul's Vivaldi now barely discernible. He's not getting out to help me. The air thickens with my resentment, I can almost touch it. Shaking, I get up until I'm kneeling, and I edge toward my father on all fours, dragging my limbs like an injured crab. I continue staring at him in the face, and I can see a trace of doubt. He frowns. Then my sleeve catches on another broken chain link and I fold down, digging into asphalt with my elbows and face.

Sprawled on the ground, I raise my head so I can see Papa.

"Go on, shoot me. I'm helpless. See, I can barely move."

And I flash him a grin. The terror that passes through his eyes is so genuine, that I burst out laughing. It shakes me to the core, sounding wrong and gleeful at the same time, releasing my fear into the open. I hear him curse.

Bam!

Another shot. It hits me square in the face, slapping me on my right cheek just as Papa always does. He'd then hit my left one, for symmetry, he'd say. To make me think about standing up to him, about growing out of my female weakness. I blink tears out of my eyes. The right side of my head is on fire; my right eye is close to popping and the right side of my jaw feels ready to part with my face. I grit my teeth and remain quiet, expecting the blast to my left. Nothing happens.

My father's silhouette swims against the staircase underbelly with pulsing regularity. I close my eyes and open them again, shedding more tears. Still no good. Everything around me looks as if it's covered with a layer of water. A gigantic, bronze bell tolls in my ears, ringing on repeat, echoing the shot. I suspect there must be some sort of intensity setting on that thing, some sort of a dial that regulates the wavelength or the focus of the sound beam, aimed at either torturing the siren or blowing her up for good. Because how else did he blow up Raidne with one blast from a distance of about fifty feet, yet he can't blow me up from only ten feet away? My mind clears up. Facts. Facts are my crutch and my sanity, they always pull me out. And water.

I try to turn my head toward the Puget Sound, to glimpse its blue expanse. No luck. My head drops on the pavement, my neck muscles twitching, exhausted. My nerves, assaulted by the sonic boom, feel detached. The last of my strength evaporates into a groan. I'm an escapee caught red-handed and awaiting corporal punishment. On sheer will, too stubborn to give up, I manage to roll onto my back and face the sky. But I don't see it. I don't see the street, I don't see the buildings. There is no highway exit above me, no clouds, no trees. Nothing. All is gone, replaced by Papa's eyes. Large, round, dark. They burrow a hole through me, and I flatten.

"I'm not coming home," I whisper.

"I can't hear you, sweetie." His shadow is above me, leaning closer. He doesn't hear me. He never hears me.

"Papa..." I can't finish. His eyes block the world, his black pupils consume my vision. I'm blank except for the constant ringing in my ears. The rest of me feels dead.

"Why don't you understand? You can't run away from me. I'm your father and you do as I say as long as you live."

"Then I don't want to live anymore," I whisper.

"Don't you ever say that," he hisses through his teeth and passes the gun to his left hand.

Here it comes, the symmetrical blow. His right arm snakes high into the air and pauses; for a moment, nothing more than a bent line drawn against the gray sky. Then it crashes down in one hard smack. The left side of my head explodes with a sound so deafening that I vibrate again to a bursting point, like I'm a balloon filled with too much water.

Everything goes quiet and dark.

I can't see, can't hear, but I can feel. My skull compresses, then rebounds with a shock of bright pain. I can't tell if it's cracked, but I'm still alive, as much as you can call a soulless siren alive. I feel Papa's hands on my neck, his fingers palpating, searching for a pulse. How ironic. I'm not alive, yet I'm not quite fully dead, either. I have a heart. It's pumping liquid through my veins, but that liquid is seawater. Cold, colorless, tasteless blood. No, not true, it has a taste. It's salty, like tears. Look who is crying. Ailen Bright, a siren, freshly caught, properly stunned and ready for purchase. At thousand dollars a pound, I'd say it's a steal. Except my father gets it for free, family discount, you know.

It's been a little more than a day now since I died and was born again. And I totally *feel* like a newborn in a fetal position, with my back bent, my head bowed, and my limbs drawn in toward my torso.

Papa leans to pick me up. The only other time he picked me up was probably when I was born. He must've been full of wonder, thinking he was getting a son. His hands full of love, cradling my head and pulling on my shoulders, to free me from my mother's womb. Lifting me and turning me over. Until...until he saw. That's it. I know why I didn't run away this time. Deep inside, I was waiting for this, I was planning on it, with all of my pitiful, dead heart. I was too afraid to admit it before, but now that I'm close to dying a second time, I'm not afraid anymore.

Papa, I can't help myself. I still love you.

This is my dream. My one minute of fantasy that's better than nothing, worth every ounce of pain, paid for with suicide. This very moment. *This*.

Papa wedges his arms underneath me and it's more intimate contact than I've ever gotten from him. He is rough, but to me, his touch is gentle. He lifts me off the ground in a sharp yank, but I think he gives me a first real hug. He jerks me up and folds me over his shoulder, but I feel like he cradles my body. He throws me into the trunk of his car, stuffing me in for perfect fit, but I imagine it's the car's interior he puts me in, simply a bit too dark. He ties my hands and ankles, and tapes my mouth. I phantom his face above me, smiling, worried sick for my safety, then buckling me up. He gives me one last punch, but I know he meant it as a kiss.

"What did I tell you? We're going home," he says.

The lid of the trunk shuts with a smooth clunk and my heart sinks. Darkness is complete, so is the soft silence. Papa presses on top several times to make sure it's really closed, then walks around the car and slams the driver's door. His steps, and the door's slamming, barely trickle into my ears. I feel them more than I hear them. There is a struggle, voices coming at me as if through a thick, wooly wall. I'm surrounded by hushed white noise, then it's silent again. The car trunk must be soundproof to some degree, maybe designed to transport captured sirens? I wiggle my wrists in an attempt to free my hands. Forget tape. What I feel is metal rope. There's no way can I break it, not without my usual strength. I grunt, trying to roll onto my back, but there's not enough space. I begin inching toward the back of the trunk, to hit it with my hands and touch it. The chemical smell of glue and some kind of rubbery foam starts irritating my nostrils. Great. What I need right now is a runny nose. I convulse in a soundless sneeze.

Like a distant echo, I make out the timbre of Hunter's voice, he seems to be arguing with my father. There are no words, only the sharp tone of their squabble, thick with emotions—suppressed anger, hatred, disgust, even arrogance. Then one remark from my father and silence again. I wonder what it is that he's said to shut Hunter up. It's not an easy thing to do.

The car purrs to life, backs out of its parking spot to turn around, and moves at an increasing speed, thrumming slightly.

That's it, I've been caught. Good job, Ailen. Prepare for your final execution. Isn't this what you wanted? You wanted to die, right? Well, here's your chance.

I swallow, tasting glue from the tape. It's been several minutes now that I've been locked inside, and it's increasingly difficult to breathe. The air grows warm from the working engine, and exhaust fumes trickle in through whatever gaps they can find, choking me with their gasoline smell. I'm on the verge of blacking out again. Prompted by the car's

rhythmic motion, and the soft padding and darkness, I try to distract myself by imagining being back inside my mother's womb; imagining what it felt like. And missing her, missing her badly.

I wish I was never born.

I wish I was frozen in time, as a fetus, feeling this safe and warm and dreamy, always.

I pretend that the motor revolutions are her heartbeats, the stuffy air her amniotic fluid soaked into the lining of the trunk. The metal wire coiled around my wrists and my ankles is her misplaced placenta. Every bump in the road shakes me, her gestating embryo, but in a gentle swaying manner, the way a boat sways in the middle of a lake.

The air resembles a poisonous gas now, thick with a synthetic and metallic odor, and getting hotter by the minute. Dizziness spins my head. I can't tell up from down, left from right, or in from out anymore. It doesn't matter, I go on pretending I'm deep inside my mom, a properly developing baby. Ailen Bright, oxygenating normally, ten fingers, ten toes, two lungs, one heart.

For whatever reason, I imagine that it's when my parents were in Italy on their honeymoon, in Lake Garda's amusement park that my mom told me so much about. I must've been no more than a few multiplying cells at the time. They're going down a huge water ride, and Papa is scared out of his mind because he hates getting wet, even though he's strangely attracted to the water. But my mother insisted they ride, because she loves boat rides so much. When they met, she jokingly told him that she'd marry him if he bought her a boat. He did. She told me he fell in love with her like a madman. They married three weeks after that, and now I'm in her belly, swaying.

She jeers and laughs, soaking wet, and is clutching Papa's hand tightly. Papa is white, like paper. My mother is too absorbed in her enjoyment to notice, her heart going crazy like a revving motor. I know, I can hear it from the inside.

Mom? I'm a brave little girl. I swear I won't tell Papa that I'm not a boy. Promise. I feel her turning her gaze inward, suddenly knowing that she's pregnant, sending me a stream of warmth and endless admiration. The ride ends and they climb out of the boat, stepping down from the platform and into the Italian sun.

"Roger? I just felt something, on the ride. Some sort of a vision. I think I'm pregnant," she says and smiles at him. "And I think it's a girl. It's going to be a beautiful baby girl." She places a hand on her stomach.

"Do me a favor, Tali, stop it," Papa says, visibly irritated and still shaken by the ride. His face is gray, and his shirt is wet, sticking to his chest, almost transparent. "Stop talking nonsense, all right? You'll jinx it.

I want a son, remember? You'll give me a son. And that's the end of it." He grabs her hand and pulls her out of the sun, and into the shade.

Deep inside my mom, I recoil and float into the farthest corner of her womb, not knowing anymore where my future heart belongs, crying nonexistent tears, covering up my face that I don't have yet with hands that are not there.

For a moment, my mother is speechless, following him like a puppet. Then, proceeding with her soft diplomatic nature, she tries to soothe him, discounting his remark to jet lag and a fast ride that perhaps made him ill. That's what she always told me; she was constantly trying to find an excuse for what he said or did.

"How can you say such a thing? So what if it's a girl, we'll try again. I know you want a boy, Rogie. I know." Her eyes widen, so blue and beautiful and dreamy. Her brown hair contrasts with her white skin, glistening even in the shade of a tall maritime pine. She attempts to touch my father's cheek, but he pushes her hand away.

"I don't want to talk about this anymore. Let's get out of here," he says.

"Are you feeling all right? Do you want me to get you a bottle of water?" She raises her hand again, then drops it. "You might need to—"

"Don't tell me what to do, woman," he says harshly, gripping her arm right above the elbow and pulling her behind him, weaving his way through the tourist crowd. They had their first fight in the hotel room after that. Mom wouldn't tell me what happened next.

I've imagined this scene a thousand times, and I had told this story a thousand times to Canosa and her sisters while sitting in the bathroom, crying.

I won't cry right now, though. I won't.

But I do.

They're cold siren tears; excess seawater excretes through my tear ducts at an alarming rate, wetting my face and getting absorbed into the wooly soundproof lining of the trunk. If I don't stop, I'll be swimming in this cry fest soon, all hot and swollen, my gills aching from the dry, stinky air, and my lungs suffocating.

My one minute of fantasy is over, and I have nothing. Forget the womb, this is a coffin. I'm going home, slated for slaughter.

A sense of dread spreads through my ribcage, as if something horrible is about to happen. I'm not afraid to die, I've thought all about it for years and years, ever since mom jumped. But something is brewing inside of me.

My father and Hunter ride on in silence. The car speeds along what must be Aurora Avenue, toward Raye Street, the street I grew up on. The engine pistons its steady rhythm and the tires pull at gravel, spinning and wheezing. Traffic hums over the distant drone of human

souls packing the highway. They're all going somewhere, worried about being late; late to find their graves, every minute closer to the end, in the throes of this constant human dilemma. How to escape death, while pretending it's not there. If only there was a magic pill to swallow. And there is. It's called keeping busy. And they do. Like a chorus of atrophied puppets no longer led by a puppeteer, moving their limbs and sauntering through life, stumbling around without direction. They resemble one big, spoiled cacophony, except for Hunter's soul. His is a sweet note, so warm; warm like a home should be, warm like hands can be, and warm like someone who knows what being *warm* means.

Warm. Like I'll never be.

I can barely hear his melody through the trunk's lining. I try to stay mad at him for not helping me, but I can't. Instead, I want to hold his hand, to dive into the memories of games we used to play, music we used to listen to, and things we used to talk about when we were stoned out of our minds, happy.

Have you ever been truly, ravenously hungry, Hunter? I want to ask. *Hungry for a love you can never have. Have you?*

Shedding water through my skin because of the increasing warmth, I manage to worm myself closer to the back of the trunk. I tilt my head and press my ear into its synthetic lining. It tickles me, but I stay put, listening to the muffled echo of their conversation. I was wrong about them not talking. They are talking, and they're arguing at that.

"You don't understand. She's my friend. I can't do this to her. She's..." Hunter's voice catches at the end and I can't make out the rest.

"A siren, your friend. I see." Papa talks in that calm manner that I know too well. Listening to him is like breathing stiff air, waiting for the sky to open over your head into one downward gush of pouring anger.

"She's not just *any* siren. She's Ailen. Ailen, your daughter!" Hunter says with fervor.

I hold my breath.

"Help me understand something. You're a good looking kid. There are hundreds of normal girls out there. Why are you so fixated on the one who will snuff you out like a lightning bug, without so much as a second thought?" Papa says. Not even a smidge of a mention about his *daughter*. I don't know why I held my breath to begin with.

"That's a load of bull crap!" Hunter is nearly shrieking now. "She would *never* do that!"

"I'd appreciate it if you kept your voice at a lower level. Please." There is barely contained anger beneath my father's politeness.

"I'm sorry," Hunter says. I can't hear it, but I can sense his heavy breathing.

"I'd also appreciate it if we followed the original plan, like we agreed. You know I don't like repeating myself, so I'm going to say it one more time. One time only. I'm your boss, Hunter. I pay you to do your job. You listen to me and you do as I say." Pause. "That thing back there is *not* Ailen anymore. It's a siren—a clever, undying whore. The worst of its kind. When she's hungry, she'll murder anything living, even a newborn. It makes no difference to her, because she has no feelings. I pay you to kill the likes of her. Are we clear?"

Silence. I can't draw a breath. His words punch me in the gut like a fist.

"Are. We. Clear?" he asks again.

"Yes, Mr. Bright." Hunter answers so quietly, I can barely hear him. And then he keeps talking under his breath. "She's not a whore. Why would you call your own—"

The car comes to a sudden halt, tires screeching against brakes.

I wince as the inertia presses me into the scratchy lining.

"*Silence!*" My father bellows, his anger erupting. "Did I say I care for your opinion? Mine is the only one that matters here. All women are whores, better brandish that now onto your naïve, adolescent brain."

A few cars honk impatiently.

"But—"

"Did I give you permission to talk?" This Papa says more quietly, getting a grip on his anger. I think I'm getting a glimpse into what their afternoon talks must've been like, held behind closed doors in Papa's man cave behind the garage, where women were forbidden. Where Hunter would be invited as a special guest once in a while, after he'd come to visit me. My father would steal him for hours, under the pretext of educating my friend and giving him some much needed fatherly support.

Another honk. The car idles softly.

"You don't need to do this, Hunter. Any of this. You're free to go. Right now, if you want. I'll drop you off myself. Go tell your mother she can't have her drugs. I'm sure she'll be glad to hear it."

The silence thickens.

"If I stay, can we still stick to the original plan?" Hunter asks.

"Yes."

"I'll stay then."

"Good." Pause. "Oh, one more thing. What do you think women were made for?"

"What? What do you mean, made—"

"Answer the question."

I dig my fingernails into the lining, wanting to rip it out. This is my father's favorite question to torture me with.

One driver behind us seems to have lost his patience, honking

repeatedly and then letting out one long, annoying blare.

A soft, rolling purr follows, and my father yells, "Shut the fuck up!" before rolling his window back up. The car rushes around us and off into the distance, as if upset and hurried.

"Well?" He is back to being calm, as if shouting helped. I know what he's doing, it's his favorite game. He's setting up Hunter to trip, to guess wrong, to stumble on an answer so Papa can wait one dramatic pause and be right. About everything. Always. Nothing in this world exists without him having an expert opinion on it. He'll tell you what to do and prove you wrong in case you try to argue.

An image of spit flying from his mouth startles me, flashing through my head. His flaring nostrils and his bulging eyes wedge under my eyelids into a horror movie I don't want to see but am unable to turn off. Mesmerized. Terrified. I squeeze my eyelids shut, hard. *Go away, thought, go away!*

"I don't...I don't know, Mr. Bright." Hunter's defiance is gone, his voice is flat and lifeless.

"Listen to me, son."

I attempt to burrow my head deeply into the scratchy lining, wanting to roll away so I don't hear anything. But I hear every word.

"Listen to me and learn. Women were made to haul water. They're weak by nature, weak and promiscuous, and we have to teach them that it's no way to live. Work them. Work them hard, or they'll swing their lusty eye at you, charm your pants off, and wrap your little cock around their fingers before you know it."

"What's this got to do with anything?" Hunter blurts.

"Did I say you could talk?" Papa asks.

Long silence.

More honks. Papa finally decides to get out of the way and pulls over. He pulls on the handbrake, leaving the car to idle. My fingers hurt from curling them too hard. The trunk's synthetic stink mixed with the smell of gasoline is overwhelming. I hyperventilate, getting dizzy, drowning in hot air.

"I'll explain. Not all of them, but most have whore DNA. You can detect it in girls as young as five. It's in their gaze. The way they look at you with their seemingly innocent eyes, little whores in the making. The way they talk, the way they walk. They flip their hair, and swing their hips. Every man wants a piece of a girl like that. Those are the ones who typically get turned into sirens. Whores attract whores. Are you following me?"

"I heard you say this before," Hunter says thickly.

And, suddenly, I know where his siren explanation came from, the one he gave me yesterday in the bathroom. I want to puke.

"Please. Simply answer my question."

"Yeah, I'm following." There is reluctance in Hunter's voice.

"Good." The strain in Papa's voice gives way to a lighter tone. "You see, if only it was about the flesh...but, no. They corrupt our very spirit. Steal our very souls. It's our duty to root them out, to clean up this filth, to let our spirits shine again, untarnished. You hear what I'm saying?"

"Um..."

Papa is on a roll, I can tell. He doesn't wait for Hunter to answer. "You think I like my job? You think I enjoy doing it, is that what you think?"

"I didn't say nothing," Hunter retorts.

"Ah, but you thought it. What you don't understand is the subtle difference here. It's not a question of want, it's a question of must."

Pause.

"What if I don't want to?"

"Then why *the fuck* did you agree to take this job?"

"You said it'd be easy. You said it'd be like shooting beer cans. No one told me I'd have to kill my best friend!"

"Well, no one told me I'd have a daughter when all I wanted was a son. How is that for disappointment, tell me?"

The rest drowns in my humiliation. I want to shrink into a fleck of dust. Shame for my own gender burns me to embers. I'm nothing. I hate my body. I want to cut off my newly acquired breasts and throw them into the bushes, leaving them to rot. My uterus, I want to cut it out too. Then, whatever is left of me, I want it to cease to exist. Where is that button, if I could simply press it. And I know. The sonic gun. I need to steal one and just kill myself for good.

Out.

I want out of this life.

As if it heard me, ready to help, the car starts moving.

Chapter 18



Brights' Garage

There is a sick triangle happening between the three of us, and I'm clearly out of the picture. Hunter hasn't had a father for two years now. I do, but my father doesn't want me; he never did, and never will. He wants a son, and Hunter would be perfect for him to relay his women-hating and siren-killing knowledge to, just like he always wanted. Conflict or not, it's clear they've formed some sort of a parent-child attachment to each other. For Hunter, some father is better than no father at all. For my father, a son is better than a daughter. Me? I just need to get out of their way and let them be. And the only way out for me is death, as it always has been. A siren's suicide. Which makes me think of Canosa and where she fits in this picture. She stirs the pot, pulls on our strings, and makes us clamor. I know. If Hunter, Papa, and I are one of those steel triangle percussion instruments, then Canosa is the metal beater. With me gone, there'd be nothing left for her to ring.

I've come full circle. That's it then, my fate is sealed. With my decision made, I feel relief spread through my body, forgetting that I'm hot and aching and can barely breathe.

Mom? I wait, as if she'll speak to me. I hear nothing. Mom, wherever you are, can you hear me? Is this how you felt? That you were being left out of the picture? Is that why you jumped? I get it now and I'm coming. Coming soon to join you, I promise. I swallow. I'm sorry

I couldn't kill Papa to avenge you. Canosa asked me to, in return for telling me what happened to you and where you are. You wouldn't want me do it though, would you? Because you still love him, no matter what, right? I know I do. I hate it, but I can't help it. I pause, almost expecting her voice to answer me, to soothe me, to tell me what to do. *Mom, can tell me where you are, where I can find you? Can you? Please?* I wait for something, for some sign, some sound or feeling or even a flicker of premonition. Anything. But there is nothing, only stuffy silence. I close my eyes, waiting for the end to come.

The car speeds in a straight line, then slows down. I recognize the turns and the sound of asphalt under the tires. Away from the trunk's back wall, I hear no talking. But it seems like there isn't any, only a hushed stillness reeking of depression. The increased humidity makes me perspire and fade into dizziness once more. My jeans stick to me in a disgustingly warm layer of damp cotton, and Hunter's rain jacket feels slick and foreign against my skin. Drowning in the heated air, I'm close to fainting, rasping for oxygen, my gills ablaze.

The car stops. Papa pulls on the handbrake and leaves the engine idling. I know where we are. We're in his typical parking spot, a couple yards east from a dark blue sign that reads *411 Raye Street*, our house. Despite the soundproof layering of the trunk, I hear the garage door creak open.

Papa releases the handbrake and the car slowly moves forward. After the garage door closes, the handbrake is up again, and the engine dies, everything is still. Then, the trunk lid pops open letting in a sliver of cold air. I try to gulp it in a series of frantic breaths, but the tape covering my mouth doesn't let me. I wait, the skin on my face damp with cold sweat. My hands and feet are numb from being tied with a metal rope for so long.

The driver-side door opens, followed by the passenger door. Suddenly, Hunter's soul melody is so close, I can almost taste it. His hand presses into the back of his seat, toward me. I attempt to move my hand, to press back or wave, as if saying, *I'm here. I'll get out of your way. I'll get out of everybody's way, I promise.*

The soft resin of Papa's Gucci loafers gently hugs the concrete. His car keys jingle, the light switches on, and the trunk lid flies open. The bright, fluorescent light hits my eyes; I flinch and utter an involuntary moan.

"Too bright for you, sweetie? I'm sorry, there is no dimmer here. My bad. I'll have to install one."

I want to say, *Like you care*, but I can't. Telling him wouldn't matter, anyway. Nothing matters anymore.

Papa walks off toward the back of the garage and unlocks another door. I can tell from the gush of air it's large and mostly empty. His man cave. A place of mystery for as long as I can remember. The forbidden sanctum for his manly work. Now I know what was done inside, and the thought makes me shudder.

"Hunter? Take her out, please." Papa's voice sounds hushed, almost mechanical, and dies as soon as he's done talking.

There is no echo, the garage must be soundproof as well. How did I not think about this before? It explains the soft paneling. I was always fond of caressing it when Papa didn't look, although he caught me once and slapped me hard. He proclaimed that I'd dirtied his walls, and locked me in the bathroom for three hours. I think I was five. I learned to be very careful and sneaky from that moment on, managing to stroke it once in a while when he wasn't looking. I even peeled portions of wallpaper in the house behind furniture where he wouldn't look. It was my little power over him, damaging his things when I could and staying quiet to anger him when he hit me. I'd play limp, no matter what he did, so it would look like I didn't care. Like it was a piece of cake, like it didn't hurt, not one little bit.

I hear Hunter get out of the car, take one reluctant step, then another, and then stop.

"I really don't have much time, Hunter." I can almost see Papa's painful grimace without looking. "You know I don't like waiting."

"Sorry," Hunter says and walks faster.

I open my eyes, wanting to adjust to the brightness of this glowing, dazzling enclosure. It's so rich with light, yet almost devoid of smell and noise. It's harsh and dry, the anti-siren space. A space designed for sirens to die. I try to gasp for air, feeling my gills opening and closing, aching for water. Hunter makes it around the car and stops in front of the trunk, leaning in to look at me. The first thing he does is reach behind my back and squeeze my hand.

"Hey! It's okay, you're gonna be okay. Trust me," he whispers. I squeeze his hand back, wishing he didn't say what he'd just said, making me want to believe in a happy ending. I was hoping he'd somehow heard my silent message.

Don't worry, I'm ready to die, I tell him with my eyes. *I know this is what my father wants you to do. You'll look like a pro. It will be easy, I promise.*

He blinks at me, his chest heaving. His face is ashen against the cold bright light, the white soundproof walls, and the white unbreakable ceiling.

“Lean on me when I pull you up, okay?” His face doesn’t look like a face anymore, it’s a quiet mask, torn and crumpled over the conflict inside.

I want to tell him, *Listen to me. I’ll make it easy for you, don’t you worry, you’ll do just fine. You’ll keep your job. You’ll get your mom her meds.* Grief chokes me as I try to mumble into the tape.

“Enough talking. Get her out, Hunter.” Father’s voice cuts through and prompts Hunter into action.

“You all right?” Hunter whispers as he hoists me up, slipping his warm hands under my arms as he props me into a sitting position and swings my legs over the edge of the trunk.

Just a heat stroke, no biggie. I croak into the tape, so no words come out, only more mumbling. Moving my tongue hurts. I want a drink of water, badly.

Hunter raises his head, and opens his mouth. As if anticipating his question, my father answers. “I’ll take the tape off once inside. Now, get moving.”

We both pretend like everything is normal. I struggle to make it over the edge of the trunk and lock my legs to stand, but my knees give out and I buckle. Hunter holds me from falling. A wave of nausea hits me and I gag behind the tape, my head falling onto his sweatshirt. I raise my head and turn to study the garage with my new understanding. Now I know why it’s covered in soft, acoustic panels, why Papa always claimed to hate noise, why he hid in his man cave for hours on end, and why neither me nor mom were ever permitted to enter.

The garage itself is clean and small, about fifteen feet wide and twenty five feet long. It’s devoid of any clutter, with only a few wall shelves on each side holding select tools—my father’s style of keeping everything organized with almost surgical precision. There is no more than four feet on either side of the car, just enough space to open the doors and get out.

Watching us closely, standing in the middle of the garage’s back wall, Papa twirls his car keys on his left forefinger, his right hand holding the sonic gun. His figure is pale and small against the darkness behind him. The darkness comes from the open door to his man cave. It’s ominous and suggests a very large space, perhaps the size of a theater auditorium, I can tell by the air movement.

A strange curiosity takes over me. I want to get inside, to see it for myself and breach his sacred place, his private sealed off office that is not to be trampled on by women. His lunatic asylum, his siren killing ground complete with an expensive ventilation system to evaporate the moisture. That’s what that whizzing sound was, making my feet buzz

whenever I stood barefoot in the middle of the night on the kitchen floor, sneaking a drink of water. Papa always explained it as the air conditioner's motor running.

I make myself jump forward and nearly fall. Hunter supports me and I hobble along, feeling the metal rope dig into my ankles with every movement. I ignore the pain with elegance and greet my father with a smile, letting him know that I don't care. He doesn't seem to notice, he just steps into the darkness. There is a click and the darkness yields to light.

"Didn't think I'd ever let you set foot into my private space." A painful frown creases his forehead. "This is rather unfortunate, but... the circumstances have changed, and, well, here we are. Tell me, Ailen, what do you think?" Papa says, grimacing into a toothy, proud smile and spreading his arms like a showman on stage, welcoming his audience. Obviously proud of his creation, he nearly jumps up, rolling back and forth from his toes to his heels and back. "Cost me a fortune."

I peer inside and my mouth hangs open as much as it can behind the tape.

I've always imagined Papa's place to literally be like a cave—small, dark, and closed off. I was wrong. It resembles a fiercely illuminated chamber hall, the size of our house, only underground; it's almost empty save for a desk with a single lamp and a few soft chairs around it at the far wall. Behind the desk hang numerous sonic guns and a few bullwhips, neatly arranged in a checkerboard pattern. I know what they're for. The walls to my left and right are empty, and there are no windows.

Everything about this place, and its furniture, is soft. The filtered, fluorescent lighting, the foam padding on the walls, the air-conditioning that fizzes quietly, and even the reek of the fake ocean-smelling fragrance. I'm about to join it, vaporized. I could scream all that I want, but the walls look super thick and there is no echo.

"Don't be shy, come in," Papa says, and I jump in. He closes the door behind me and Hunter with a heavy clang. He locks it and drops the keys into his pocket. I manage to stand on my own, without Hunter's support. Even the floor is padded here. I curl and uncurl my toes, partly for balance, partly to relish this feeling of softness.

Now that my eyes have adjusted to the bright light, I see something else, and my blood chills. No, it freezes, making me feel like an icicle. What I took for a wall to my left is not a wall at all. It's a smoothly spread white cotton cover. Judging by the edges and the size of the thing it's hiding, I assume there must be a gigantic aquarium beneath it. I sniff the air. There is a faint odor of chlorine and a faint whispering of water. The aquarium must be filled to the brim, but I detect no movement. I don't want to know what's in it or what was in it, yet my mind can't stop.

Images of sirens contained behind the glass, floating with their mouths open in a silent plea, make me gag. For a second, I wonder what happened to Canosa and the rest of the sirens in the public restroom. Had he killed them all or not? If he didn't, where are they now?

"There is nobody there. Come," Papa says, as if reading my mind.

That's right, Papa, seal me off from the world of the living in your soundproof cave. Shelter your neighbors from the horror, yes. Give them no reason for insomnia. I'm glad I can't say these words out loud. This is no time to be angry, this is my time to die.

"So, what do you think? Oh..." Papa passes the gun to his left hand and raises his right. I instinctively duck and then immediately hate myself for showing him my fear. He rips off the tape from my mouth in one practiced movement. My lips burn and so do my cheeks, but I don't show it. "Well? I asked you a question." His eyes turn from blue to steel.

I gulp air through my open mouth and then, of course, say the stupidest thing, the first thing that comes to my mind. "Is this your man cave then?"

"Precisely, sweetie. Do you like it?" He tilts his head to the side, like he always does when listening to his clients. They are big, important people with money and with a taste for antiques, so why in the world would he deem me important?

"It's...big," I say, honestly mesmerized, not by the cave, but by his attention. He heard me, he's talking to me, he's not angry, and he answered me like a normal human being. Despite the horror of what's to come, I'm elated. "Yes, I do. I like it very much."

Hunter watches our exchange with utter puzzlement on his face, glancing back and forth between us. I feel him edge toward me, perhaps to hold me or to provide support, just in case.

"Good. I'm happy you appreciate the work that's gone into this. You're about to see it in action. We *both* need to see it, don't you think?" He saunters off toward his desk, hangs the gun he is holding, and picks up a larger one. He turns and aims at the covered aquarium, playfully, smiling at his thoughts. I chill to the core, wondering what the significance of this is and how I should take it.

Our gazes cross. In a split-second, I think of all the movies I've ever seen with the bad guys giving pep talks to the ones they're about to shoot. It looks so romantic. The danger, the suspense, the thrill of what's about to happen. The last words from the victim's mouth that can make all the difference. Sadly, that's not how things work in real life. In real life, things happen without a warning.

Lightning fast, he shifts his body in my direction, aims at me, and pushes the button. This is my father, my only family, my bloodline, killing me. I make no attempt to escape, frozen, ready to die.

Blam!

The sonic blast hits me straight in the face, not on the right cheek like last time, but directly into my nasal bridge, in that space between my eyebrows. My ears explode with brilliant pain and my head thrums with a pulsing energy, as if I dipped it into the world's largest waterfall and it's about to suck me into a rushing stream and throw me over the edge. I double down and roll onto the padded floor with a soft thud that doesn't travel far, dying instantly. I suppose you could kill a whole whale in here, and nobody would hear.

"Ailen! What...what the *fuck* are you doing?" Hunter's voice hushes the second he's done yelling. His heart beats so loudly, I can hear it. His soul still sings Vivaldi's *Summer*, but it's barely audible now, as if dampened.

"I simply stunned her. She's still alive for you, don't you worry. You'll get your turn. Patience, Hunter, patience," Papa says. Although I suspected it, it still hurts to hear the confirmation to a terrible guess and know it's real. Hunter is supposed to kill me. That sounds so much like my father, always having someone else do his dirty work. I can't think about anything else, because pain from the blast spreads from my head to the rest of my body, ripping through muscles in pangs akin to electric shocks. I twitch, wincing at the metal ropes digging into my skin.

"Dude, this is not what we agreed on!" Hunter nearly shrieks now, taking one step, then another, in my direction. "You said you were only going to—"

"Enough!" my father yells. There is no echo and his yell dies quickly, without the typical grand effect. "I haven't forgotten. I would appreciate it if you would shut your mouth and step aside."

Hunter steps back without another word.

A deal. They made some kind of a deal. What was it, to let me die painlessly, from one shot only? I wait. Papa comes to me and leans over.

"Come on, sweetie, show me what you're made of." He aims at me again, at close range now, from the five feet and ten inches of his height. I look into the black muzzle of the gun and pretend I'm looking into a subwoofer blasting one of the Siren Suicides songs. I'm blasting them so loudly that the air hits me in the face with every big *boom* of the bass drum. My muscles contract before I realize what I'm doing. I smile and open my mouth. Terror darkens Papa's face for a split second, enough for me to notice.

"What's wrong, Papa, can't kill me yourself? Aren't you supposed to be *the* siren hunter? The one who disposes of us sirens, cleans the planet of our womanly filth? Yet even *you* have to hire a hit man." I attempt to raise my head to look Hunter in the eyes.

I don't get a chance, because another blast hits my chest and, for a second, I think I'll sink into the concrete floor below the padding, then flatten and burst into nothing. The force of the focused sound wave is that strong.

I don't exactly black out, but rather swirl in my own consciousness and awareness of the terrible pain that's in every single cell of my being. I feel them all inflate with a desire to fly, to rupture and be no more. Then, somehow, they deflate and shrink back together into what's supposed to be Ailen Bright, body and all. Sounds become jumbled, light pulses with colorful circles, and I taste bitterness on my tongue, as if I turned toxic.

I see my father's face above me, strangely happy. "What do you say now? Come on, tell me everything you ever wanted to tell me. Isn't that what's been eating you for years? I'm listening."

I understand why he's giddy. I'm supposed to fight back, to be angry. He wants me to prove to him that I'm not weak, that I can change my life, that I can stand up and shed my female frailty. He's doing to me the same thing he did to my mom. Perhaps I was wrong. Perhaps she died not for herself, but for him. Perhaps she loved him so much that she decided to rid this world of her own presence, to make him happy, because she felt she contributed to his misery. All of this flashes in my mind in barely a second, and I decide not to fight. Anger leads to pain, and I know this pain first hand. I regret having said what I told him earlier. No matter what it will cost me, I don't want to be like my father. I won't, ever, even if it means having to die.

"Papa...just tell me one thing, please. Did you love mom? Did you really love her? I want to know before, before I, before..." I don't finish, because a look of disgust contorts my father's face.

"You're no use, after all," he says quietly, and it's worse than his rage. It's pure hatred. It can't be all for me, can it? "What a paradox. How can a vessel of such beauty house so much evil? Women..." The tip of his Gucci loafer nudges me in the ribs, as if to probe road kill, to see if it's still breathing. "I always wondered. Then, I realized...it's all a test for us. For us men. To make us stronger, more resilient. It pains me to do this, oh, if you only knew how much it pains me. But it must be done."

I know what he means, and I swallow, but say nothing.

Papa turns away from me and walks toward the door, then pauses there, jingling his keys.

"Hunter, finish her off."

"What?" Hunter's voice sounds sleepy, like it always does after he drifts into one of his daydreaming spells.

"I changed my mind. Be quick about it, please. Call me on the intercom when it's done." He inserts a key into the first lock, then another and another, opening them one by one, until I feel a draft of fresh air reach me. It's raining.

"What? What do you mean, finish?" Hunter says again, not comprehending. I twist and roll over on my other side so I can see. Hunter's whole body appears to have shrunk, frail and somehow old in his damp hoodie and jeans and sneakers, his arms hanging uselessly to each side. My father stands in the doorway again, framed by white light this time.

"You heard me. Do your job. I'll have your payment ready." At that, he shuts the door with a soft metal clang and locks us in.

"But..." Hunter is in shock, I can tell. He shakes violently, and then, a few seconds too late, finds his voice and shouts, "*What the fuck is wrong with you, man? You're fucked up. You're fucked up in your fucking head! You're...*"

I drown out the rest, shutting my eyes and willing myself to be still. It takes another minute for him to stop shouting and swearing, then for another several minutes he pounds on the door, and then on the walls. He runs to the desk and throws down the lamp. He throws down what looks like an intercom device and stomps on it until it cracks. Then, he grabs the sonic guns one by one and smashes them into the floor. Except they don't break, because the floor is padded and they are made of unbreakable plastic.

"*You're one sick fuck!*" Hunter shouts once more and slams his fist into the wall. Then, he slides onto the floor and starts crying. I've never seen him cry before. He buries his head into his knees and yanks handfuls of his hair as if attempting to tear it all out. He sobs loudly, wailing like a child. It takes a few minutes for him to calm down and notice me staring.

I'm on the floor, twisted up, about twenty feet away from him, searching his eyes, feeling lost in this huge, padded vastness of space. Now it's in disarray, with sonic guns and whips and lamp shards scattered all over.

"It's okay, Hunter, I don't want to live anyway."

He looks at me. "Oh, God, Ailen, no..."

"I mean, not like this, I don't. Today is my birthday, remember? I'm sixteen, so it's kind of a big deal. Can I ask you for something?"

"No, no, no, don't. Don't talk like this." Hunter wipes his nose with a sleeve. "It's...it's my fault." He hangs his head.

I ignore him. "Can you kill me, please? It'd be easier if *you* did it. It's okay if you can't, though, just let me know. I'll do it myself," I say, as I bend my legs, lift my torso, and sit up. Moving hurts, but I'm strangely

numb to all of the pain. I stretch out my legs and study the metal rope around my ankles. The nearest sonic gun is about five feet away, made of matte-plastic so no wires are visible, showing only a single blue button.

"Ailen... what did I do? I fucked everything up." Hunter's words scatter and die in the low whiz of the ventilation system that clicks on. Father must have turned it on remotely. At this noise, Hunter shakes like a leaf on the wind and lowers his face into his hands.

"Do it. Please," I repeat.

He holds my gaze, stands, and walks toward me. Then, he pauses, color creeping into his cheeks.

"All right, Hunter Crossby, mister fucking chicken shit, do it already! It's your job, isn't it? Then do it! *Do it!*" I scream at him. I wait, but Hunter doesn't take the gun. Instead, he runs up to me, sticks his hands under my arms, pulls me up, and drags me like this toward the aquarium wall. He leans me against it, grunting. Then he takes my face into his hands and leans so close that our lips almost touch.

I peer at him, breathing fast. He looks strangely delicate and fragile against the vastness of the cave.

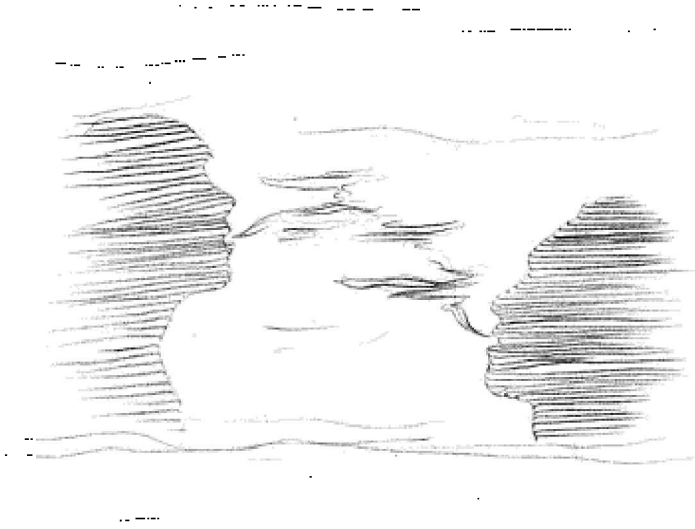
"If you die, I die," he says quietly, his eyes cold, his breathing ragged.

"Really?" I ask, momentarily deflated.

"Really," he says.

My heart beats so hard it feels like the entire aquarium is pulsing. Maybe it is. I freeze for a second, with my back pressed against the thick glass, sensing movement through its cotton cover. Then all is still. It's nothing. I feel nothing.

Chapter 19



Man Cave

Before I can say anything, Hunter pulls me into a kiss. The melody of his soul overwhelms me. It's so close, I want to gulp it, momentarily hungry. I try to resist, pulling away, horrified at the sudden urge to fall apart and cry. Holding it, holding it, holding it. And then losing it completely and letting go, unable to keep on the lid. I feel water trace my cheeks and drop with quiet splats onto the rain jacket. Hunter's lips and tongue burn mine with living heat, making my skin tingle. His irises shimmer in a feverish frenzy, bluer than before, saturated to the maximum. His scent overpowers the stupid smell of the fake ocean fragrance my father likes so much; I inhale it, feeling almost alive. It's pine. He smells of pine, Linden flowers, and sugar. I stand there and let him kiss me, let him pull me closer. Why not? I'll be dead soon anyway.

We're like two inexperienced theater goers who came not to watch the play, but to secretly kiss in the back row, because it's more sophisticated than kissing in a movie theater and more cool to try to absorb a live performance at the same time. *For the sake of divine experience*, as Hunter would say. I imagine that we really are standing in a chamber hall after the opera singers, the spectators, and the orchestra had departed, even the janitors left and unknowingly locked us up for the night.

I'm bitter. Bitter at how my life has turned out and how it's about to end. Bitter that I can't be one or the other, neither girl nor siren. Fine, since I can't let myself eat him, I decide to take as much of this goodness with me as I can, suddenly kissing Hunter back with fervor, nearly grazing him in my haste. I stare him in the eyes, pretending to swim in them like two pools of beautiful, blue water. Like I'm a pebble thrown inside with an expert twist. I hop, hop, hop, making little, round waves, then, finally, give in to gravity and sink. Tears gush from my eyes.

I won't cry, I won't. *I won't!* I want to stomp my foot to believe it. Hunter breaks away.

"What's wrong?" he says, alarmed.

"What do you mean, *what's wrong*? Everything is wrong! Everything!" I cry and then break into sobs, not caring anymore.

"I'm sorry..." he says and trails off. "I'm sorry I screwed up. I really am." He hangs his head, his arms falling to his sides. I'm furious at myself for wishing his arms would rise and embrace me, for lusting after him, for wanting to eat his soul.

"No, *I'm* sorry. It's my fault. I'm the one who started it all. I'm the one who jumped and got turned into a siren and stuff. You had no idea it was going to be *me* you'd have to kill on the job, so I get it. I hate myself. I really do. I deserve to die." I sniff, unable to wipe off my tears, my hands still tied. I think Hunter doesn't offer to untie me because on some level he thinks it's safer this way, and I agree. So, I don't ask him to do it, not fully trusting my ability to control myself.

"Well, I don't hate you. And I don't think you deserve to die. It's bullshit. You're..." he hesitates.

"I'm what? What? Go on, say it. Say what you really think," I challenge him.

"I don't think anything. It's not what I..."

"Bullshit!" I cut him off, shaking, and then immediately regret what I said. Feeling the siren in me wanting to break out and feed, I battle it, pushing it down. I take a deep breath and exhale loudly, through pressed lips. "I'm sorry. Just get rid of me, all right? I can't stand this anymore. Please?" These last words I say so quietly, I can barely hear myself, afraid that if he doesn't do it first, I'll lose control and kill him, and then kill myself afterward.

"You're not mad at me, then? For, you know, for taking this job?" He has this puppy look about him that used to make me swoon. Suddenly, I just want to shake him really hard.

"Look, I don't know how much longer I can stay calm, okay? Thank God my hands are tied. It's awfully hard, with you standing so close." I swallow, hurting from hunger. His soul is teasing me, I want to suck it

out in one big gulp. He touches my neck.

"You're not helping." I flinch away.

"I don't care." He cradles my face.

"Dude, let's be real here." I pat the aquarium wall behind me for support. There is nowhere else to retreat. "Your mother is dying, but she still has a chance. I'm dead already. Well, almost. So finish me. What's so difficult about pushing a button on that thing? I mean, it's not even a real trigger, so pretend you're playing a computer game. All right?"

Our noses touch. "Ailen, why are you saying these things? What's wrong?" he asks again, and that does it.

"Why do you keep repeating the same stupid question? You just asked me a minute ago. What do you mean, *what's wrong*? You're... I'm..." I stumble, bewildered at his idiocy and at my inability to communicate clearly. "I just explained everything to you!"

He brushes my cheek. "Why are you crying? Talk to me."

"I *am* talking to you!" I take a deep breath and explode. "Fucking *kill* me already!"

The wall panels shimmer from the force of my voice and then settle back into position. I feel the glass vibrate behind my back. Hunter cups his ears for a moment, then takes his hands off again.

"I can't kill you, you know that." He studies the floor, arms hanging aimlessly down his sides.

"No, I don't! How would I know?" I sniff. "You're such a liar sometimes, it's disgusting. You need the money, I know you do. Your mom needs the money. So be a man and do it. Finish what you started, all right? If you can't, I'll do it myself." I look at the sonic guns scattered on the floor and wiggle my hands, wondering if I can break the metal rope. "Looks easy enough."

"No, you won't!" Hunter says in alarm.

"Fine. You do it then. Come on, I'm tired of waiting."

He looks at me, then at the guns, then back at me again. "I can't. I just can't."

"Then you're a fucking loser! Kill me, you idiot! Get rid of this!" I squat down, stick my butt in between my shackled arms, plop on the floor, and pull my hands up and over my tied ankles. Then, I jump up again and stick my hands under his nose. "See this? Feel it." I push them into his chest. "What do they feel like?"

"Um, like your hands..."

"Jeez, Hunter, I hate it when you act like an idiot. You know exactly what I mean. How do my hands feel to you, temperature-wise?"

"Cold."

I grab his hand with both of mine and press it against my chest, right in the middle.

"How about here?"

He blinks.

"Answer me. Do you feel my heart?"

"Yeah, sure." He blinks again as if unsure where this is going.

"You know what it pumps?"

"Not really," he stammers.

"Not really? Stop lying. Every siren hunter should know. It pumps water. Cold, dark water. It's not even blood, it's some dead liquid, get it? Dead!" I must look scary, because he takes a step back.

"I get it. Honest." His hands rise in a self-protecting gesture.

"I'm dead, Hunter. D-E-A-D. Dead. This," I tap my face, touch my gills, spread out my fingers, "is fake, okay? It's not real, it can't live. It exists by stealing. Stealing life from others, temporarily, while it lasts. Always on the lookout for the next meal, that next soul that will fill my void." I slap my chest. "Hear it ringing? It's empty. If you have no soul, if you're empty, if you can't even love, then what's the point of this existence, tell me, what? *What?*"

I glare at him, knowing that if he makes one wrong move, I will lose control.

"You," he says under his breath, his eyes open wide, his face vulnerable somehow.

"*Liar!*" I cry. "You're one pathetic liar, you..." I feel tears roll down my cheeks, but now that I can wipe them off, I make no effort. I'm beyond caring. "I hate you. You only say this because you pity me. Well, I have news for you. I don't need your pity. I won't ever fall for this again. Never. Ever." Tears fall from my chin. "It's not a game, okay? We're not stoned, sitting in the bathroom, talking mythology and shit. This is real. Your job is to kill me, and my job is to kill you. So just do it already, before I do it. Why do you always have to make everything so difficult?"

He just stands there, looking helpless, wringing his hands as if he's unsure of what to do next. It makes me even more furious.

"What do you want, Hunter, tell me, what? You want to be in love with a siren, is that it? Is that what you want? For me to constantly fight the urge to snuff you out, for you to walk every day in danger of potentially dying from my song? I want to murder you! I want to murder you right now and feed on you, do you understand?"

"Sorry, I can't help it. I just...love you." His mouth slightly open, he stares at me like a child who's discovered the biggest piece of candy on the planet. Unable to believe in its existence, he's dumbstruck and euphoric, fingering his empty pockets, knowing he can't afford it.

"Why?" I nearly shriek. "Why do you love me?"

"Because, I just do. You're...awesome." He stares at me with such naiveté, I begin to tremble all over with fury.

"That's a stupid reason. I don't believe you. I'm not worth it. I'm a monster. You can't...love...a monster," I say in a loud whisper and recognize my father's voice in mine, the tones of a barely hidden anger that's about to break loose.

"Yeah, you can," he says.

"So you agree." A sudden realization dawns on me. No, it was always there, but I was afraid to believe it. I was afraid to let it grow in my mind and become real, clinging to the hope of being loveable. "I'm a monster after all. I'm a siren. And it's my voice," I say, shaking from hunger and from a terrible understanding. "It's my voice, isn't it? My siren voice mesmerizes you and makes you love me. That's what it's designed for. That's what it's doing. How did I not see this before?" My last words come out as a hiss.

"Ailen. I'm a siren hunter, remember? Your voice has no effect on me," he says calmly.

"Yeah, right. Nice try," I say, yet I think back to commanding him to kill me and how he didn't do it, unlike those cops at the Pike Place Fish Market who froze when I told them to. A small part of my mind knows there is some truth to what he says. But that something sinister that woke up in me for the first time, when I was converted to a siren, is quickly taking over. The soul of the fishmonger is long gone from my chest. I'm utterly empty and famished. A curtain of blind desire clouds my vision and all I want to do is strike. Hunter stops being Hunter. He is food.

"Step...back," I hiss, now visibly trembling, drowning in his soul's melody. It's so impossibly delicious and sweet that it feels like I haven't eaten for a whole week and there is a cake taken straight from the oven right in front of me, steaming and emitting this irresistible aroma.

"Try me," he says, endless admiration in his eyes.

"No!" I say, but this is it. Something snaps and the siren in me takes over, greedy and happy to finally have her most coveted meal. I charge at Hunter, ravenous, reeling with blind determination, my mind pulsing with one single thought.

Food.

I jump forward, my ankles still tied, locking my eyes with his. As if with the flick of a lighter, I ignite his soul. I begin to sing *We Can't Be Apart* by the Siren Suicides, from their *Fatal* album. It's the song I tried to kill him with before, when I floated up Lake Union, before I knew it was Hunter's soul roaming there trying to find me. Everything that's been bottled up in me for the past several hours erupts into one powerful gush, pouring out into first verses, sounding less like singing and more like wounded, animalistic howls.

*"There you are.
Without me you cry.
I surround you.
Love me or I die."*

Hunter falls to his knees a few feet away from me, opens his arms wide, and lets his soul escape, a thin ribbon of his precious sixteen years; a silky strand of his essence. A thin puff of smoke at first, it trails through the air between us and lands into my open mouth, thickening as it goes. I taste it on the tip of my tongue and my hunger intensifies, ringing through my empty chest. *Forget smoking weed, this is the best junk ever.* I inhale his soul with a whoosh, wolfing it down.

*"I adore you,
See me or I fly.
I dream of you,
Dream with me, don't lie."*

I'm high. I can't stop. It feels so good, like a first drag after a week of abstinence. No, like a shot of heroin, the way they describe it in movies, because I've never tried it myself. It feels like a double dose, right in the vein.

*"Can you hold my hand?
Can you hold my heart?
Can you hold my soul?
I can't be apart."*

I want more. I realize I won't be able to stop until he's all mine. Never mind me wanting to dive inside his eyes, reserve that for stupid romantics. He'll be swimming in my ribcage soon, around and around, for real. This is so much better. I watch his soul string between us in a ribbon of smoke, linger, like the herbal smell of marijuana. Pungent. It gives me power. I inhale and holler more.

*"Here I am,
Without you I fall.
You astound me,
I'm a crumbling wall.
You let go of me,
I'm a broken doll.
You dream of me,
I'm your waking call."*

The walls shake, the ground shifts, and the door gets jammed in its frame. I feel the water in the aquarium splash and creep toward me, wetting the cotton cover. I command it with my voice, command it to come. Lights flicker and in those few seconds, when darkness is complete, Hunter's soul illuminates the air between us. The ceiling vibrates and splits in several places. I hear the glass creak and break, and water seeps out of the aquarium with a hiss. Fog rolls off my skin like a cascade of waves from the freezer, coiling, obscuring everything around us.

I focus on Hunter, ready to finish him.

"Can I hold your hand?

Can I hold your heart?

Can I hold your soul?

We can't be apart."

The last of his soul wisps up in a barely visible plume and I swallow it. His eyes well up and shed tears, his face goes gray, and he loses his balance. He falls and rolls to his side.

He's dying.

And I know what he did. He made me kill him, he made me believe his lie. Fear pierces me and I gag. I retch and retch and part of Hunter's soul oozes back into his mouth, greedy to reconnect with its rightful owner. I make myself heave and vomit more, until all of it is out, snaking in a faint trail of clouds back into his mouth. He gasps and arches in a spasm, then groans and rolls onto his other side, laying still.

I fall down on my knees next to him, exhausted and momentarily sober, my hunger gone in a flash.

"Hunter! Hunter, are you okay? Oh, my God, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. What did I do? Oh, shit, I almost killed you. Will you ever forgive me? Please, please, please..." I continue yammering excuses, when my father's fists rain on the door that's jammed now, slightly crooked. It appears I have shifted the walls and the ceiling, only a few inches, but still.

"Ailen, open the door please, sweetie," comes through, muffled.

"Shit!" I yelp. My heart jumps out of habit before settling back down into its normal rhythm. I know he can't get in. But that means we can't get out either. Before I can think anything more, Hunter pulls on my sleeve. I hover and peel hair off his forehead, clammy and sweaty.

"Are you all right?"

He moves his lips, dry and cracked. "Wow, tha..."

"Say what?" I stick my ear right over his lips.

"Man, that was...awesome. It was...it was better than getting stoned. Like getting triple stoned or something. Can we do it again?" he gulps.

"*What?* Fuck off! You're sick, you sick junkie!" I push him, but my anger evaporates and my lips want to curl into a smile, as ridiculous as smiling would be at the moment. He's joking, so that means he's really okay. And I'm happy. Happy he's alive, but disgusted at what I almost did. I almost killed him. Yet I can't help myself, and finally give in to my grin.

"I said, open the damn door!" Louder. The door rattles but it's jammed pretty well and doesn't give. I hear the key being stuck in and turned again and again, and then the door being tried again.

"It looks like Papa can't get in," I say.

"So it appears," Hunter says.

An urge for mischief flashes between us as we glance toward the door and then back at each other. He grins and I love how his face splits in two, with that dimple on his right cheek. It pulls me in like a magnet, closer, until our lips touch and we're kissing. He burns me with his warmth like a high fever. I exhale whatever is left of his soul back into him, I give him all I have. I wish I could give him more. I wish I could give him everything there was to give. But I can't. I have nothing else, only one dead girl's fantasy. I'm a thief who simply returned what was stolen.

Something shifts in the air. I break away and look behind me. The cotton cover has slipped off the aquarium completely. I stare at it, for a second thinking I'd see sirens; but it's empty, full of nothing but clear water. Then, I see something else. Chains. Heavy steel chains and locks on the bottom of it, coiling like snakes, waiting for that next siren to be bolted to it forever. I shudder, chasing my thoughts away, not wanting to think about what kind of sick stuff my father used to do in here or was prepping to do in the future.

"Holy shit!" Hunter says, propping himself on his elbows.

"Don't tell me you haven't seen this before," I croak.

"No, I haven't. I swear. It was always covered," Hunter says, staring at the aquarium, its glass cracked in several places and oozing water. "Fuck me running..." He sits up.

There is a dull thud, then another. My father seems to be kicking at the door with something heavy. And there is another noise. Digging. Like a soft transfer of dirt, right above me. I slowly raise my head.

Ten feet above, behind one of the vent grilles that sits flush in a padded ceiling panel, as if trickling through several feet of water, a strange noise intensifies. It sounds like crunching and biting, shuffling and squirming. A trail of sand falls through the grille's metal net and then the vent pops open and falls, followed by a gush of dirt and little

stones raining onto the floor. Cold, moist air and an earthy, damp aroma uncoil from the hole. Then someone kicks at the panels surrounding the vent. They detach and fall down, revealing a ragged hole about three feet in diameter, followed by more dirt and then a face.

"Canosa?" I whisper, unbelieving.

"What the hell..." Hunter echoes.

Canosa's head pokes through the hole in the ceiling and turns until she sees me, her eyes peeking through her matted hair, hanging upside down, brown and dirty, her eyes glistening with a triumphant glee.

"What are you looking at? Ailen Bright, I'm talking to you. Don't be rude," she says and worms her body down. Her skin is streaked and smudged, oozing that odor of a pond with dying plants and decaying animal remnants, and those who dared to wade into its murk and drown.

Hunter opens his mouth to say something, when she shushes him with a hideous hiss. He promptly closes his mouth and simply stares.

"I thought he killed you. My father. I thought—" I begin.

"You think too much," she cuts me off. "What's wrong with your lover boy?" Even hanging upside down, looking dirty and comical and ridiculous, Canosa has this bossy demeanor to her that makes me feel like I owe her for saving my life.

Before I can say anything, she talks again.

"What's the matter with you? Couldn't finish your meal? Or did you leave him for me to snack on? I think I'd like that. In fact, I think I'd like that very much." She smiles.

"No!" I shout and hop in front of Hunter, to shield him. "Don't you dare. Don't you fucking dare." I raise my tied up hands at her. She clasps the edges of the broken ceiling panels and drops down, quickly jumping upright, brushing dirt off her hair, and shaking her head.

"Or what?" she says, smiling. "What would you do to stop me?" She takes a step toward me.

I raise my tied hands in front of me, determined to fight her no matter what.

"We should have snuffed him out in that public restroom, would've been less trouble to deal with now," she says, looking down at Hunter with pity. Then she looks at me, suddenly serious. "You know, you won't be able to stop next time. Once you've tasted a soul, you can't let it go." Deep inside, somehow, I know she's right. I look at Hunter, terrified. "So, would you like to finish him off now or later? Because we need to go. Your old man seems to be very impatient, which won't end in a good way. I'd bet my life on that."

Behind us, a whizzing noise comes alive and begins burrowing into the door. I think Papa is attempting to cut a hole in it with a chainsaw.

I glance at Hunter, then at Canosa, then at the door, then at Hunter again.

“Make a choice,” Canosa tells me, wickedness gone from her voice. There’s no trace of mocking or jeering or bossing in it either. She’s serious, and she looks me straight in the eyes. I think I see hint of pain in there, cleverly hidden. “Stop running, stop fidgeting like you’re three, and make a choice. Now.”

She saw right through me, and there is nowhere for me to hide. I gawk, wanting to fall through the floor, wanting to burrow into the bottom of the deepest ocean, deep inside its deepest cave, like a tiny, unsightly sea worm—an ugly and colorless and disgusting creature, unworthy of any attention.

“Now!” she yells.

I hear the chainsaw cut through the door, and I know that if my father realizes that there’s a hole in the ground leading into his man cave from our front yard, that will be the end of us all.

Chapter 20



Ship Canal

I hold Canosa's gaze and think of love, of what it is and what it means to me. I think about how it reminds me of a shiny lure at the end of a fishing line, iridescent and sparkly. How clever it is, making you bite, only to discover that it has a hook. A treble hook in my case. The first sharp point is for mom, who left me; the second one is for Papa, who never loved me; and the third one is for Hunter, who fell victim to my siren voice. All three are big, fat lies that I bit into, desperate. I'm stuck under a layer of self-pity, wanting to get out, no matter what it takes. Just wanting to belong. Barely a second passes as I think through this. Images flash through my mind, and I'm trying to make sense of them, hoping an answer will come to me. The courage to make a decision.

I study Canosa and somehow I think she's the angler, the one hunting me, the one who threw in the fishing line and is now pulling me out. *What's it gonna be, catch and release, or sell? Or will you eat me, gut and sinew and all?* But I know she'll only giggle, together with her sirens. They'll all laugh in my face. *Poor Ailen Bright, they'll say, you still believe in love? Oh, you naïve little girl, grow up already. How stupid of you, how pathetic. Silly almost. People were not made to be loved, they're food.* And they're right. I'm a siren now, I belong with them. They're my family, whether I want it or not.

I stand straight, determined.

"Where are you going?" Hunter asks, alarmed, as if he read my mind. He props himself up and stands.

I breathe in and breathe out, then I make myself do it. "You picked the wrong girl, okay? Go find somebody else. Somebody normal. Living." I throw out each word through pressed lips, breathing hard, gagging on self-hatred.

For a moment, the whizzing through the door stops, and I know I have minutes left before my father makes his final attempt and breaks in. The door is only so thick, it shouldn't take him long to cut through.

"What do you mean, picked? I don't want somebody else. I don't—"

"You're full of shit," I say quietly. "Stop painting a rosy picture in your head and look at me, look at who I am. I want out of these walls, I want out of this skin. I want out! Don't you understand?" I wail. "I have no choice!"

"Ailen Bright—" Canosa begins.

And I yell, "*Shut up!*"

She continues mocking me. Hunter continues his plea for me to stay. My father starts up his whizzing again and now there is a gap in the door, rotating chainsaw blades poking through it. He's cutting a circular hole.

"Leave me alone, all of you!" I holler, backing away from Hunter who comes at me with outstretched arms. I break into hysteric sobs, looking up at the ceiling, into the hole above me. I see a little bit of the cloudy sky peeking through.

"Mom, if you hear me, answer me! Why did you leave me? Why? Was I that ugly? That unlovable? Did you love me at all? Tell me, did you love me?" I wait, but there is no answer. Not even an echo in this stupid, soundproof place. I regret that I never asked her this flat out, now I'll never know for sure. She was not the type who said "I love you" at every bedtime; she never said it at all, that I remember. Still, I don't believe what Papa always tells me, I know he's lying. I wasn't an accident. My mother wanted me. She did! Didn't she? Was I simply an inconvenience? An unwanted blue stripe on a cheap, drugstore pregnancy test?

"Was I, mom? Is it true?" I ask, looking up.

"Kill the siren hunter, and I'll tell you," Canosa says, steps closer, and with inhuman strength rips off the metal rope from my wrists and feet. There is mockery in her voice again, like she knows. She knows that I'll probably never muster enough courage to kill my own father. My typical instinct kicks in, to run, to run away from it all.

I'm free. Twisted in pain, I jump toward the ceiling, head first, propelling upward, a hard line of muscle and disgust. I'm not good enough. Not good enough for my mother, not good enough for my

father, not good enough for Hunter, and not even good enough for Canosa and her sisters. I can't even kill a siren hunter, like she asked me to. What am I, after all of this? A half-dead girl? A half-alive siren? Whoever I am, I don't want to be me anymore.

Midair, arms stretched into a line over my head, I want to smash to pieces. I imagine myself as a slimy mess, which is exactly what I am. I can't die properly, can't seem to find a way to do it for good. I should've taken a gun with me, I should have taken a gun! Too late.

My head passes ceiling level and I burrow into the tunnel of dirt. Momentum carries me a few more feet and then I stick out my arms and legs to arrest my jump, staying still for a second. Then, I push off and fly upward again, spitting out bits of clay and stone that dribble on me, brushing roots away from my face. My body probably resembles a jumping caterpillar, contracting and shooting up again, through the mass of broken acoustic paneling, rubber sealant, plastic, foam board, bent roof trusses, and several feet of torn-up concrete. I'm horrified at the image of Canosa eating through it. How the hell did she do it with her teeth?

But the chance to finish my thought is lost. I make a spectacular exit out of the hole and onto our front yard, covered with bright green grass and flanked by feeble bamboo shoots, Papa's attempt at beautifying the front of our house. He'd paid an exorbitant amount of money to some fancy local gardener just to have his natural and ecologically sound, Seattle-styled, designer landscaping now ruined—looking like a giant mole hole, all brown and torn up.

I cough and sputter soil and mud, crawling on all fours away from the hole. I stand and stagger toward the bushes that separate our yard and the neighbor's. His trees stand dark against the gray afternoon sky. The usual. No rain, no sun, just a typical September day.

My jeans are a mess. Hunter's rain jacket that I'm wearing is torn, covered in filthy muck. I dust myself off, shake dirt out of my hair, and brush my face, suddenly unsure of where to go next. Moist air fills my lungs together with that earthy smell. So grimy, it's almost crunching on my teeth.

"I hate it, I hate it, I hate it," I say through gritted teeth. "How can I make myself cease to exist?"

"Walk back to Papa, why don't you, silly girl? He's a siren killer, he'll make you disappear, will he not?" Canosa climbs out of the hole behind me. I spin around to face her.

"*You* again. Will you leave me alone?" I retort. She scowls at me and tugs me toward the bushes. Even though her face is dirty, it's lovely when framed by the greenery.

"Let go of me, I don't want to..." I begin, but then hear the whizzing of the chainsaw stop. Then, I hear a faint crash, a few curses, the opening of the creaky garage door, and, finally, soft footsteps.

"Stupid." Canosa smacks me on the back of my head. It doesn't hurt, but it floods me with shame. "Stupid and rude. Follow me, and keep your mouth shut." She digs her fingers into my arm and pulls me through the bushes into our neighbor's yard. She glances back at me, and I feel guilty for yelling. She saved me, after all. She saved me, and I didn't even thank her.

"Ailen? Ailen, stop!" I hear from behind and below, and then a shot of a focused sound wave hits the ground behind me, sending up a puff of dirt. We duck, fall on the grass, and roll. I hope that nobody sees us and none of the neighbors decide to call the cops, because I really don't feel like throwing another scene and killing people right now. On top of that, I'm sure that wherever we go, we're going to attract lots of attention. Canosa looks like a naked corpse that just crawled out of her grave, after having spent a good hundred years or so there. I don't look much better. My jeans and jacket are torn to the point where I'm almost as naked, and as dirty as her. Except my hair is short and it sticks out this way and that in matted, nasty clumps.

"When I tell you to go, you stand up and... go!" Canosa whispers in my ear and pulls me upright. I don't fight her anymore and simply follow, talking in between breaths.

"Where are...the others? Teles...Ligeia...and, what's her name, Pisinoe? Did you...guys...all make it...out, or..."

"Shut your trap!" Canosa yells, and more shots fire right at my feet. Like a frightened bunny, I jump. Clutching Canosa's hand, we dash in-between the trees and into my neighbor's yard, trampling his blooming azaleas and breaking his rhododendrons. I'm stupidly hoping that Mr. Thompson's not home and won't see us. But, of course, he's home. He's a retired Navy Officer, on the neighborhood watch committee, and an eager ear for Missis Elliott's stories. I can hear his soul for the first time, a mix of military movie shouts, golf clubs hitting the ball, and what sounds like the skin smacking that you hear in bad porn—at least, that's what me and Hunter heard when we saw some on the net once when we were stoned. Brrrr. It feels like it'll taste mushy, his soul. Mushy and rotten. I suppress an involuntary gag. I hear him slam his front porch door, gasp, and give his usual tirade.

"Oh, Jesus, sweet Mary!" His voice shakes with that elderly timbre, almost singing, but not quite. "How dare you? She's damaging...my garden! Roger, your daughter is damaging my garden! Every week I clean out cigarette stubs from my flowers, and now this? I'm calling the police! That's right, I am! I'm calling them right now, right this second..."

But I'm already several yards away, focusing on Canosa's white hair, and still holding her hand. We make it to Missis Elliott's garden, and I trample her flowers with hateful glee, knowing that what I'm doing is very wrong, but not giving it a second thought. I let that mad siren bloom in me like a terrible, destructive force. Lamb-chop, the poodle, sees us and starts barking hysterically from behind the window, his white mane shaking in that dandelion fashion.

"Shut up, you little shit!" I yell, and hear his tiny muzzle clamp shut behind the glass. His soul has one single repetitive sound to it—the squeak of a rubber ball.

"My voice!" I pant behind Canosa. "It works on animals too!"

She doesn't answer but keeps pulling me, as if saying, *Duh!* I feel stupid. And I wish Missis Elliott was here, so that I could command her to do something nasty. But, she's nowhere to be seen. Bummer, next time, I decide. I'll come for you and I'll show you how to properly care for people. Right now, I have only one goal in mind, and that's to belong. I'm filled with hope that I have finally found where I belong for real. With my siren sisters.

There are no more shots, but I hear the Maserati Quattroporte engine come to life. Canosa pulls me over the garden's fence and we skim down the familiar forty stone steps that separate the upper and lower Raye streets. At the bottom, we stop to look for cars and dash across. It feels like *déjà vu*. Only, this time, I'm not going onto the Aurora Bridge like I did this morning. This time, I'm going under. We hop over the pavement and plop onto the hilly incline, sliding on the grass and making it to the concrete pedestrian walkway that lays perpendicular to the bridge, cutting right across its underbelly.

We slink into its shadow.

I cringe from the racket of the traffic passing overhead, the mechanical engines and added cacophony of human souls breaking up the sleepiness of my neighborhood. Canosa flits in between supporting anchors, her hair flapping behind her like a torn and dirty sail. We sprint down, to the water.

I slip on the wet grass and nearly fall, but she keeps pulling me, without turning her head. We cross one more road, and then another. We weave through honking cars and gawking drivers, heading toward the marina where Papa's Pershing yacht bobs gently on the waves to the crying of seagulls and the jingling of the other yachts' masts.

Canosa lets go of my hand, pushes off the wooden pier, and dives. I follow, hitting the lake with my head, gulping in cold water, and reeling in its smoothness. I feel my gills open and begin pumping oxygen into my blood. A silence washes over me at once. The lake licks the dust from my hair, and soothes me, quiets me. It feels so velvety and serene, as if it hugs me. I float. This is my gigantic bathtub, my therapy,

my home. I flap my legs and speed toward the bottom of the lake using Canosa's matted mane as my guide. Her whole body emits a faint glow that shines through the murkiness of the dark water. A few fish squirt by us, and kelp stalks shimmer in their forest. Suddenly, I'm happy at the prospect of seeing the other sirens. I guess I've missed them. We don't need to pity each other and nod our heads and say that we understand. We get it without words.

We sing.

I wonder if they all survived my father's attack at the Pike Place Fish Market, and if they're okay. I wonder how they became sirens in the first place, if what I've read in books is true or not. I decide to ask them when I see them.

"This is where I belong," I say into water.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ksenia was born in Moscow, Russia, and came to US in 1998 not knowing English, having studied architecture and not dreaming that one day she'd be writing. *Siren Suicides*, an urban fantasy set in Seattle, is her first novel. She lives in Seattle with her boyfriend and their combined three kids in a house that they like to call The Loony Bin.

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ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Drawing for as long as she can remember, Anna has always been a creative mind and had very distinct plans for her adult life, all centering around art. Starting with a foundation in fine art, she soon realized that design was another passion, one she decided to pursue. She is enrolled at Chapman University as a Graphic Design major, set to graduate in 2016, and has been employed as a Graphic Design Assistant by the Art Department since Fall 2012. She currently lives in Orange, CA with her boyfriend.

ABOUT THE BOOKS

Siren Suicides was expertly edited by Colleen M. Albert, The Grammar Babe. Final formatting was completed by Stuart Whitmore of Crenel Publishing. Titles and chapter headings are in Bitstream Futura. Final digital assembly of the print edition was completed using LibreOffice and Adobe Acrobat. The electronic edition was mastered in ePUB format using Sigil.